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Uneven Recovery Leaves Many Hispanic, Black, and Low-Income Adults Struggling

One in Four Adults Say Their Families Are Worse Off Six Months into the Pandemic

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The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and other legislation provided substantial assistance to households hit hard by the pandemic-induced recession, but much of this assistance was temporary. For the past few months, Congress and the Trump administration have failed to come to an agreement that would provide additional help to families who continue to struggle. Despite some improvement in the labor market since April,[1] recent data reveal slowing job growth and a growing number of workers facing permanent job loss,[2] signaling an immediate need for more federal stimulus. But focusing on aggregate employment statistics alone offers only a partial glimpse into the economic recovery. These data do not directly address how families' economic well-being has changed over the course of the pandemic.

In this brief, we assess how adults and their families were faring in September relative to the beginning of March, before the pandemic caused a sharp economic recession.[3] We use data from the second wave of the Urban Institute's Coronavirus Tracking Survey, a nationally representative survey of nonelderly adults conducted September 11–28, 2020, to examine how family employment and financial situations have changed six months into the pandemic and how these changes have differed by race/ethnicity and prepandemic family income.[4] We also explore the financial strategies families are using to cope with job loss and how much support families experiencing job loss are receiving from public and private safety-net programs.

Although one-quarter of adults reported that their family's financial situation was worse in September than it was at the beginning of March, this masks substantial variation by race and ethnicity and by income in how families' financial situations are deteriorating. More than one-third of

Hispanic/Latinx adults, nearly 3 in 10 Black adults, and more than 4 in 10 adults with prepandemic incomes below the federal poverty level (FPL) reported that they were worse off financially in September than they were in March.[5]

The groups experiencing the greatest deterioration in their financial circumstances are the same groups that were most likely to experience job loss. Roughly one in seven adults—including nearly one in four Hispanic/Latinx adults and one in five adults with income below FPL before March—is in a family that has experienced a job loss during the pandemic. More than half of adults whose families experienced job loss reported that their families received unemployment insurance benefits since the beginning of March, highlighting the critical role that safety-net programs play in helping struggling families get by. Many of these adults' families are also receiving assistance from other public and private sources, including Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and charitable food programs supported by government funding and private donations. But continued access to these benefits may be at risk in the coming months, and this threatens to increase the severity of hardships faced by millions of families that have lost work and to exacerbate economic and health disparities that predate the pandemic.

Results

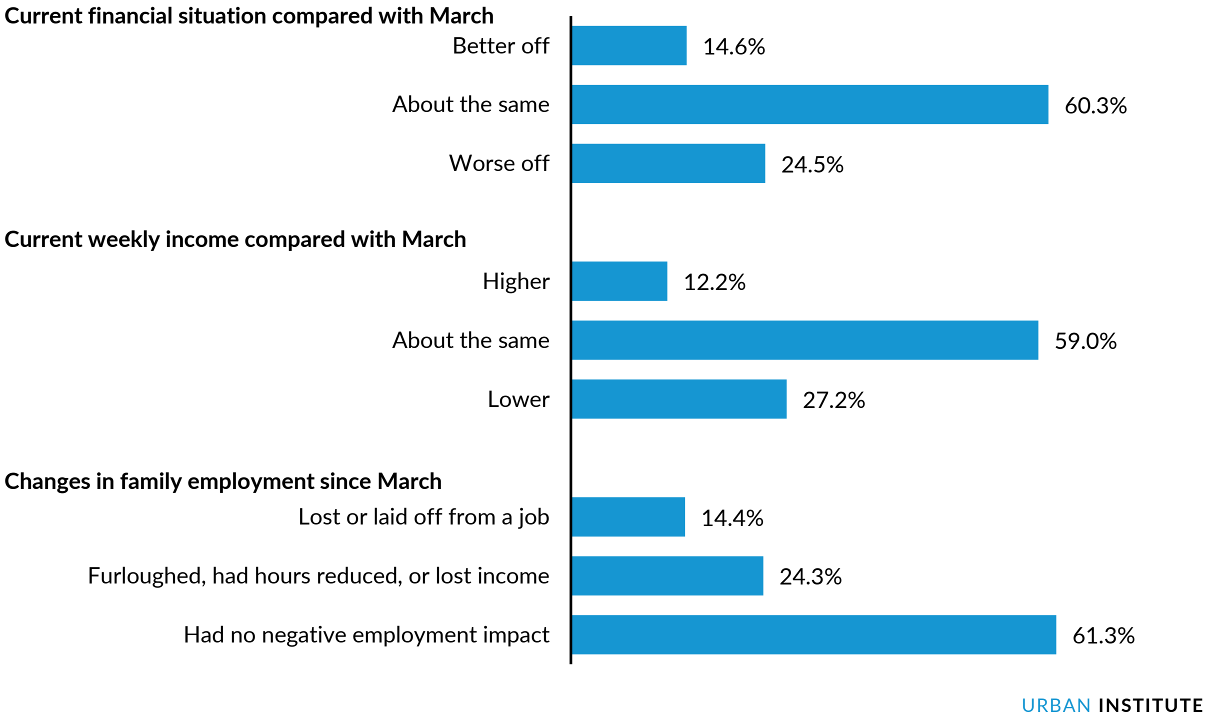
One in four adults reported that their family was worse off financially in September compared with the beginning of March before the pandemic slowed the economy, and one in seven is in a family that has experienced job loss since the pandemic began.

