Despite Slight Gains in May, Women Have Still Been Hit Hardest by Pandemic-Related Job Losses

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The most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) monthly jobs data shows that the economy rebounded slightly between April and May 2020, gaining 2.5 million jobs. These numbers, based on survey results from mid-May, bring the net number of jobs lost since the pandemic started to nearly 19.6 million. The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the disastrous consequences of longstanding racial and gender inequities, and women have proven particularly vulnerable to the pandemic’s economic consequences. Women are overrepresented in the front-line workforce, making up the vast majority of workers risking their lives to provide health care, child care, and other essential services. Women are also far more likely than men to work in part-time, low-paid, and/or tipped jobs, meaning women were often struggling to make ends meet before the crisis hit—and faced a higher risk of losing their jobs as retail stores, restaurants, and other service sector businesses were forced to lay off workers or close their doors entirely.

Women gained 1.1 million jobs in May, meaning only 1 in 10 of the 11.3 million women’s jobs lost in April alone have returned

- The majority of the jobs gained back in May went to men. Women accounted for 46% of May’s gains, while making up 49% of the workforce.

- Since February 2020, women have lost 10.9 million jobs total, accounting for 56% of all jobs lost since the start of the pandemic.

- Overall, more than 1 in 8 people ages 16 and over (13.3%) were unemployed last month. Adult women ages 20 and over were more likely than adult men ages 20 and over to be unemployed, with an unemployment rate of 13.9% compared to men’s 11.6%. The unemployment rate for women in May is 1.7 times higher than the highest unemployment rate for women during the Great Recession and subsequent recovery (8.4%).
The overall unemployment rate masks higher unemployment rates for women of color and other demographic groups

- Despite improvements for nearly everyone else, the unemployment rate for Black women increased slightly to 16.5% from 16.4% in April, meaning about 1 in 6 Black women was unemployed in May.\(^{11}\)

- Despite slight improvements from April, nearly 1 in 5 Latinas (19.0%) remained unemployed in May.\(^{13}\)

- By comparison, May’s unemployment rate for white men was 10.7%.\(^{13}\)

- In May, more than one in five (20.3%) women with disabilities were unemployed – an increase of nearly 13 percentage points from February.\(^{14}\)

- Pandemic-related job losses continue to hit younger women particularly hard, with nearly 1 in 4 (24%) women between the ages of 20 and 24 unemployed in May.\(^{15}\) And rates for young Black women between the ages of 20 and 24 (27.8%)\(^{16}\) and young Latinas between the ages 20 and 24 (29.2%) were even higher.\(^{17}\)

![Women's Unemployment Rates: December 2019 - May 2020](chart)

Source: NWLC calculations based on historical data for BLS Employment Situation Summary Tables A-1, A-2, A-3, A-6, and A-10. Unemployment rates for women overall, Latinas, and Black women are seasonally adjusted and are for women 20 years and over. The unemployment rate for women ages 20-24 is also seasonally adjusted. The unemployment rate for women with a disability is not seasonally adjusted, and is for women ages 16 to 64.

Even accounting for May’s gains, women have been hit hard by job losses in the industry sectors most affected by COVID-19

- About half of May’s job gains came in the leisure and hospitality sector, which includes business such as restaurants and bars.\(^{18}\) Even with this improvement, the leisure and hospitality sector has lost over 7 million net jobs since February.\(^{19}\) Women have accounted for the majority (55%) of these losses, despite making up 53% of the workforce in February.\(^{20}\)
• More than 1 in 6 (16.9%) of the 2.5 million jobs gained in May were in the education and health services sector, which includes jobs like teachers in nurses. May’s gains bring the net number of education and health services jobs lost since February to over 2.3 million. Women made up 77% of the education and health services workforce in February but have lost 83% of the job losses in this sector since then.

• Since February, women have lost over 1.2 million net jobs in retail trade, making up 62% of job losses in that sector, despite making up half (50%) of the retail trade workforce in February. In May alone, the retail trade sector gained nearly 368,000 jobs, with women accounting for 49% of the gains.

• Despite gains in many other sectors, 585,000 government jobs were lost last month, with women accounting for 62% of those losses. Since February, the number of government jobs has decreased by nearly 1.6 million, with women losing 967,000 (62%) government jobs.

While some jobs have returned, many women are not working the hours they want or need

• In May, nearly three in ten women (29%) working part-time wanted full-time work, but were unable to obtain it for economic reasons, such as their employer not giving them full-time hours. In February, only 11% of women working part-time were doing so for economic reasons.

• Rates of involuntary part-time work were higher for women of color: 31% of Black women, 37% of Asian women, and 39% of Latinas working part time in May were doing so for economic reasons.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Table B-1, available at https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm (last visited June 5, 2020). Throughout this factsheet, we measure changes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic using the February 2020 Employment Situation Summary as a reference point.


NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Table B-1 and historical data for Table B-5, available at https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab5.htm (last visited June 5, 2020).


NWLC calculations based on BLS, May 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Table A-2: Employment status of the civilian population by race, sex, and age, available at https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.re0.htm (last visited June 5, 2020). Figure is seasonally adjusted and is for Black women ages 20 and over.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, May 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Table A-3: Employment status of the Hispanic or Latino population by sex and age, available at https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t06.htm (last visited June 5, 2020). Figure is seasonally adjusted and is for Latinas ages 20 and over.


NWLC calculations based on BLS, May 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Table B-1.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Table B-1.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Tables B-1 and B-5. In this section, figures for women’s share of industry-specific workforces are from the February 2020 Employment Situation Summary, which we use as a pre-pandemic baseline.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, May 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Table B-1.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Tables B-1.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Tables B-1 and B-5.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, May 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Tables B-1 and B-5.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, May 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Tables B-1 and B-5.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, May 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Tables B-1 and B-5.

NWLC calculations based on BLS, May 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Table A-27. Persons at work in nonagricultural industries by age, sex, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, marital status, and usual full- or part-time status, available at https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpsseea27.htm (last visited June 5, 2020). Figures are not seasonally adjusted and are for women ages 16 and over.