

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST
HOW MOTHERS SPEND THEIR TIME

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

Did you know that more than one in ten mothers of young children left their jobs due to child-care responsibilities at some point in 2020? That's one of ten facts in a new report from The Hamilton Project at Brookings titled, "Ten economic facts on how mothers spend their time," which is the theme of this Mother's Day weekend episode of the Brookings Cafeteria. To discuss some of the ways that work, time use, and caregiving have changed for mothers with young children over the last year, I'm joined in the virtual studio by Lauren Bauer, a fellow in Economic Studies and The Hamilton Project, and one of the report's authors.

Also on this episode, Senior Fellow Sarah Binder tells us what's happening in Congress as President Biden looks ahead to his next 100 days in office. While the first 100 days were largely a legislative and political success for the president and congressional Democrats, Binder says the next 100 days look murkier.

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First up, here's Sarah Binder, with what's happening in Congress.

BINDER: I'm Sarah Binder, a senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution.

President Biden and the Democratic-led Congress have reached their first mile marker—the first 100 days of the Biden administration. By conventional metrics, the first 100 days were largely a legislative and political success for the president and congressional Democrats. But

what lies ahead for the next 100 days? That is a work in progress; not clear yet which path Congress will take.

So, first a few thoughts on why the first 100 days was such a success, why such smooth sailing for the American Relief Plan? And second, why then such a rocky road ahead for the president's next initiatives: the American Jobs and the American Families plans?

First, the relief plan. The major accomplishment of the first 100 days of course was relatively swift enactment, with Democratic votes alone, of Biden's massive pandemic relief bill. Key ingredients made it possible: It was the top priority for the new administration; it was full of popular provisions for Democratic and Republican voters alike, including cash payments for millions of Americans (even Republican lawmakers who voted lockstep against the plan have trumpeted its benefits to families and businesses back home); there was bicameral Democratic agreement both on substance and on process; Democrats used special budget rules that precluded the need for Republican votes in the Senate; there was a looming deadline to force action—enhanced unemployment benefits were about to expire; House Democrats had already passed a similar measure last year; and Democrats sweetened this bill with longstanding priorities for progressives, like a fully refundable child tax credit that experts estimate will lift millions of children and families out of poverty.

So why such a rocky road for the next two plans? First, Democrats' agenda of top priorities is far more crowded now, and Democrats are not all yet on the same page. Note the slow roll out of Biden's next two plans: the American Jobs Plan, followed by the American Families Plan. The slow, staggered rollout suggests that these are more politically complex and possibly more contested even within the White House. That's certainly the case on Capitol Hill. Democrats are not yet all on the same page about how big or broad the infrastructure bill should

be, whether or not it should be paid for, and if so, how it should be paid for. And decisions made about how big to go on a jobs bill will undoubtedly affect the demands made by different Democratic coalitions on what makes it into the American Families Plan and how it should or should not be paid for. The sequence of legislative action matters when the agenda is so crowded.

Second, it's unclear whether or how many Republicans will play ball. Republicans are disputing what counts as infrastructure. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has drawn a red line: don't touch the Trump tax cuts to pay for any of these plans. Republicans back home might see things differently than Republicans on Capitol Hill. Reporting suggests that many of Biden's proposals are popular with Republican voters, mayors and governors, even if they're not popular with Republican lawmakers in Washington.

Third, process is still in play and the clock is ticking. Democrats in the Senate don't yet have enough votes—they need all 50 Democrats—to use special budget rules to avoid the need for Republican votes. So Democrats—in the White House and Congress—are trying to feel out where Republicans are. What type of jobs bill will Republicans support? Which Republicans and how many would be willing to vote for it? And of course if Republicans demand too many concessions from Democrats, many Democrats will want to give up on securing Republican support and go it alone. Democrats so far seem pretty patient, especially President Biden, but the clock is ticking, especially if Democrats decide that they will need to use special budget rules to advance either or both plans.