In September 2020, 24.5 percent of adults reported that their families were worse off financially than they were at the beginning of March 2020, and 14.6 percent reported that they were better off (figure 1). The remaining six in 10 adults reported that their families' financial situations in September were about the same as they were in March, before the pandemic struck the US. A similar pattern emerged when adults were asked how their current family income compares with its March level. Adults were more than twice as likely to report that their families' total weekly incomes were lower as they were to report higher weekly incomes (27.2 percent versus 12.2 percent). Though many families experienced significant income volatility even before the current recession began (Maag et al. 2017; Pew Charitable Trusts 2017), our finding that adults were more likely to be worse off than better off is a reversal of previous trends found in a survey that asked similar questions in the fall of 2018 and fall of 2019 (Federal Reserve Board of Governors 2019; Federal Reserve Board of Governors 2020).

One in seven adults (14.4 percent) reported that they or their spouse or partner have lost or been laid off from a job since the beginning of March, including 6.3 percent reporting a permanent layoff and 2.3 percent who do not know if the layoff is permanent or temporary (data not shown).[6] Another one in four adults (24.3 percent) did not report that they or their spouse or partner were laid off from a job but did report that their families still faced other negative employment impacts, such as a child under age 19 losing a job, someone in the family being furloughed or having reduced work hours, or someone in the family losing earnings or income from a job or business. For both categories, estimates may include adults whose families lost and then regained jobs, hours, or income during the pandemic as well as adults whose family employment or income has not recovered.

FIGURE 1

Current Family Financial Situation, Income, and Employment Compared with the Beginning of March, among Adults Ages 18 to 64, September 2020



Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2. The survey was conducted September 11 through 28, 2020, and 91 percent of respondents completed the survey by September 17.

Notes: Estimates are not shown for the 0.5 percent of adults who did not report their financial situation compared with March and 1.6 percent of adults who did not report family weekly income compared with March. Estimates of those reporting a furlough, reduced hours, or lost income exclude adults who also reported they or their spouse or partner lost or was laid off from a job but include adults who reported a child under 19 losing or being laid off from a job.

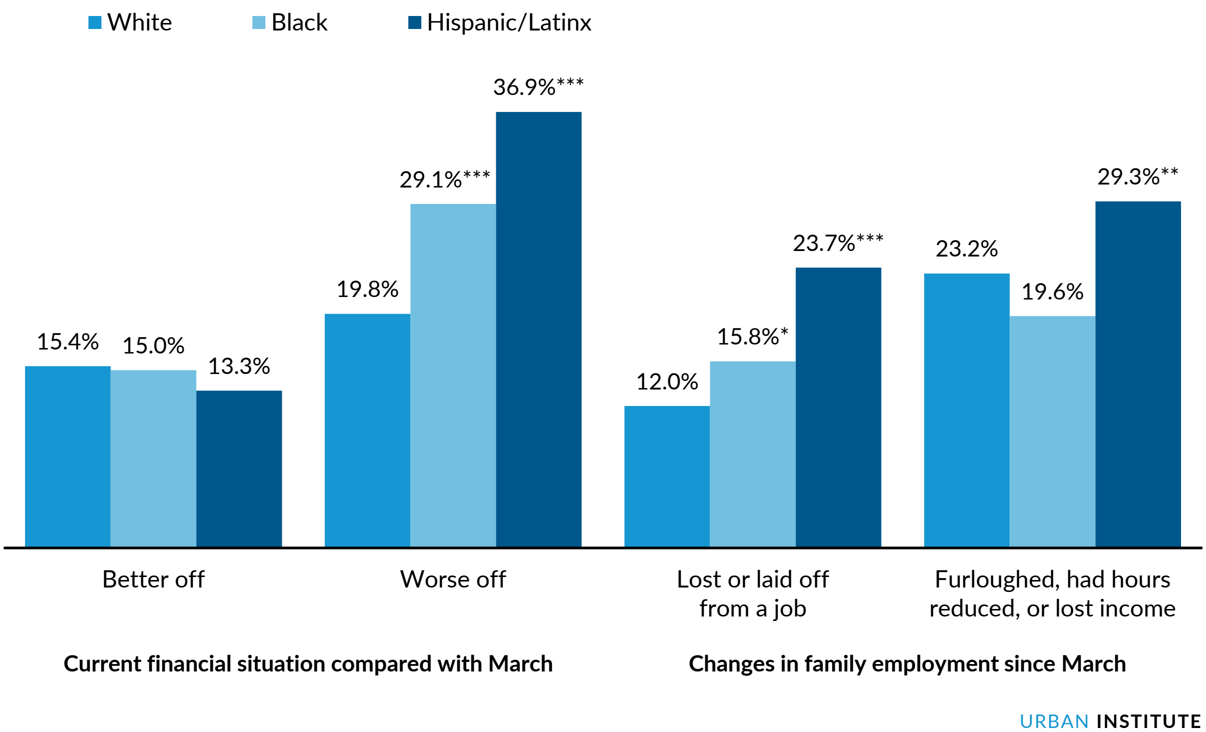
More than one-third of Hispanic/Latinx adults and nearly 3 in 10 Black adults reported that their families were worse off financially in September than they were at the beginning of March.

