



The Social and Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Family Functioning and Well-Being: Where do we go from here?

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Abstract

A growing body of research demonstrates that COVID-19 has had a profound impact on family functioning and well-being in a range of countries. The fear and uncertainty of the health risks, in addition to the stress from ensuing restrictions and constraints on everyday life caused major disruptions, impacting the financial, emotional, and physical well-being of adults and children alike. In this report, we summarize the current literature on the impact of COVID-19 disruption to family functioning and economic well-being as a context for this special issue. Our findings indicate that while the pandemic may have caused a reallocation of intra-familial tasks, a large gender disparity remains regarding the proportion of domestic work and childcare. The pandemic disproportionately impacted lower-income families, families from ethnic minority and vulnerable groups, and women. Finally, the financial impacts of the emergence in Spring of 2020 have strained family relationships, although the effects depend to a large extent on quality of the relationships and family well-being before COVID-19. To address the long-term bidirectional effects of the pandemic on family well-being and the well-being of the global economy calls for research that crosses disciplinary divides.

Keywords Covid-19 · Social and Economic Impact · Family Functioning and Well-being

JEL codes H24 · J61 · R23

The COVID-19 pandemic is more than a global health crisis. In 2020, the pandemic placed nearly half of the 3.3 billion global workforce at risk of losing their livelihoods (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Compared to fourth quarter 2019, global working hours lost in 2020 topped 8.8%, the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021). As businesses shuttered in the US, the unemployment rate jumped to the highest recorded month-to-month change (10% in April 2020), bringing the national rate to 15% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). At the household level, COVID-19

related restrictions impacted nearly every aspect of daily life, negatively affecting the psychological-wellbeing of individuals worldwide (Ammar et al., 2020). In this report, we provide a brief review of the current literature examining the impact of COVID-19 disruption on family functioning and economic well-being as a context for this special issue. Because evidence from past economic crises suggests that the effects on families are not distributed evenly or experienced in the same way, we summarized the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on three aspects of family functioning: (a) reallocation of intra-familial tasks; (b) sociodemographic disparities in COVID-19 impact; and (c) financial stress and family relationships.

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Reallocation of intra-familial tasks

From an economic perspective, intra-family analyses of tasks are being carried out in the context of the Beckerian theory of the household (Becker, 1965), which identifies the degree of complementarity or substitutability between

parents in different household tasks. The theory does a good job of explaining family adaptations to lockdowns and identifies those household tasks for which a gender reallocation would be more likely to happen in response to policy reforms. In this methodological context, the collective household model predicts that the division of domestic work is driven by the relative opportunity costs of partners Chiapori, 1988, 1992, Donni & Molina, 2018). If specialization in the family is a response to the economic incentives that couples face, then it could be expected that fathers assume the primary role at home in couples where the mother is the main earner or where only her job remains active.

Previous economic recessions have shown that men were more likely to experience greater negative employment effects (Rubery & Rafferty, 2013; Hoynes et al., 2012). In pre-analysis of employment effects of the pandemic, Alon et al., (2020) using the American Time Use Survey and the American Community Survey, and Hupkau & Petrongolo (2020) using the UK Labour Force Survey, predicted that a number of fathers would become, temporarily, the main caregivers and this temporary change could lead to shifts in gender roles. A number of studies have found some evidence of reallocation of household and childcare tasks in countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, although gender disparities continued.

In the US, Zamarro & Prados (2021) found an increase in gender inequality with respect to childcare. In the case of the UK, Andrew et al., (2020) showed that very large gender asymmetries emerge when one partner stopped working for pay during the crisis: mothers who stopped working for pay did far more domestic work than fathers in the equivalent situation. Similar results were found in Canada (Shafer et al., 2020), Australia (Craig & Churchill, 2021), and Spain (Farré et al., 2020; Sevilla & Smith, 2020) used UK time use data to show that mothers in the UK continued to provide more childcare than fathers during the pandemic, even though the “gender childcare gap,” i.e., the difference between the share of childcare provided by mothers and fathers, narrowed. These authors focused on childcare in UK families with young children and found that the gender childcare gap was smaller during the lockdown. Adams-Prassl et al., (2020) found that women did approximately an hour and a half more childcare per workday than did men, but there was no analysis of the relationship with employment. Additionally, Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque (2020) found that poorer employment outcomes for women during the crisis were also accompanied by a higher incidence of mental health issues.