Finally, Biden's proposals aren't necessarily every lawmaker's top priorities. A gang of 15 Democratic and Republican senators are working on immigration reform. Another group is trying to hammer out a deal on police reform, others want to make progress on limiting guns. All

told, there are a lot of moving parts, no majority, or supermajority, yet for any particular plan. And so the next 100 days are looking quite a bit murkier than the first.

DEWS: And now, here's my interview with Lauren Bauer.

Lauren, welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria.

BAUER: Good to be here, Fred.

DEWS: And, I checked the tape and this is actually your first appearance on the Brookings Cafeteria. You've been on our other shows like the Current. But I'm very, very happy to have you on the show now to talk about some of the new research from the Hamilton Project that you've been involved in.

BAUER: It is absolutely my pleasure to be here. I can't wait to have this conversation.

DEWS: So, one of the things I'd like to talk to you about today specifically is the recent Hamilton Project set of research called "10 economic facts on how mothers spend their time." And it's Mother's Day the weekend that this is airing, so this is appropriate timing. Let me ask you to explain two of the frames of reference in the title of this research: mothers and time. Right?

BAUER: Sure, so in this work a mother is a woman who has given birth to or is raising a child under the age of 18 and depending on the data source that we use in this piece, we're able to distinguish biological mothers from other sorts of mothers. But when we talk about how mothers spend their time, I'm not really trying to be clever. We literally want to know what mothers—mothers of very young children, working mothers, unemployed mothers, black mothers, Hispanic mothers, low-income mothers—do with the time that they have.

So, for a few years prior to the pandemic, I had been working through a line of research on time, from big picture things like figuring out that one reason for declining aggregate labor

force participation was due to young people choosing to spend more time in school, to small things like how unemployed mothers and fathers spend their time differently. And because of this work, and because I am, shockingly, a mother myself—and I have my Super Mom mug with me to do this interview—I knew very early on that the pandemic was going to hit us hard. And I was not an optimist at the time about how fast we could turn things around.

So, in March, in addition to working on nutrition assistance policies to help families put food on the table, I wrote a survey—the survey of mothers with young children, and with support from all sorts of lovely Brookings people, we were able to field it very quickly early in the pandemic, in April, to assess how the pandemic was affecting the lives of mothers with little kids and we were able again to field it in October.

And so the work of this paper looks at moms looks at time and we use a variety of federal datasets. But we also wrote our own survey, put it in the field, and that helped us dig really deep into how these moms were handling things this year.

DEWS: Let me tell listeners if they're not familiar with the Hamilton Project's research that kind of follows the 10 facts model, when you go to hamiltonproject.org or brookings.edu and you find “10 economic facts on how mothers spend their time,” it's presented literally as 10 facts that you can read the analysis and always see some really interesting data charts, so I commend that to listeners.

Lauren, you write in the introduction, and I'm going quote here: “from the outset of the pandemic, mothers face pressure to do it all, but with fewer resources and support than before.” Can you explain what you mean by that?

BAUER: Sure. So, that quote I think means different things for different mothers. But for all mothers, I think the past year the number one priority has been how to keep their children

safe, healthy, fed, learning, and monitored—and your ability to do that with enough cash in your pocket, food on the table and some care network, it's just vastly different than it was in March.

Some families have lost access to school or childcare or aftercare entirely just at the beginning, partially. It's been very different for different people, but I think everyone lost access at some point. Depending on where you live and how you're connected, you may have lost access to your friends and family network at various points that provides you support, or a grandparent to pick up your kid after school. So many families have experiences, losses of income, over the course of the pandemic, especially families with kids. But you've also experienced the loss of time or the displacement of time. I can't be the only person who was watching my kid during the day and then started working at 8:00 o'clock at night sometime in April. And your ability to control your schedule or not control your schedule to make ends meet like that also really varied.

And so, to me, the pressure to do it all is to do what you were doing before the pandemic only now you have to do potentially something different with your kids, different at work ... under enormous stress in the middle of a global pandemic, and there could be new caregiving activities with your parents or your grandparents. It's been just a squeeze.

DEWS: Right, and I'll just recognize as a father myself, but also as a male in this society, I recognize that women typically, especially working women, also do all the other unpaid things that are needed to keep their households running from scheduling to thinking about kids activities to, as you just mentioned, caring for elderly parents or in-laws. So the pandemic just kind of exacerbates all of that.

