

# FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES AND THE MOTHERHOOD EMPLOYMENT GAP DURING THE COVID-19 RECOVERY

The lockdowns and school closures caused by COVID-19 have underscored the critical need for both family-friendly policies—such as paid parental leave and affordable childcare—and labor-friendly and equal rights policies. In September 2021, the existing childcare system—which relies on private financing by parents—was deemed unworkable by the US Treasury due to several market failures, making a strong case for federal childcare investment to support both women and a thriving economy.

However, to date, Congress has failed to enact national legislation to offer long-term relief for families. As a result, family-friendly policies remain determined by state. They can thus vary widely from state to state and, when considered alongside state labor market policies, yield starkly different employment results for women and families depending on where they live.

A new Roosevelt Institute issue brief, [“Family-Friendly Policies and the Motherhood Employment Gap During the Covid-19 Recovery,”](#) found that state adoption of family-friendly policies has had a positive impact on female labor force participation, demonstrating the impact state-level policies can have on both women and the economy as a whole. Not only does increased women’s labor force participation increase household incomes for families and help address gender imbalances in the labor market; but as more women join the workforce, overall wages tend to rise, GDP increases, and the economy grows.

By analyzing the motherhood employment gap, which measures the difference in employment rates between women with young children (0-13) and women with older children (14-19), across states during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue brief shows that:

## **Family-friendly policies play a larger role in the lives of women with younger children compared to those with older children.**

- Even for women under otherwise similar legal and regulatory landscapes, family-friendly policies have a significant impact on the employment levels of mothers with young children, as younger children are more likely to depend more on their parents than older children.
- With the increase in demand for labor witnessed in the summer of 2021 to April 2022, the motherhood employment gap decreased in states with high coverage of family-friendly policies.
- States with low coverage of family-friendly policies had the biggest increase in the motherhood employment gap. In these states, women with older children saw a recovery in their employment numbers, whereas women with younger children—who are more reliant on these policies—did not experience the same recovery in employment rates.

**The correlation between the motherhood employment gap and the availability of family-friendly policies persists even when accounting for education, race, and age, but is particularly wide for young women of color with lower levels of education, indicating that they might benefit the most from these policies.**

- All else equal, the motherhood employment gap is highest for women of color in the 25-39 age range who have attained at most a high school degree.
- While the motherhood employment gap exists across demographic factors, it seems that factors like race significantly exacerbate the gap—particularly considering that the motherhood employment gap appears widest among Black mothers.

**There is a positive correlation between states with family-friendly policies and those that protect women's reproductive rights.**

- States that have the highest coverage of family-friendly policies are the ones most likely to safeguard abortion rights. States that have the lowest coverage place the most restrictions on women's reproductive rights.
- In the wake of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, there has been a rise in antichoice support for family-friendly policies as justification for restricting people's reproductive rights. However, abortion bans completely contradict the goals of family-friendly policies—to ensure the socioeconomic rights and well-being of parents and families.
- The misuse of family-friendly policies in service of an agenda that impedes the bodily autonomy of women and pregnant people leads to more harm than benefit to the very people these policies seek to protect.

The correlation between state-level family-friendly policies and changes in the motherhood employment gap points to the impact that these policies have on women's employment. Public investment is crucial to increase the availability of family-friendly policies to ensure a sustained and uniform level of employment gains for women across states. However, when every state is left to legislate its own family-friendly policies, the differences across states result in stark disparities in women's employment rates. It's clear that federal-level policies are needed to better address these disparities and ensure that women, birthing parents, and families everywhere are able to prosper.



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