

Americans Ages 55–64 Lag in Return to Employment and the Labor Force — With Considerable Variations by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

The number of employed workers experienced declines across all demographic groups since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Americans ages 55–64 have been among those slowest to return to employment since the pandemic started.¹ However, within this cohort, new differences in the number employed and the labor force participation rates by race/ethnicity and gender have emerged since the pandemic began.

About the Data

The focus of this *Fast Fact* is the number of civilian noninstitutionalized Americans ages 55–64 who are employed and the percentage in the labor force. The labor force is defined as those working or actively seeking employment, whereas the number employed only accounts for those with a job. The data on the number of employed and the percentage in the labor force 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* builds on previous research in the *EBRI Issue Brief* “[Labor Force Participation and the Pandemic: Making Sense of the Changes](#)” to explore, by race/ethnicity and gender, the trends in the number employed and the labor force participation rates of Americans ages 55–64 since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Number Employed and Labor Force Participation Rates of Americans Ages 55–59

Among Americans ages 55–59, the number employed at the end of 2020 was below its level at the end of 2019 across each gender and race/ethnicity examined (Figure 1).² However, by the end of 2021, the number of employed Black and Hispanic Americans of these ages was higher than it was at the end of 2019. The one exception was Black males, where the number employed was 7,000 below the 2019 number. In contrast, the reduction in the number of White Americans employed in 2021 was even larger than in 2020, going from a reduction of 796,000 in 2020 compared with 2019 to a reduction of 808,000. White females accounted for the decline from 2020 to 2021, going from 292,000 fewer employed in 2020 relative to 2019 to 388,000 fewer employed by 2021. However, while White males did increase in the number employed in 2021, they still had a larger number not employed in 2021 relative to 2019 than did White females: 420,000 fewer employed in 2021, down from 504,000 fewer in 2020.

In terms of labor force participation rates, Black Americans ages 55–59 had the largest decline between 2020 and 2021 after having experienced an increase from 2019 to 2020 (Figure 2). Black males were the driving force

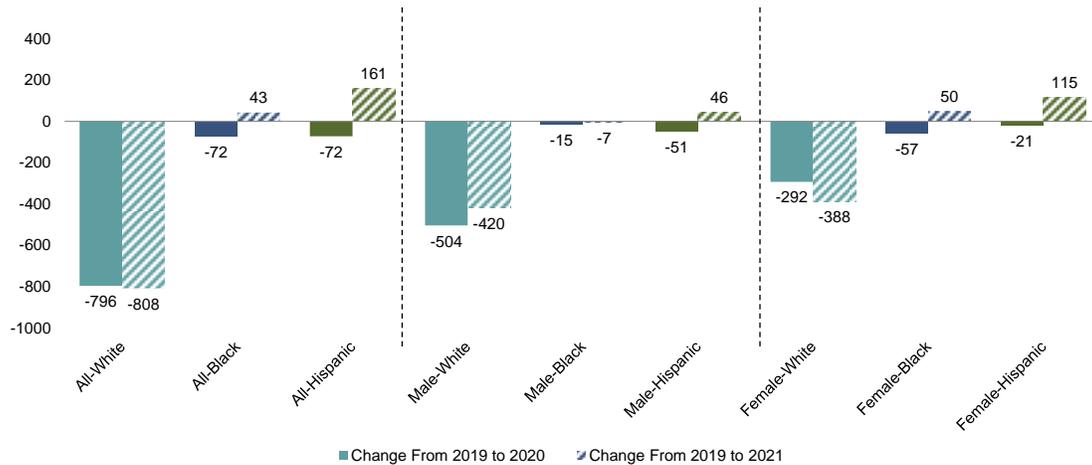
¹ “[Older Americans Stall in Returning to Work](#),” *EBRI Fast Fact* no. 430 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, March 24, 2022).