BAUER: Absolutely. I mean, that's one of the things that we document. That's one of our facts. It is a fact that prior to the pandemic, mothers spend about 2 hours a day more than fathers

in what we call nonmarket labor and so that is everything that it takes to run a household but also everything it takes to directly care for your children.

DEWS: So let me mention that the report, in addition to that, has three broad categories of data that I'd like to ask you some questions about, and those are labor force participation and childcare, labor force participation and time use, and then childcare and time use. So the 10 facts are arranged in these three large categories, and we'll just go through a few examples of each. So on childcare, how did mothers' involvement in childcare look before the pandemic? And how did the pandemic change this from others?

BAUER: Sure. So, we'll talk about little kids and then we'll talk about school age kids. So prior to the pandemic, about half of three-year-olds and 2/3 of four-year-olds were in some sort of center-based care, meaning that they were in childcare or preschool. And then starting in school age there are some exceptions, but for the most part, one, we should think about education is childcare for the purposes of this question, but also that basically all the kids are in it, right? You know, we certainly have some issues with older kids and truancy and some other reasons that kids aren't in school, but for the most part all kids starting in kindergarten are in childcare for a chunk of the day.

And certainly, prior to the pandemic, there were mothers who weren't in the labor force because they were taking care of their kids, and that was either their choice or something that they had to do. But, prior to the pandemic, labor force participation rates, meaning that you're working or actively seeking work, had converged around 80% for all mothers except for married mothers with kids under 13 at home. Forty years ago, about 50% of married mothers with young kids were in the labor force, and in 2019 it had reached 70%.

So I think mother's involvement in quote unquote childcare was that childcare was both developmentally positive for their children, but it was a labor support, a work support. And many children and families availed themselves of center-based care in order to enable mom to work outside the home.

DEWS: Are those changes different based on mothers' racial or ethnic background? I mean, does the experience of Black and Hispanic mothers differ from white mothers?

BAUER: Here's a stark way to think about the differences between how Black mothers, Hispanic mothers, and white mothers have experienced the pandemic. So, prior to the pandemic, black mothers had the highest labor force participation rates of any mothers. They were the most likely of mothers with children under 13 to be employed. As of February 2021, white mothers have overtaken that. And why is that? Because Black mothers and Hispanic mothers were more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic and are right now more likely to be unemployed or out of the labor force than white mothers.

And so all of the things that we've been talking about in terms of the she-cession in terms of the industries that were affected and all these women losing their jobs is true, but white women seem to be able to be getting back into the labor force with more success than Black woman and Hispanic woman.

DEWS: And so there's a lot of research from a lot of people at Brookings about the kinds of jobs— So we look at the labor force participation of Black women is high, but again, it depends on the kinds of jobs that they had, which are more vulnerable to an economic shock like the pandemic. And also the needs that they would have for providing childcare at home. Is that right?

BAUER: That's absolutely right. I think it's a combination of all those things and many people, including people at Brookings, are working on parceling that out. My biggest takeaway from working on this issue over the past year is that without childcare it's very difficult for women to work, and your ability to stay attached to the labor force over the past year depends as much on your ability to make sure your children are cared for as it does what industry you're working in. Because you know many, many people lost jobs in these difficult sectors, but you know the economy started to open up again, and maybe they're finding a similar kind of position in a different sector. But women who left the labor force to care for their kids, not all of them are ready to look for a job and take a job because the childcare issue isn't solved yet. And that's really holding them back.

DEWS: I want to go back to the point about how mothers and fathers spend their time. You have some data in the report that's very specific about the activities that employed mothers and employed fathers with young children participate in. Can you talk about some of those findings?