As of September, 36.9 percent of Hispanic/Latinx adults and 29.1 percent of Black adults were worse off financially than at the beginning of March (figure 2). Adults in both groups were more likely to be worse off than white adults, one in five of whom (19.8 percent) reported being worse off. We did not find statistically significant differences in the shares that were better off by these racial or ethnic groups. However, Black adults were nearly twice as likely as likely to be worse off than better off (29.1 percent versus 15 percent), and Hispanic/Latinx adults were almost three times as likely to be worse off than better off (36.9 percent versus 13.3 percent).

Nearly one in four Hispanic/Latinx adults (23.7 percent) reported that they or their spouse or partner lost or were laid off from a job since the beginning of March, and over half had experienced at least some negative effect on their work or work-related income; those are higher shares than reported by white and Black adults. Black adults were nearly 4 percentage points more likely than white adults to be in families that experienced a job loss (15.8 percent versus 12.0 percent).

FIGURE 2

Impact of the Pandemic on Family Financial Situation and Employment among Adults Ages 18 to 64, By Race/Ethnicity, September 2020



Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2. The survey was conducted September 11 through 28, 2020, and 91 percent of respondents completed the survey by September 17.

Notes: Estimates are not shown for non-Hispanic/Latinx adults who are not Black or white or are more than once race. Estimates of those reporting a furlough, reduced hours, or lost income excludes adults who also reported they or their spouse or partner lost or was laid off from a job but includes adults who reported a child under age 19 losing or being laid off from a job.
*/**/*** Estimate differs significantly from white adults at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

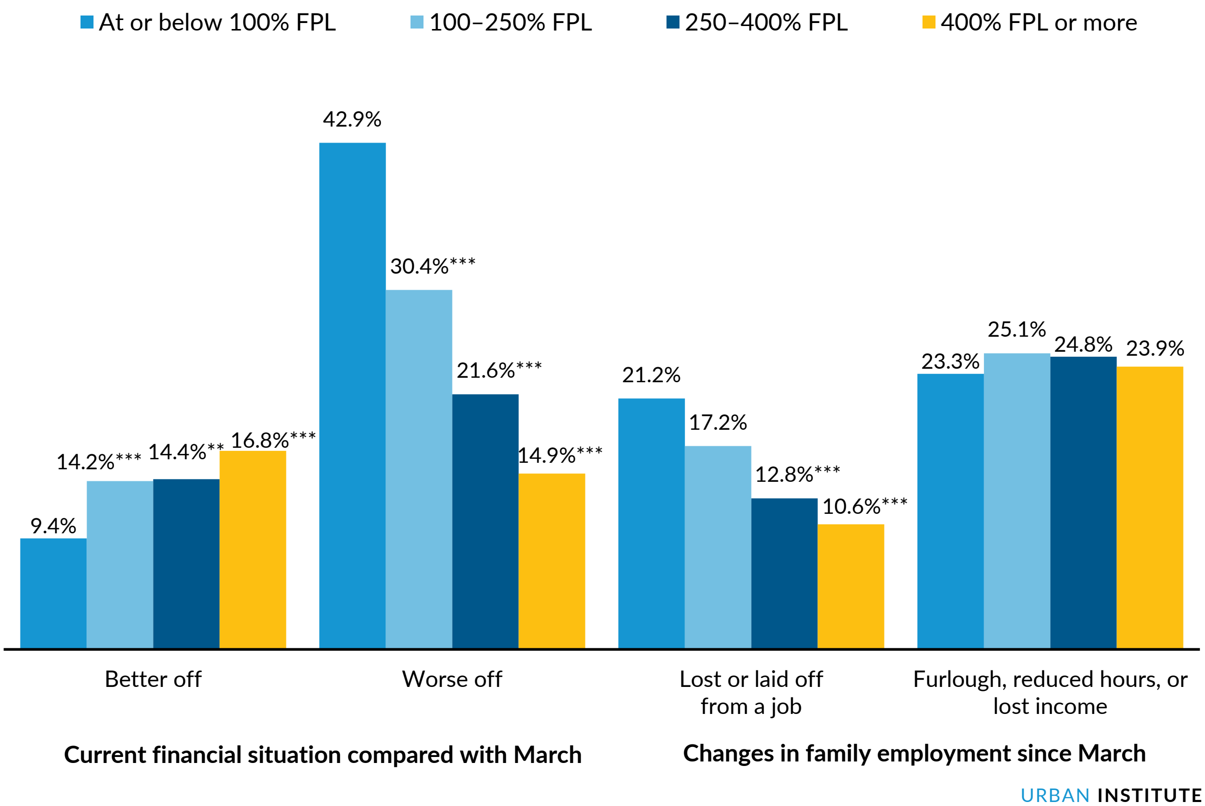
Adults who had family incomes below the FPL before the pandemic were nearly three times as likely as adults with the highest prepandemic incomes to be worse off financially in September than they were at the beginning of March.

