

Young, Female and Unemployed

New research finds half of young women reported being unemployed for at least one month during the recent downturn -- twice the rate of young men -- but the survey's methods incite some questions. And then there is the question of whether childbearing skews the numbers. By Michael O'Brien

According to a new report from the Washington-based Institute for Women's Policy Research, American women -- single mothers, in particular -- report higher rates of financial strain and daily hardship as a result of the economic downturn of the past few years.

While the overall findings show that Americans have taken dire steps to make ends meet, such as not filling medical prescriptions, not visiting the doctor, or "doubling up" or sharing housing with others, it also finds that American women have had a rough go of it in the job market.

"The survey results show how much hardship American families are still facing as a result of the long and deep recession," says Heidi Hartmann, IWPR president and a MacArthur Fellow. "Clearly, American workers need jobs and a federal jobs program could make a big difference, especially one that targets jobs typically held by women, like teaching, since our data show that women have been harder hit than men in this recovery."

According to the report, young women have faced "disproportionate hardship" when entering the labor market. Of those aged 18 to 34, 50 percent report unemployment for at least one month during the two years prior to the survey; twice the rate for men (24 percent) in the same age group.

Jeff Hayes, a senior research associate at the Institute for Women's Policy Research, says he was surprised -- to some degree -- by the IWPR findings, because of the widespread media reporting of the imbalanced gender breakdown of job losses in the recession, thus giving rise to the "mancession" term.

Indeed, the [*Wall Street Journal*](#) reports that young men are, in fact, the hardest-hit demographic in this current economic climate, with the share of men aged 25 to 34 living with their parents -- the highest level since at least 1960, according to the Census Bureau.

"As you know," Hayes says, "men lost more jobs than women in the 2007-2009 recession, and even in the 18-34 age group, men had higher unemployment rates than women."

He says that, while the unemployment rates were slightly lower for women than men, "we had noticed that, once unemployed, the average weeks spent unemployed were

similar for men and women of all working ages in the recession.

"However, even in the official monthly statistics for this 18 to 34 age group, when our data were collected in the fall of 2010, the young men's unemployment rates were dropping a bit, while young women's were continuing to climb."

The report, entitled *Women and Men Living on the Edge: Economic Insecurity After the Great Recession*, presents the findings from an IWPR/Rockefeller Survey of Economic Security, which surveyed 2,746 adults aged 18 and older between September and November 2010. The survey sample was stratified to yield approximately equal numbers of white, black and Hispanic respondents, with results weighted by American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census to reflect the non-institutional, adult population of the nation.

So what role, if any, did childbearing have on these statistics?

Hayes says the survey "does not allow me to tease an answer out" on the topic, but he does offer some theories as to why the gap exists.

"The question [asked of respondents] did specify that the respondent was unemployed and looking for work for at least a month in the previous two years," he says, "so some new mothers/parents might not have responded yes."

On the other hand, he says, the two-year window could have caught more young women having difficulty re-entering the labor market after exiting for a birth.

"There has been some media coverage of the gaps in post-secondary schooling where more women are enrolling and earning degrees than men," he says. "Besides new mothers re-entering the labor market, students might have had more difficulty finding employment during breaks or after graduation and this could have hit women in this age group disproportionately."

Hayes says the report's findings push back against the majority of media reports on the topic of gender breakdown and job loss.

"I think that the earlier take in some media coverage that it was a 'mancession' was somewhat exaggerated," he says. "Men lost more jobs overall, but as the recession -- and weak recovery -- wore on, women were still losing jobs and their recovery has not yet really taken hold."

And, "given the long-term trends in women's increasing labor-force participation, the number of women who lost jobs was very high compared to earlier downturns," he says.

But **Billie Blair**, president and CEO of Change Strategists Inc., a Los Angeles-based consultancy, says the report "does not sound like the reality that I know."

And she notes that not only is the report based on data collected about a year ago, but

she questions the duration of unemployment that was asked about.

"One month's unemployment is nothing," she says. "It could just mean that they were taking a 'time out' after finishing school. That data marker is far too narrow to give any reliable data.

"Now, if it were 'experienced unemployment for six months or more', then we might be getting somewhere," she says.

However, Michele Gorman, director of career management for MBA@UNC at the Kenan-Flagler business school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says the report does offer one takeaway for HR leaders.

"One of the most interesting insights is the report's finding that secondary education is leveling the playing field," she says, noting that graduate programs are available offer access beyond the traditional setting, such as online or on the weekends, in order to meet the needs of women's multi-faceted lives.

"The HR takeaway is that companies need to offer more flexible options for career advancement if they want to retain, develop and attract the right talent," she says.

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