BAUER: Yes, if you're following along in “10 economic facts about how mothers spend their time,” this is fact #5. So, prior to the pandemic, on average, mothers with children under 13 worked in the labor market for fewer hours than fathers. But as I said before, did about two more hours of nonmarket labor and took less time for leisure than fathers did. And so consequentially during the pandemic, I think it's really important to know this, many, many fewer mothers are working full time right now than they were before the pandemic. So we're not even talking about losing your job leaving your job. We are talking about keeping your job, but dialing back. And so all of those things—not knowing if you can get back to work because you can't care for your kid, having lost your job and not struggling to find a new one because jobs may not be available,

but also people who are struggling to maintain the professional trajectory that they were on before. Many women reported on our survey that they felt like they were being penalized at work because of their childcare issues.

Now, that is illegal, but it doesn't mean that women aren't feeling those burdens and those pressures and struggling to work through them.

DEWS: One thing that really struck me from the report from the data is that we know that working mothers face more challenges than fathers after the pandemic hit, but it was particularly hard on, and as you mentioned this earlier, part time, but also essential workers, we had all this attention to essential workers over the last year. But mothers who are essential workers were particularly hard hit.

BAUER: Oh, absolutely, and I think single mothers who were essential frontline workers were even harder hit because you're thinking of circumstance where not everybody could work from home. Someone had to work outside of the home in order to keep their job. And who was going to watch their kids? And I think that's one of the reasons why, in work that I put out yesterday, we see higher rates of labor force exits because of childcare.

So, people who are saying they left their job because of childcare issues among mothers with children under the age of five, but also among single mothers. And so what that says to me is children who require a tremendous amount of supervision, but also families whose caregiving networks lost threads over the course of the past year, some of them just had to leave their jobs. And the people who were able to make it work had resources—financial, time, social—to allow them to stay working outside the home and those resources could have been, you know, they're teenagers, but something had to give because you can't just leave a 2-year-old at home when there's no childcare.

DEWS: Well, I think that might be a good segue into the next point. I want to ask you about, and this tracks, I believe, with fact seven, I want you to comment on this quote and that is: “two in five mothers say they must hide their caregiving struggles at work and that mothers who are working are more likely to report that their work life balance has become more difficult.”

BAUER: Yeah, so one of the best parts about writing your own survey is that you can ask people questions that you really want to know the answers to. So, throughout this survey, we asked questions that give mothers the opportunity to report on their struggles without judging them for it. So yes, many mothers, said that they don't feel supported at work if they have kids, that they're struggling to balance competing demands on their time from their jobs and their families. But most importantly, perhaps, that it's taking a mental and physical toll. So, we found that mothers were reporting at exceedingly high rates difficulty sleeping, that they were having intrusive thoughts, which is a way that we ask about anxiety, and so forth. And so not only were women feeling comfortable about reporting the struggles that they were having at work, they were just comfortable reporting their struggles. And I think this is really important information to put out there because it's not just you, it's a lot of people, especially the sleeping problem.

DEWS: Yeah, I thought that piece of the report was especially enlightening for this reader, at least. Let me ask you Lauren to talk about how the pandemic affected how mothers have participated in educational activities with their kids. And also, does that vary based on income?

BAUER: Sure. So, it will not surprise listeners to know that many more mothers are reporting that they're doing educational activities than they were before the pandemic. And I'll note that we specifically only included pandemic-era educational activities that one could have done prior. So we did ask things like, were you monitoring your child's remote school. But that's

not included in this because you couldn't have been monitoring your child's remote school in 2017. So yes, many, many more people across the income distribution have said that they are engaging in educational activities with their kids, and it seems to be tied the rate differences across the income distribution are tied to when the kids are in remote school.

And so early on in the pandemic more higher income mothers reported that they were doing these educational activities. And in the fall of 2020, more low income. I think this merits further investigation in terms of what kinds of kids were in schools and school districts that could quickly stand up remote or hybrid learning in the spring and who is still doing or was still doing remote or hybrid learning in the fall. It seems to be the case that those are tied to income.

DEWS: Let me turn to Fact 9, and it is mothers report doing the majority of childcare now. That shouldn't be surprising to any listeners. I think it's probably always been that case. But you documented in the 10 economic facts ways that mothers' perception of their childcare responsibilities differ by the kind of employment they have and also by their marital status. So it's very interesting data there. Can you talk through some of that?

