

# FORCED OUT OF WORK: THE PANDEMIC'S PERSISTENT EFFECTS ON WOMEN AND WORK

**"It's impossible to be a good, productive employee AND a good parent when you don't have child care. I live in a pretty constant state of low-level anxiety because I never know if our daycare is suddenly going to close due to a COVID case."**

Parent in Georgia

Millions of American parents have left the workforce or had their work hours reduced since the pandemic began. Lay-offs, lack of child care and reliable schooling, and other challenges related to the pandemic have led to significant changes in how families earn a living and care for their young children.



This burden is primarily carried by women. In spring of 2021, findings from our RAPID survey of families with children birth to age 5 showed that over a third of mothers and other female caregivers had left or reduced their work since the pandemic began. The vast majority of these women could not afford to do so, and they experienced significantly higher levels of emotional distress

compared with women whose work status had not changed.

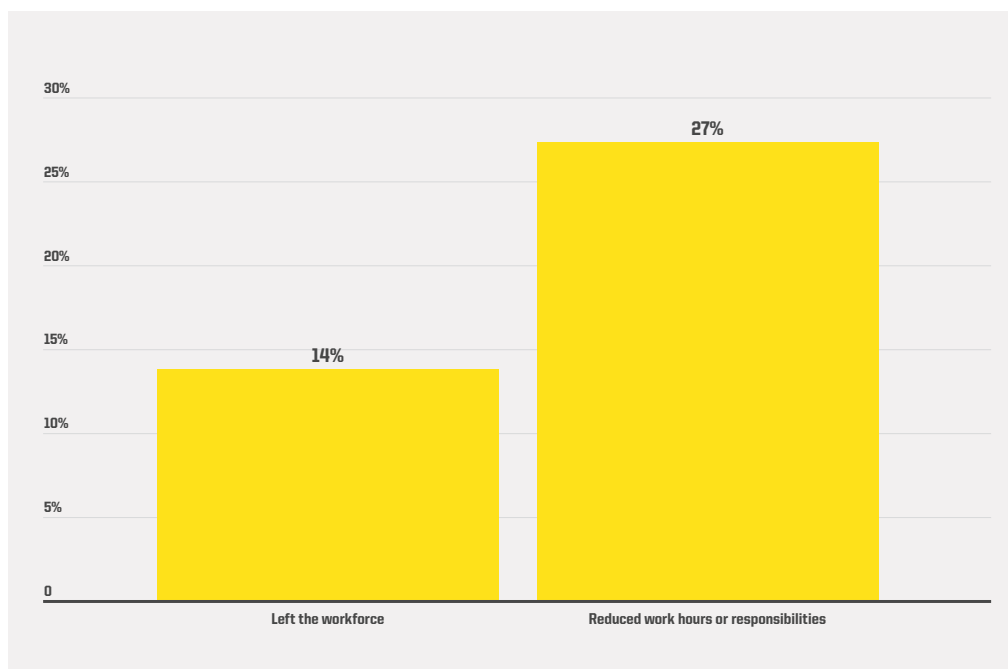
A year later, the pandemic continues to cause disproportionate numbers of women to leave the workforce and deal with the heavy consequences of these changes. Here, we examine what women in the RAPID survey are currently saying about work and how their situations have changed over the past year.

## BY SPRING 2022, NEARLY 40% OF FEMALE CAREGIVERS HAD STOPPED WORKING OR REDUCED THEIR WORK HOURS/RESPONSIBILITIES

Our February 2022 data showed that 39% of women caregivers in our survey had left the workforce or reduced their work hours since the pandemic

began. This is a slight increase from our findings in spring 2021 when 33% of women had left work or reduced their hours.

Percentages of women who left the workforce and reduced work hours or responsibilities



**“I’m extremely lucky to own my own business and work from home, but it’s still incredibly hard to find reliable full-time care and I can’t work full-time hours without it.”**

Parent in Virginia

**“It has just been so challenging to work and parent with limited child care. The burden has fallen completely on me, as I try to work from home with a 2 & 5 year old also present. Ultimately it means sacrificing sleep, exercise, and other self-care to complete work in the early morning and evenings.”**

Parent in Michigan

**“[I am concerned about] getting terminated for missing work due to not having child care.”**

Parent in Utah

## MOST WOMEN CAN'T AFFORD THESE CHANGES IN WORK STATUS

As of spring 2022, most women with young children reported that they could not afford to leave work or reduce

their work hours/responsibilities. These percentages are nearly identical to what women reported in spring of 2021.