Figure 3 shows that the share of adults who were better off in September than in the beginning of March increases with prepandemic income, and the share who became worse off declines with income. More than 4 in 10 adults (42.9 percent) whose prepandemic family incomes were below the FPL reported being worse off financially in September than in the beginning of March. In contrast, 14.9 percent of adults with prepandemic incomes of 400 percent of the FPL or more reported being worse off. Looked at another way, adults with incomes below the FPL were more than four times as likely to be worse off as they were to be better off (42.9 percent versus 9.4 percent), and adults with the highest incomes were about equally likely to be worse or better off (14.9 percent versus 16.8 percent).

Job losses have also fallen hardest on families that were experiencing poverty before the pandemic. More than one in five (21.2 percent) adults with income below the FPL before the pandemic reported that they or their spouse or partner have lost or been laid off from a job since the beginning of March; that is twice the share reported by adults with the highest prepandemic incomes (10.6 percent).

FIGURE 3

Impact of the Pandemic on Family Financial Situation and Employment among Adults Ages 18 to 64, by Prepandemic Family Income, September 2020



Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2. The survey was conducted September 11 through 28, 2020, and 91 percent of respondents completed the survey by September 17.

Notes: FPL is federal poverty level. Estimates of those reporting a furlough, reduced hours, or lost income excludes adults who also reported they or their spouse or partner lost or was laid off from a job but includes adults who reported a child under age 19 losing or being laid off from a job.

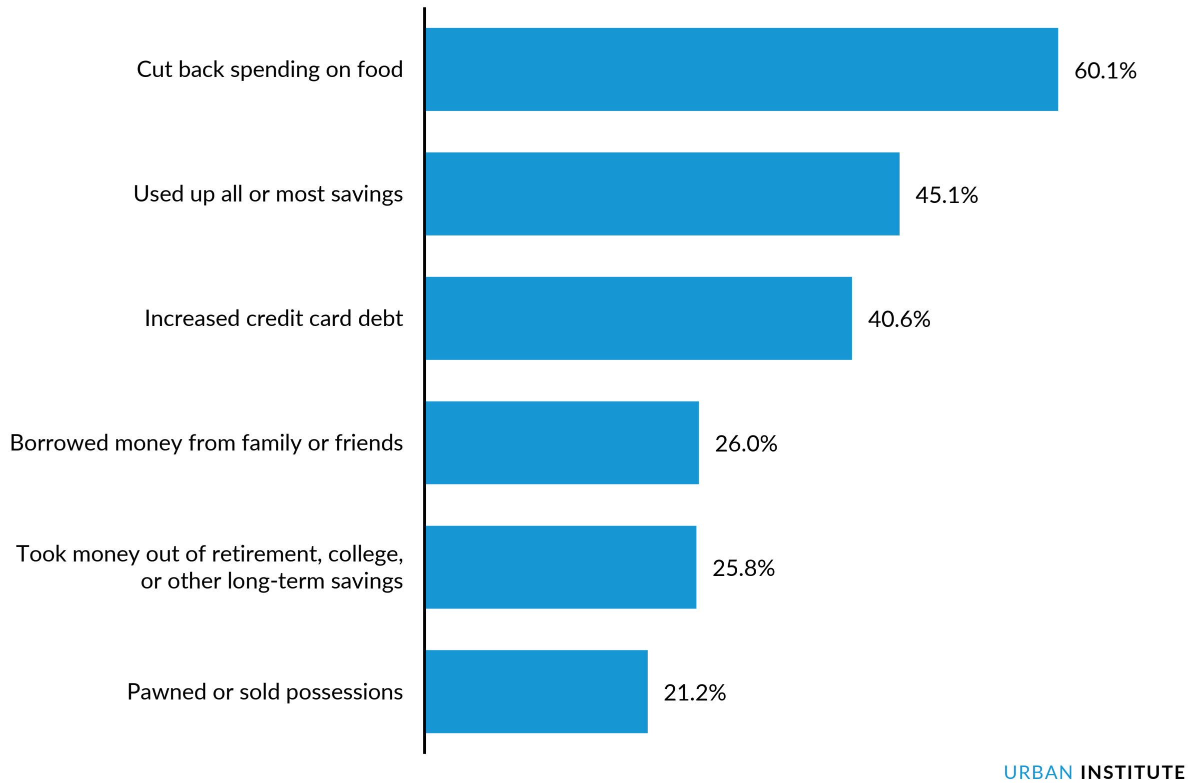
*/**/*** Estimate differs significantly from adults with incomes at or below 100 percent of FPL at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