² The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides data by race and ethnicity separately, so these are not mutually exclusive categories. Both White and Black Americans could also be in the Hispanic category if the individuals say their race is White or Black and their ethnicity is Hispanic.

behind the 2020 to 2021 decline, with the labor force participation rate within this cohort dropping from 68.6 percent in 2020 to 63.8 percent in 2021, after having increased from 64.8 percent in 2019. The Black female labor force participation rate was relatively flat from 2020 to 2021, whereas it had decreased from 2019 to 2020.

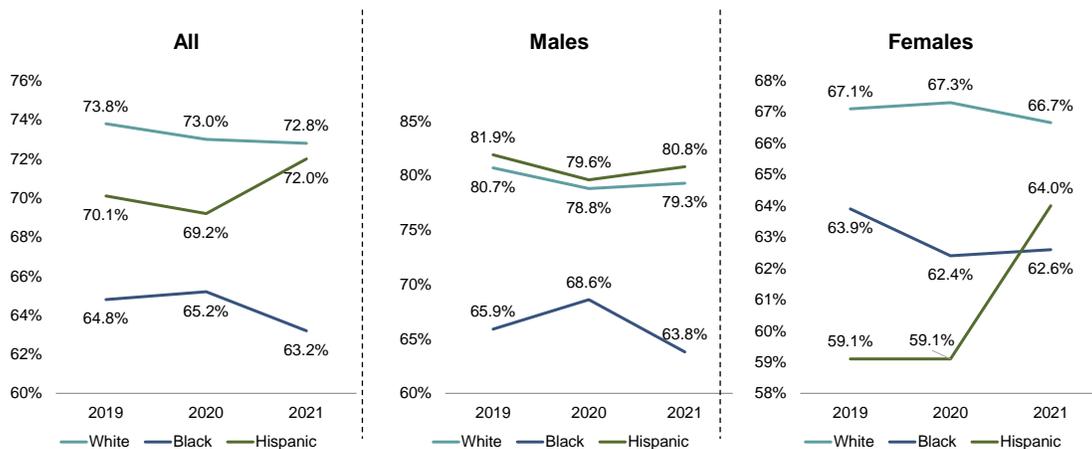
For White and Hispanic males, the labor force participation rates declined in 2020 compared with 2019 before increasing in 2021. In fact, in 2021, the Hispanic labor force participation rates exceeded the 2019 levels, primarily driven by a surge in the Hispanic female labor force participation rate. In contrast, the White labor force participation rate in 2021 remained below its 2019 level, driven by a decline in White female labor force participation in 2021 after a slight bump up in 2020.

Figure 1
Change in the Number of Americans Ages 55–59
Employed, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity
 (in thousands)



Note: The numbers are from December of each year and 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/>

Figure 2
Labor Force Participation Rates of Those
Ages 55–59, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity



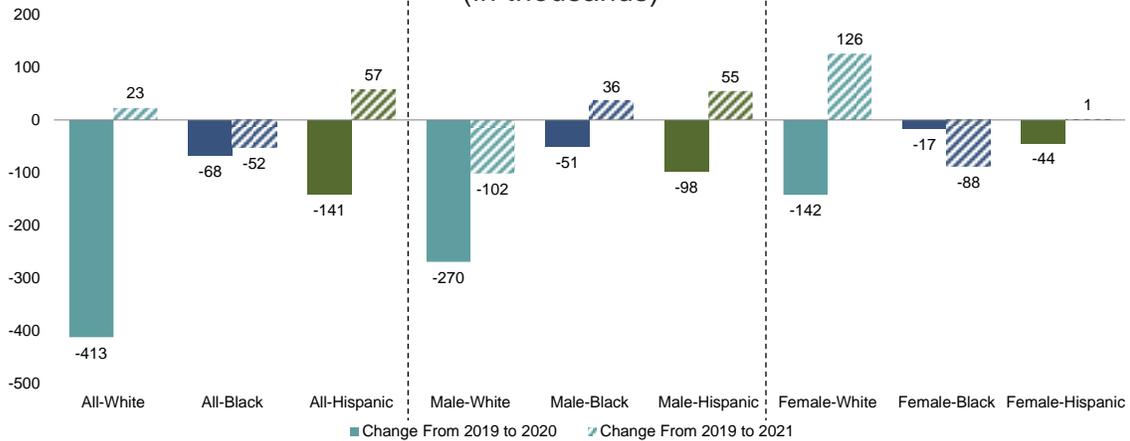
Note: The numbers are from December of each year and not seasonally adjusted.
 Source: U.S Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," <http://www.bls.gov/data/>

