

Exploring pandemic effects on mental health of parents juggling unemployment and having children in remote school

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Family dynamics are critical to mental well-being, and this role became more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic as families were bound

to stay together longer than usual. A recent study from the University of Alabama at Birmingham found that parents who had work disruptions, unemployment or children in remote school saw an increase in depressive symptoms.

The study, [published](#) in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, also showed a significant decrease in mental health among single parents with work disruptions or without paid work, single parents with children in remote school, fathers without paid work, and [white parents](#) with children in remote school.

"We explored the consequences of the [pandemic](#) on working parents by examining the health outcomes of parents who faced unemployment, work disruptions and virtual schooling for their children," said Mieke Beth Thomeer, Ph.D., associate professor in the UAB College of Arts and Sciences' Department of Sociology and lead author on the study.

"Looking at parents' mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that experiencing work disruptions or having kids in remote school harmed their mental health. We expect that work disruptions and remote schooling especially affected single parents because family safety nets became more taxed for single parents during the pandemic."

The [longitudinal study](#) used data from around the United States to show that the implications of unpaid work and school dynamics for parents during the pandemic are complex and how they vary for parents is based on partnership status, gender and race-ethnicity.

According to the study, the mental health effects were more pronounced among certain demographic groups. The study indicates that not having paid employment and having children attending school remotely more profoundly impacted three groups: single parents, men and individuals

who identified as white.

Depressive symptoms caused by paid work disruptions were similar in both men and women during the pandemic, but men's mental health was more impacted by longer-term unemployment than was women's.

"We have known that the pandemic resulted in worse mental health for parents," Thomeer said. "Through this study, we provide evidence for the extent to which parents' paid work and how their children attended school mattered in worsening mental health. The decline in mental health for fathers could be linked to men's greater societal pressures to be breadwinners."

The UAB study examined how those with children in remote school were affected. White parents' mental health deteriorated more as compared to Black parents.

"This trend may be because Black families are more likely to have extensive kin networks that provide social support systems, including childcare that could reduce the strains of remote school for these parents," Thomeer said.

Future research should explore the role of systems of support for parents, which may assist us in better understanding of these mental health patterns.

"Although COVID-19 was unique, we can expect to experience more societal events like the pandemic, for example, climate disasters or economic recessions, disrupting parents' work lives and their [children's](#) schooling," Thomeer said.

"The study's results can help inform policies advocating for providing more support to families, especially vulnerable families such as single-

parent households, that can help protect [mental health](#) for all generations."

More information: Mieke Beth Thomeer et al, Cumulative Disadvantage or Strained Advantage? Remote Schooling, Paid Work Status, and Parental Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00221465241230505](#)

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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