Families are coping with job loss by cutting spending on food, using up savings, and increasing debt.

Adults in families that have experienced a job loss since the beginning of March are using several coping strategies to compensate for lost income. Six in 10 (60.1 percent) reported that their families have cut back spending on food (figure 4). Nearly half (45.1 percent) have used up all or most of their savings, and 4 in 10 (40.6 percent) have increased credit card debt. Roughly one-quarter of adults in families experiencing job loss reported that their families have borrowed money from other family members or friends or took money out of retirement or other long-term savings accounts, and one in five pawned or sold possessions.

FIGURE 4

Family Financial Decisions among Adults Ages 18 to 64 in Families Experiencing Job Loss during the Pandemic, September 2020



Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2. The survey was conducted September 11 through 28, 2020, and 91 percent of respondents completed the survey by September 17.

More than half of adults in families experiencing job loss have received unemployment insurance benefits since the beginning of March. Many are also receiving health and nutritional assistance from other public and private safety-net programs.

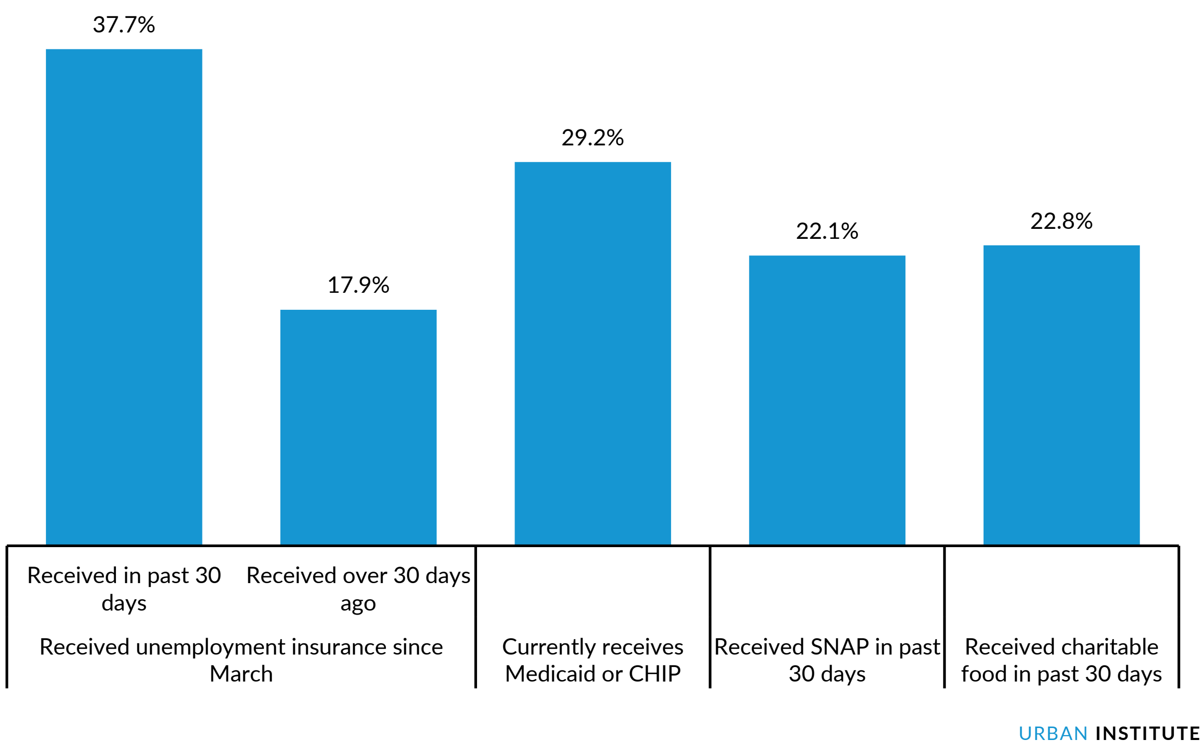
Among adults in families facing job loss, 55.7 percent have received unemployment insurance benefits since March 1 (figure 5). This share includes 37.7 percent who received benefits in the 30 days before the September survey and 17.9 percent who received benefits more than 30 days before the survey. Another 7 percent have applied for unemployment insurance benefits since March 1 but have not received them (data not shown).