Number Employed and Labor Force Participation Rates of Americans Ages 60–64

A very different picture emerges for the number of employed Americans ages 60–64 between 2019 and 2021. The number of White Americans these ages employed in 2021 surpassed the number in 2019, while among Black Americans, the number employed in 2021 was below the number in 2019 (Figure 3). In 2021, the number of employed White males remained below the 2019 level, whereas the number of employed White females surpassed its 2019 level by even more than the level of the decline for White males. In contrast, the number of Black males employed in 2021 exceeded its 2019 level, while the number of Black females employed declined more in 2021 relative to 2019. The numbers of both Hispanic males and females employed in 2021 exceeded those of 2019.

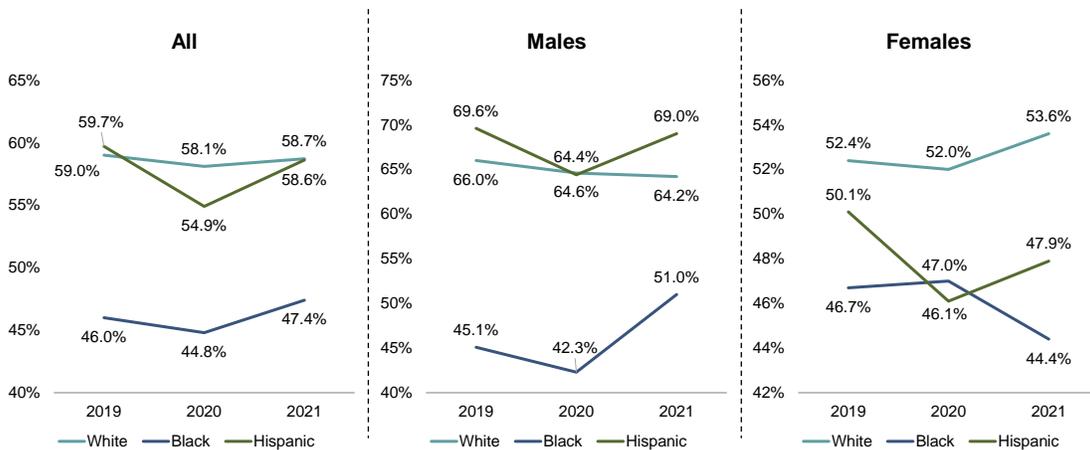
The Black American labor force participation rate increased between 2020 and 2021 among those ages 60–64, driven by a dramatic increase in the labor force participation rate of Black males (Figure 4). Hispanic Americans these ages saw their labor force participation rate nearly return to its 2019 level by 2021, while the White labor force participation rate remained below that of 2019 in 2021 due to the lagging participation rate of White males.

Figure 3
Change in the Number of Americans Ages 60–64 Employed, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity (in thousands)



Note: The numbers are from December of each year and 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/>

Figure 4
Labor Force Participation Rates of Those Ages 60–64, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity



Note: The numbers are from December of each year and 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/>

Implications

Americans ages 55–64 have been among those slowest to return to employment since the pandemic started. This has been led by White Americans ages 55–59 of both genders, and, to a lesser extent, White males and Black females ages 60–64. Health status, caregiving needs, and the ability to draw down savings all can affect various cohorts' willingness and ability to return to the work force. It is important to parse out the factors driving labor force participation and employment, as they could have strong links to both near-term and long-term financial security of Americans.

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