

New Research Report Finds U.S. Labor Force Participation Rates and Employment Population Ratios Returning to Pre-Pandemic Levels, but Certain Groups of Workers Have Reached Those Levels While Others Fall Short

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(Washington, D.C.) – A new Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) research report released today regarding the labor force in the United States from 2019-2022 found labor force participation rates and employment population ratios have been returning to pre-pandemic levels, but certain groups of workers have reached those levels while others are still falling short. In particular, both male and female White Americans have been slow to return to the labor force, as have male Hispanic Americans.

“The pandemic halted many long-term trends in the American labor market. Many Americans dropped out of the labor force or were without a job if they remained in the labor force at the onset of the pandemic. How Americans respond as the pandemic recedes will have significant implications for workers’ retirements,” explained Craig Copeland, director, Wealth Benefits Research, EBRI.

The new EBRI research study examined the civilian labor force in the United States from 2019 through 2022 using data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, available through the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. First, the research study investigates the trends in labor force participation rates of those ages 55 or older by age and gender. Then, it explores labor force trends for those ages 16 or older, providing an analysis by age and gender composition of the labor force and the adult population while allowing for the identification of key labor force and population trends. The study then provides an analysis of how the labor force and employment changed from 2019 to 2022 for individuals of various ages, genders and races and ethnicities.

Key findings in the study include:

- In 2021 and 2020, among males, the labor force participation rates of those ages 55–69 increased, but it declined for those ages 70 or older. Increases in the labor force participation rates of females ages 55–59 and 60–64 also resulted in 2021 and 2022, but the labor force participation rates decreased for females ages 65–69 and increased for those ages 70–74 in 2022.
- In 2022, the male share of the labor force (highest since 2001) ages 55 or older increased. Despite the falling share of the labor force since 2010, females ages 55 or older are still a significantly higher share of the labor force than they were in as late as the 1990s.
- In 2021 and 2022, the labor force participation rates of those ages 25–54 trended toward their 2019 levels but did not quite reach them. The labor force participation rates of those ages 16–19 and ages 55–64 reached or surpassed their 2019 levels. In contrast, the labor force participation rate of those ages 65 or older in 2021 and 2022 stayed at its 2020 level, below its 2019 level, while the labor force participation rate of those ages 20–24 decreased in 2022 below its 2021 and 2019 levels.
- The male employment rate dropped by 3.8 percentage points in 2020, while the female rate declined by 3.5 percentage points. By 2022, the difference in the employment rates of males and females from 2019 had nearly recovered to only 1 percentage point below their 2019 levels.
- By 2022, Black Americans had made the biggest recovery, as their 2022 labor force participation rate was only 0.8 percentage points below its 2019 level, while the other two race/ethnicity categories studied had differences of at least 0.9 percentage points between their 2019 and 2022 levels.

“A continued strong labor market will likely lead to the labor force participation rates and employment population rates of 2019 being reached. However, a downturn in the economy would likely halt the movement back to 2019 levels, and who is out of the labor force after any downturn could significantly alter what companies’ work forces look like and what Americans have saved for retirement,” said Copeland.

To view a summary of the 30-page Issue Brief, “Trends in Labor Force Participation and Employment,” visit www.ebri.org/publications/research-publications/issue-briefs/content/trends-in-labor-force-participation-and-employment.

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