Families that have lost jobs during the pandemic are also receiving health care and nutritional assistance from other public and private safety-net programs. Three in 10 adults in families experiencing job loss (29.2 percent) reported that they or someone in their families were enrolled in Medicaid or CHIP at the time of the survey. More than one in five adults in these families reported receiving SNAP benefits (22.1 percent) or charitable food (22.8 percent) in the past 30 days.[7]

Overall, nearly two-thirds of adults in families experiencing job loss (62.6 percent) reported having received assistance from unemployment insurance, Medicaid or CHIP, SNAP, or charitable food programs in the past 30 days (data not shown).

FIGURE 5

Family Receipt of Assistance from the Public and Private Safety Net among Adults Ages 18 to 64 in Families Experiencing Job Loss During the Pandemic, September 2020



Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2. The survey was conducted September 11 through 28, 2020, and 91 percent of respondents completed the survey by September 17.
Notes: CHIP is Children's Health Insurance Program. SNAP is Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Discussion

Six months into the pandemic, one-quarter of adults reported that their family was worse off financially in September than they were before the pandemic hit the US in March, and a smaller share reported that their families are now better off. Consistent with findings from federal employment statistics and other surveys, the pandemic has hit hardest the families of Hispanic/Latinx and Black adults and families that had income below FPL before the recession (NPR, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health 2020; Parker, Minkin, and Bennett 2020).[8] Approximately 37 percent of Hispanic/Latinx adults, 29 percent of Black adults, and 43 percent of adults with prepandemic incomes below the FPL became worse off than at the beginning of March.

Though changes in financial well-being could partially reflect patterns of income volatility that predate the pandemic, our finding that adults were more likely to be worse off than better off reverses previous trends found in the 2018 and 2019 rounds of the Federal Reserve's Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking (Federal Reserve Board of Governors 2019; Federal Reserve Board of Governors 2020). Data from the October 2019 Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking, which uses the same panel as our tracking survey and asked a similar question about changes in financial well-being,[9] show that adults were more than twice as likely to report being better off than worse off (32 percent versus 14 percent) than they were 12 months before the survey.[10] This pattern was consistent across racial and ethnic groups. Though changes in financial well-being varied by household income and income volatility, even adults with household incomes below $25,000 were more likely to be better off than worse off in October 2019 than they were in October 2018, and those with high income volatility were about equally likely to be better off or worse off.

In the September 2020 tracking survey, the likelihood of becoming worse off since the beginning of March 2020 was strongly correlated with the impact of the pandemic on family employment, which also varied significantly by race and ethnicity and by prepandemic income.[11] Overall, one in seven adults is in a family that has experienced job loss during the pandemic, including nearly one in four Hispanic/Latinx adults and more than one in five adults with prepandemic incomes below the FPL. Disparities in families' financial circumstances reflect both differences in exposure to the initial economic shock and an uneven recovery in which high-wage workers have regained nearly all jobs lost while many low-wage workers remain unemployed[12] and in which the labor market has recovered more quickly for white workers than for Black and Hispanic/Latinx workers.[13]

Families are coping with job loss by reducing food spending, drawing down savings, and increasing debt. They are also turning to the public and private safety net to help make ends meet. More than half of adults whose families lost a job during the pandemic have received unemployment insurance benefits since the beginning of March, and many are also receiving assistance through other safety-net programs such as Medicaid and SNAP, which are among the programs most responsive to increased need during recessions (Moffitt 2013).