BAUER: So, I will note that I did not survey fathers and so we are only getting one side of the story here. And others who have surveyed fathers asking very similar questions, fathers don't report that they're doing all of the childcare, but they're much more likely to report that they're doing equal amounts of childcare than when you ask mothers. So I stipulate that this may not be fair. But it is nevertheless true that the vast majority of mothers, whether they are married or unmarried, whether they are working or not, report that they do all or almost all of the childcare in their household.

DEWS: Yeah, and I'm just going to have to go with mothers on this one, but—

BAUER: Same! But if men are expressing the value of wanting to be equal partners in child rearing activities through this survey, then mothers should take them up on that.

DEWS: I think it goes back to that issue of again, unpaid work that parents do in the household, but traditionally it's like fathers would go out to their job, they would earn money, they would come home, and their work was done for the day. But mothers, especially before women went into labor force in large numbers would work all day at the house, and then they would continue to work into the.

BAUER: That's right, but it's also that has changed so much. You know, male labor force participation has been declining for 50 years, and the only reason that we haven't been so focused on aggregate labor force participation is because women are working more now. They're making up in their gains for the losses of the men. And, I think we need to reframe about what the future of the American economy looks like and the work that we have to do to support women who, prior to the pandemic, were working at higher rates than almost any other time on record—I think second most except for, like, one year in the late 2000s—and get them back to where they want to be. But also focus our attention on men without children because they are the ones who are struggling to get into and stay attached to the labor market.

DEWS: Lauren, let's move on to the last fact which has to do with lower mental health among mothers being associated with poor economic outcomes. And I think this starts to get into some of the long-term impacts also, of the COVID-19 pandemic on working mothers of young children. Can you comment on that?

BAUER: We're not attributing causality to any of this, but it is certainly the case that mothers who are reporting higher levels of mental health distress are also reporting higher levels of issues with their household economic security—whether it's food insecurity, meaning you're

struggling to put food on the table, whether it's being behind on your rent or mortgage, whether you've experienced an income loss over the course of the year that these things are going hand in hand.

I would say that on all of these indicators, they're all quite high, that even people who say they're doing well seem to be experiencing higher than normal levels of economic distress, which makes sense when you're in a recession, but also that the toll that these high levels of economic distress are taking on people is also higher. And so I think it's important to try to figure out ways to chicken and egg this, it's probably going to be impossible, but it is certainly true that parents are struggling now, especially women.

DEWS: Lauren, looking ahead if you will, what are some of the kinds of policy approaches that we could be thinking about to address the concerns that are illuminated by these facts?

BAUER: Sure. So, on May 12th the Hamilton project will be releasing two new policy proposals on increasing access to high quality, affordable childcare and on expanding paid family and medical leave. You can sign up for this event now. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo will be keynoting. And it's going to be a really interesting event to dig more into the details of how do you actually re-stand up this care infrastructure in a way that is equitable, race conscious, but also acknowledges what women have been through over the past year and takes specific strides to move it forward. I would also recommend to the listeners that the Hamilton Project put out a book in 2017 called "The 51%," which offers many proposals for improving economic security through investing in women. And many of those proposals are still quite relevant today. But as always, mothers are not going to succeed until the virus is under control

and schools are open. And as adults get vaccinated, we should be cognizant about who is affected as we wait for vaccines for children, it's going to be their moms.

DEWS: Well, I'll put links to both the event and the book in the show notes in addition to links to the report we're talking about now. Lauren, thanks for sharing your time and expertise with us today and Happy Mother's Day to you.

BAUER: Oh, thank you.

DEWS: The report, which you can find on [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu) and also on [hamiltonproject.org](https://www.hamiltonproject.org), is “10 economic facts on how mothers spend their time.” It's authored by Lauren Bauer and Eliana Buckner, Sarah Estep, Emily Moss, and Morgan Welch.

A team of amazing colleagues helps make the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo; to Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press who does the book interviews; to my communications colleagues Marie Wilken, Adrianna Pita, and Chris McKenna for their collaboration. And finally, to Camilo Ramirez and Andrea Risotto for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.