

A Closer Look at the COVID-19 Pandemic Decline in Female Employment and Its Potential Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a far-reaching impact on the labor force. Workers from all demographic groups experienced declines in the number working. However, the effects were felt more in different subgroups than others. One group hit harder was women of caregiving ages, which is likely to have lasting consequences for their careers.

About the Data

The focus of this *Fast Fact* is the number of civilian noninstitutionalized Americans ages 16 or older who are employed. This relates to the labor force by controlling for the unemployed, as the labor force includes anyone working or seeking employment, whereas the number employed only accounts for those working. The data on the number of employed Americans are for December of each year (not seasonally adjusted) and are from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

This *Fast Fact* draws on the [EBRI Issue Brief](#) "Labor Force Participation and the Pandemic: Making Sense of the Changes" to explore the number of fewer employed Americans by gender and age, highlighting the disproportionate impact of job loss on certain female age cohorts.

The Big Picture

Overall Difference Between Male and Female Employment

The number of males employed in 2020 was 4.51 million fewer than in 2019. This compares with 4.38 million fewer females. However, the percentage reduction in those employed was higher for females, as there were more employed males in 2019 than females. The reduction in the number of employed females was 5.8 percent vs. 5.4 percent for males.

Crucial Differences by Age

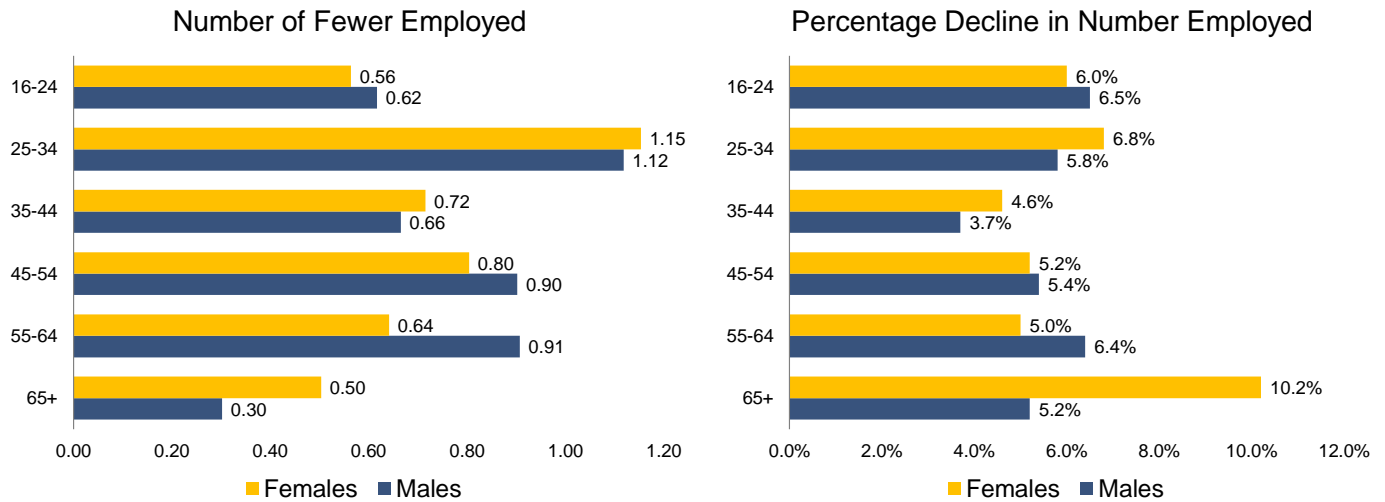
Females experienced larger reductions in the number employed from 2019 to 2020 among those in their prime working years — ages 25–34 and 35–44 — and among those past normal retirement age (65 or older). In contrast, the reduction in male workers was concentrated among the youngest (ages 16–24), those of middle age (ages 45–54), and those of preretirement age (ages 55–64).

The largest age cohort reduction in the number employed occurred among females ages 25–34, where 1.15 million fewer were employed in 2020 compared with 2019. This was a 6.8 percent reduction from 2019. Males of this age group had 1.12 million fewer employed — a 5.8 percent reduction from 2019.

In contrast, the smallest percentage reduction occurred among those ages 35–44, but females of these ages had a decrease in employment almost 1 percentage point larger than males — 4.6 percent vs. 3.7 percent. The largest percentage reduction occurred among females ages 65 or older, who experienced a 10.2 percent reduction in

employment between 2019 and 2020. This was almost twice the percentage decrease of males these ages. The only age group in which males clearly experienced a larger decline was among those ages 55–64. Otherwise, the female reductions in employment by age were either larger than or similar to those of males.

Number of Fewer Americans Employed in 2020 Compared With 2019 and the Percentage Decline, by Age and Gender



Note: The numbers are from December of each year and are not seasonally adjusted.
 Source: U.S Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," <http://www.bls.gov/data/>

The Bottom Line

It is important to understand the age at which a job loss occurs, because it can alter future earnings and consequently the retirement preparedness of those losing their jobs. Notably, the ages of females most impacted by the pandemic correlated with caregiving either for a child or a spouse despite having a similar overall decline in those employed to that of males. The significance of these ages most impacted among females is that the younger caregiving ages correlate with the time when many workers are likely to be building careers through promotions and raises. Thus, career paths could be derailed just as they are at or reaching their peak advancement years. For the older caregivers, their presence in the work force past the age of 65 may have meant that they were still working to make ends meet or preserve what had already been accumulated. Being forced into retirement early, they may now find it challenging to reenter the labor force at even older ages or may have to scale back their lifestyle in retirement. Consequently, the ages of the female employees most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic correspond to critical periods in career development and preservation of assets for retirement security.

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