Relief legislation enacted in the early months of the pandemic (including the CARES Act) provided substantial assistance to mitigate the recession's effect on households, but much of this assistance was temporary. Most households received one-time economic impact payments of up to $1,200 per adult and up to $500 for qualifying children by early June,[14] and the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program that provided a $600 weekly supplement to regular state unemployment benefits expired on July 31. A subsequent executive order established a temporary Lost Wages Assistance program that in most states provided six weeks of a $300 weekly benefit supplement to people receiving at least $100 in unemployment benefits through existing programs.[15] As of late September, more than 25 million people continued to receive unemployment insurance benefits.[16] Without new funding for supplemental benefits, these recipients will see weekly benefit amounts revert to their previous levels under various state unemployment insurance laws; in August 2020 these average weekly benefit amounts ranged from $181 to $463 across states, with a national average weekly benefit of $323.[17]

In addition to receiving reduced benefit amounts, more unemployed workers are exhausting their regular unemployment insurance benefits,[18] which are available for a maximum of 26 weeks in most states. These workers will then be eligible for 13 weeks of benefits under the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program established by the CARES Act. People who have been receiving benefits through Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), a separate program for self-employed workers and others who do not qualify for regular unemployment benefits, are eligible to receive those benefits for a maximum of 39 weeks. Both PEUC and PUA expire on December 31, and some recipients may exhaust their benefits before then, at which point PEUC recipients may qualify for Extended Benefits, the duration of which varies by state. Without reauthorization of PEUC and PUA, a growing number of long-term unemployed workers are at risk of losing all income support from unemployment insurance beginning next year.

As families facing job loss deplete their savings and incur debt, they will likely face further challenges meeting nutritional needs. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act increased funding for SNAP, and the US Department of Agriculture authorized states to increase monthly SNAP benefits to the maximum level for all participants (although the maximum monthly benefit participants can receive was not increased). Further, Congress recently passed and the president signed a budget resolution that included an additional $8 billion in SNAP funding, extended the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program to replace school meals, and provided states with continued flexibility in SNAP program operations. However, the maximum SNAP monthly benefit, $680 for a household of four in 2021 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2020), falls short of meal costs in nearly all US counties (Waxman, Gundersen, and Thompson 2018). Relief legislation passed by the House would increase the maximum monthly SNAP benefit 15 percent, which would reduce food insecurity and help mitigate a looming shortfall of meals available from food banks that have seen increased demand during the pandemic and may be experiencing reduced food supplies from federal government sources in the next year.[19]

Families that have lost jobs as well as other low- and moderate-income families also face new risks to their health insurance from a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) that will soon be heard by the Supreme Court, *California v. Texas*. Because most nonelderly people receive their health insurance through an employer, job losses during the pandemic are causing some adults to lose their employer-sponsored health insurance, placing new demands on Medicaid and other health insurance safety-net programs (Gangopadhyaya, Karpman, and Aarons 2020). A Supreme Court ruling in *California v. Texas* overturning the ACA would put newly unemployed workers at risk of becoming uninsured and roll back the coverage gains that occurred before the pandemic (McMorrow and Holahan 2020).

Without steps to protect and strengthen safety-net programs such as unemployment insurance, SNAP, and Medicaid, families that have experienced job loss during the pandemic could face worsening hardship, and disparities by race and ethnicity and by income in financial stability and health are likely to grow wider. As the labor market recovers and negotiations on new relief legislation continue, increased access and augmented benefits through these programs can help protect adults and children from the harmful long-term effects of food insecurity, homelessness, and uninsurance on health and well-being.

Data and Methods

This brief uses data from the second wave of the Urban Institute's Coronavirus Tracking Survey, a nationally representative internet-based survey of nonelderly adults designed to assess how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting adults and their families and how those effects change over time. A total of 4,007 adults ages 18 to 64 participated in the second wave, which was fielded September 11–28, 2020; 91 percent of respondents completed the survey between September 11 and 17. The first wave of the tracking survey was fielded May 14–27. Respondents for both waves were sampled from the 9,032 adults who participated in the most recent round of the Health Reform Monitoring Survey (HRMS), which was fielded March 25 through April 10, 2020. The HRMS sample is drawn from Ipsos's KnowledgePanel, the nation's largest probability-based online panel. The panel is recruited from an address-based sampling frame covering 97 percent of US households and includes households with and without internet access. Participants can take the survey in English or Spanish.

The Coronavirus Tracking Survey includes an oversample of Black and Hispanic/Latinx HRMS participants. Survey weights adjust for unequal selection probabilities and are poststratified to the characteristics of the national nonelderly adult population based on benchmarks from the Current Population Survey and American Community Survey. We also adjust the September tracking survey weights to address differential nonresponse among participants in the March/April HRMS. Because nonresponse in the September survey is greater among HRMS participants experiencing negative employment effects and material hardship during the pandemic and these effects differ based on demographic characteristics, we adjust the weights so that work status and employment and hardship outcomes reported in March/April among the September sample are consistent with the outcomes reported among the full March/April HRMS sample both overall and within key demographic subgroups. These adjustments make the September tracking survey sample more representative of the sample initially drawn in March/April and mitigate nonresponse bias in estimated changes over time in the pandemic's effects.