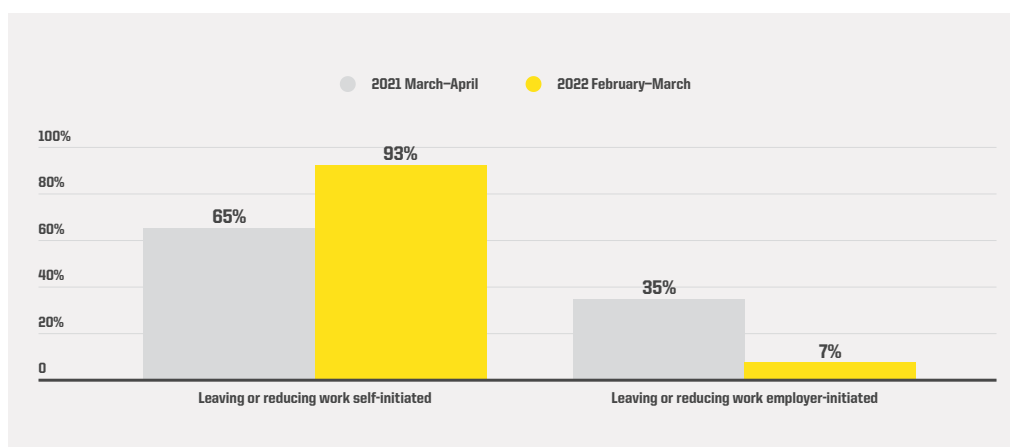
**“My work is not understanding of me being a parent and not having child care. I’ve been reprimanded for calling off due to daycare closures.”**  
Parent in Pennsylvania

## PERSISTENT CHILD CARE CHALLENGES—NOT EMPLOYERS—ARE FORCING WOMEN TO LEAVE WORK OR REDUCE HOURS

While women have continued to leave the workforce and reduce their work hours and responsibilities at similar rates in the past year compared with the previous year, one noticeable shift is that employer-initiated changes like lay-offs and demotions have become less common than earlier in the

pandemic. Instead, lack of reliable child care and other pandemic-related challenges are placing an unsustainable level of pressure on women, and they are initiating their own departures from full-time work even though the majority can’t afford to do so.

Percentages of women who left the workforce or reduced work hours or responsibilities over the past year: self-initiated versus employer-initiated



**“Work life balance was challenging before the pandemic, now with reduced child care and more needs at home, I am stretched to the breaking point trying to be a good, involved parent and hardworking employee. There is no ‘me’ time. I’m not even sure there is a ‘me’ anymore. I always feel like I’m a breath away from just dropping all the balls I’m juggling.”**  
Parent in Massachusetts

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## WOMEN'S EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING WAS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED WHEN THEY STOPPED WORKING OR REDUCED WORK HOURS/RESPONSIBILITIES

Overall, women who left the workforce or reduced their work hours experienced slightly more emotional distress (measured through a composite score of anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness) than women whose work remained unchanged during the pandemic. Important indicators of emotional distress were whether they could afford these changes in work status and whether the changes were initiated by their employer.

- Emotional distress levels were highest for women who were forced

by their employers to stop or reduce their work, and who also couldn't afford this change.

- Emotional distress associated with changes in work status also appears to be partially a result of giving up the work itself and not just about the loss in income. Even among women who said they could afford to stop or reduce work, those who did so had significantly more emotional distress than those who did not stop or reduce work.

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## SUMMARY

- The pandemic continues to disproportionately affect women in the workforce, and our data from the past year show that this continues to be true for women in households with young children.
- As of spring 2022, nearly 40% of women with young children stopped or reduced work due to the pandemic. Most women cannot afford these changes in work status.
- In the past year, fewer employer-initiated changes in work status were reported. Instead of being

laid off or forced into a part-time position, increasing numbers of women were forced to initiate their own departures from fulltime work—even though they could not afford to do so—because of mounting pressure from unreliable child care and other pandemic-related challenges.

- Overall, women reported more emotional distress when they reduced hours or stopped working. This was especially true for those who couldn't afford to do so and for those who were forced to change their work status by their employer.

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**“I cannot work if my daughter’s school closes due to a positive COVID test, snow day, etc. I’m constantly anxious about closures and whether I can do my job. And I place a good amount of my identity in being able to work as a scientist. I love my child and chose to also be a mom, but I don’t live near family that can help so I constantly feel like I’m failing in some aspect of my life.”**

Parent in New Mexico

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**“My daughter comes to work with me because we cannot afford child care or for me to not work. But as she is getting into toddlerhood, this is increasingly interfering in my work and everyone is aware of it. I am worried about the future of my job.”**

Parent in California

# ABOUT THE RAPID PROJECT

The 2022 spring data presented in this fact sheet are based on RAPID household surveys. Analyses are based on responses collected from 14,841 caregivers during February 2022. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 11.53% are Black/African American, 10.10% are Latinx, and 28.79% live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not on the total sample. The data for these analyses are not weighted.

The RAPID project includes a survey of caregivers with children under age 6 and a survey of child care providers and other adults who care for children under age 6.

These surveys are designed to gather essential information continuously regarding the needs, health-promoting behaviors, and well-being of children and their families and important adults in their lives.

RAPID collects data monthly from 1,000 caregivers and child care providers in all 50 states. The surveys are national in scope, though not technically nationally representative. RAPID collects snapshots of data across time and can also assess trends longitudinally.

For more information about RAPID study design and methods, see [here](#).

RAPID is under the direction of Philip Fisher, PhD, Director of the newly formed Center on Early Childhood at Stanford University

**1,000+**

surveyed monthly

**100**

surveys

**17,000+**

households

**50**

US states

