

WORKING MOTHER

School Closures Will Make It Impossible for a Quarter of Parents to Work

It will have a devastating impact on the workforce, women's progress and the economy at large.

By QUINN FISH AUGUST 7, 2020

Kate Baum was looking forward to going "back to some sort of normalcy this fall" after finally being in remission following her cancer treatment that ended in July. However, without daycare and her 4- and 9-year-olds' schools being fully remote, she won't be able to go back to work after all.

Kate isn't alone. With schools going virtual and daycares closing across the country, working parents will have it tough this fall. In fact, 24 percent of parents will not be able to work if in-school learning doesn't happen, according to a new study by Healthline Media.

Working parents are stretched thinner than ever, and with many lacking childcare like Kate, the survey shows there are very few options left, short of leaving the workforce.

For some parents, it's simply a matter of saving their sanity. Of the 1,000 American parents of school-aged children surveyed, 60 percent said that facilitating their child's remote learning adds significant stress to their day. When combined with the pressures of a full-time job, homeschooling is simply too much for one (or even two) parents to manage. Another recent study by the UK's UCL Institute of Education (IOE) and the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that working moms get only 2.6 hours of uninterrupted work per day.

For others, it's simply too expensive. Childcare for one, two, three or more kids—who previously attended public school for free—costs more than many working parents earn. More than half of respondents (53.5 percent) said that childcare will be a financial burden, and school closures will hit lower- and middle-income American families especially hard. In the survey, parents who earned less money were far more likely to say they would be unable to return to work:

- 39% of those making under \$50,000
- 26% of parents who earn \$50,000-\$75,000
- 19% of parents who earn \$75,000-\$100,000
- 15% of parents who earn more than \$100,000 a year

Similar surveys confirm the pandemic is pushing parents out of the workforce. A recent one by parents resources and benefits company Cleo found that more than a quarter of parents plan to take a break or quit their jobs entirely due to a lack of childcare (while one-third *already have*).

Lucy McGoron is an assistant professor and her husband, Alex, teaches at a Detroit charter school, but it won't be feasible for the two of them to continue working while their 8- and 4-year-olds are home in the fall. As of right now, Alex will likely be staying home to allow the family to balance all of their responsibilities.

"I am able to work at home, but providing care to my kids all day would not give me enough hours to get my work done," Lucy said. "Right now, my husband's school says they are planning to open in-person, and if they are online it will be all day. While there is still a lot we do not know, it seems it will not be possible for him to continue working."

During the spring, some parents were able to stay afloat thanks to government aid, such as Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) for parents who were unable to work due to school or daycare closures, and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), which requires some employers to provide employees with paid leave if their schools or daycares are closed. But the PUA expired on July 31, and many parents might have already exhausted the 12 weeks of leave provided under the FFCRA.

That means it's up to employers to make it easier on working parents—but less than one third of employers have a childcare plan for returning parent employees.

All in all, experts worry the pandemic will set women's progress in the workforce back by decades, and widen the wage gap too. That's because research shows moms are more likely to scale back their career than dads, and it won't be so easy for parents to jump back into the labor force.

That's the biggest worry for Matt Cettei, a software engineering manager for a medical technology company in San Jose, California. He plans to stay home to teach his four girls, ages 11, 9, 6, and 4, this fall. Though his family is in a good place financially, "The difficulty is in giving up my career indefinitely," he says. "I can probably get another job down the road, but not at the same level. I expect to stay home for five years or more."

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