The margin of sampling error, including the design effect, for the full sample of adults in the second wave of the tracking survey is plus or minus 2.0 percentage points for a 50 percent statistic at the 95 percent confidence level. Additional information about the March/April 2020 HRMS and the questionnaires for the HRMS and first and second waves of the Coronavirus Tracking Survey can be found at hrms.urban.org.

Notes

[1] "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," accessed October 13, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsatabs.htm.

[2] "The Employment Situation – September 2020," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, October 2, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_10022020.pdf.

[3] Although the novel coronavirus outbreak began in December 2019 and the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the US was reported in January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and the president declared a national emergency on March 13.

[4] Prepandemic family income is based on annual family income in the past year as a percentage of the FPL reported in the March/April 2020 Health Reform Monitoring Survey, from which the sample for the Coronavirus Tracking Survey was drawn.

[5] The term "Hispanic/Latinx" is used throughout this report to reflect the different ways people self-identify. The US Census Bureau uses the term "Hispanic." The terms "white" and "Black" in this report refer to adults who do not identify as Hispanic or Latinx.

[6] Respondents who reported that they lost or were laid off from a job were asked if their most recent layoff was permanent or temporary. Similarly, respondents who reported that their spouse or partner lost or was laid off from a job were asked if their spouse's or partner's most recent layoff was permanent or temporary.

[7] Because previous studies have found that participation in safety-net programs such as Medicaid and SNAP is typically underreported in surveys, our estimates may understate the share of adults in families experiencing job loss who have received benefits from these programs (Meyer, Mok, and Sullivan 2009; Pascale, Roemer, and Resnick 2009; Wheaton 2008).

[8] "Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker," accessed October 12, 2020, https://tracktherecovery.org/. Heather Long, Andrew Van Dam, Alyssa Fowers, and Leslie Shapiro, "The COVID-19 Recession Is the Most Unequal in Modern U.S. History," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/coronavirus-recession-equality/.

[9] See "Supplemental Appendixes to the Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2019 – May 2020, Appendix A: 2019 Survey Questionnaire, " Federal Reserve Board of Governors, accessed October 19, 2020, https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2020-supplemental-appendixes-2019-Appendix-A-2019-Survey-Questionnaire.htm.

[10] Authors' analysis of data from the 2019 Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking. See "Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking," Federal Reserve Board of Governors, last updated May 14, 2020, accessed October 19, 2020, https://www.federalreserve.gov/consumerscommunities/shed_data.htm.

[11] Adults in families experiencing job loss were more than five times as likely to report being worse off as they were to report being better off (57.9 percent versus 10.4 percent), and adults in families experiencing other negative employment impacts were more than twice as likely to be worse off as they were to be better off (32.9 percent versus 13.8 percent). Adults in families whose employment was not affected negatively by the pandemic were less likely to report being worse off than better off (13.4 percent versus 15.9 percent).

[12] "Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker," accessed October 12, 2020, https://tracktherecovery.org/

[13] Long et al., "The COVID-19 Recession Is the Most Unequal in Modern U.S. History."

[14] US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury, IRS Announce Delivery of 159 Million Economic Impact Payments," news release, June 3, 2020, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1025.

[15] An August 8, 2020, executive order establishing a temporary Lost Wages Assistance program allowed states to draw on disaster-relief funds to provide supplemental assistance to people eligible for at least $100 in weekly unemployment insurance benefits from existing programs. The program authorized a $300 weekly federal contribution until the balance of remaining disaster relief funds reached $25 billion. States that applied by September 10 received funding to provide six weeks of benefits to their residents. See "Memorandum on Authorizing the Other Needs Assistance Program for Major Disaster Declarations Related to Coronavirus Disease 2019," the White House, August 8, 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/memorandum-authorizing-needs-assistance-program-major-disaster-declarations-related-coronavirus-disease-2019/, and Aimee Picchi, "Trump's $300 in Weekly Unemployment Benefits Extended to Six Weeks," *CBS Moneywatch*, September 11, 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/unemployment-trump-300-jobless-aid-extended-six-weeks/.

[16] "Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims," US Department of Labor, October 15, 2020, https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OPA/newsreleases/ui-claims/20201958.pdf.

[17] "Monthly Program and Financial Data," US Department of Labor, accessed October 9, 2020, https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/claimssum.asp.

[18] Heidi Shierholz, "Many Workers Have Exhausted Their State's Regular Unemployment Benefits," Economic Policy Institute, September 24, 2020, https://www.epi.org/blog/many-workers-have-exhausted-their-states-regular-unemployment-benefits-the-cares-act-provided-important-ui-benefits-and-congress-must-act-to-extend-them/.

[19] Feeding America, "America is Facing an 8 Billion Meal Shortfall in Charitable Food," accessed October 8, 2020, https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/FA_Supply_Demand_One-pager_FINAL.pdf.

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