With respect to the literature examining the impact of the pandemic on the distribution of care work in Germany, Zinn et al., (2020) use a special Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP-CoV) survey and found that mothers took on the majority of

additional child care during the first lockdown, in Spring of 2020. While mothers looked after their children aged up to eleven for an average of about ten hours on weekdays during this period, fathers spent only half as long, at about five hours. Zoch et al., (2020), using the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), showed that mothers took on the central role in childcare in the Spring of 2020. Fathers did participate in childcare, but usually together with the mother or with the support of third parties. Similar results were reported in a study by Hipp & Bünning (2021) based on survey data from a non-probability sample collected in spring 2020. Additionally, Kohlrausch & Zucco (2020) showed that, since the beginning of the pandemic, women had taken over the main burden of care work in almost one-third of households, while this was only the case for about 10% of men. Möhring et al., (2020) also showed that in the first weeks of the lockdown, in Spring 2020, mothers alone took over childcare in about half of the families. More recently, Boll et al., (2021) showed, based on data collected from June to August 2020, that fathers who took over more childcare had done so mostly in contexts where the mother could not work from home. Jessen et al., (2021) found that the share of households where the woman was completely - or almost completely - responsible for childcare and/or housework increased significantly during the pandemic.

There is important evidence from other European countries. Farré et al. (2020) for Spain, and Boca et al., (2020) for Italy, examined the impacts on both paid and domestic work, and found that women took over most of the increased childcare burden, but evidence on labor market outcomes was less clear-cut. These authors showed an initial shift towards a more equal distribution of household and childcare between men and women in the first months of the pandemic, although most of the extra work caused by the crisis had fallen on women. A comparative analysis of a novel data set including Italy, the UK, and the US confirmed these results (Biroli et al., 2020; Boca et al., 2021) used data on a representative sample of 800 Italian working women, collected before and during the crisis, to find that most of the additional responsibilities had fallen to women, although childcare activities were shared more equally than housework. In previous work (Boca et al., 2020), the authors also focused on the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy, using the first wave of the survey and showed that most of the additional housework and childcare associated with COVID-19 fell to women, even though childcare activities were more equally shared within the couple than housework activities. More recently, Mangiavacchi et al., (2021) showed that a slight increase in the share of fathers providing childcare led to the increased well-being of children.

Finally, Costoya et al. (2021) provide a Latin American perspective on time reallocation using online data collected

from 962 couples (785 with children in the home) in Argentina during the summer 2020 lockdown. The authors found that the lockdown led to a reduction in paid work and an increase in time spent in unpaid activities for both men and women. However, the additional time spent by couples in unpaid activities was disproportionately carried out by women, who performed 65.1% of the additional hours of housework, 60.3% of the additional childcare, and 76.7% of the additional educational support activities.

In summary, these studies provide some evidence of a narrowing of the gender disparity in paid employment, gender reallocation of time spent on childcare, and to a lesser extent, housework during the early stages of COVID-19. Thus far, it is unclear whether the COVID-induced changes are only observed during the pandemic or whether they have also impacted overall norms, with potential long-term consequences. Indeed, even with the shifts, a large gender disparity remains regarding the proportion of housework and childcare tasks within the household. Nonetheless, these findings suggest that the gender division of childcare and housework, as well as shopping and other family tasks, is not fixed, but is influenced by external factors - be it a pandemic or policy instruments - that change the existing financial incentives for intra-household task sharing. If policies aim to increase gender equality in the family as well as in the labor market, they can effectively do so by setting incentives for a more equal sharing of childcare and housework.

Sociodemographic disparities in COVID-19 impact

Although the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on work, family, and its intersections are yet to be fully understood, families around the world are struggling to keep up with the changing demands and constraints of the pandemic (WHO, 2020). Alternative employment options and work arrangements including the shift to working from home, work overloads, and technological challenges contribute to family tensions (Chung et al., 2020). Families are on the front line of finding ways to adjust to the so-called “new normal”. School and day-care closures, homeschooling, inadequacies in the availability of technology, unequal divisions of household labor, and increased strain, especially for women, loss of contact with non-residential family members, death of family members, and other health concerns are among the most mentioned stressful situations that families are navigating (Lee & Ward, 2020; Kelley et al., 2022; Petts et al., 2020; Power, 2020; Wang et al., 2022).

Within families, the combination of work and family roles and the increase in time that families spent together meant that they experienced a combination of positive and

negative experiences (Fraenkel & Cho, 2020; Fisher et al., 2020). Overall, the experience of uncertainty and fear in response to the pandemic itself is portrayed as a stressful situation in the face of the major disruptions in family and working lives, with impacts on the emotional and physical well-being of adults and children alike (Holmes et al., 2020; Lebow, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). It is no surprise that families with children report high rates of parental stress (Griffith, 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020), parenting-related exhaustion (Marchetti et al., 2020) and higher than normal levels of depression and anxiety among parents and children (Wang et al., 2020). Government actions to contain the spread of the virus, via different strategies and resources, have tried to support both the changing employment scenarios and family economic volatility. Yet for some families, contending with unemployment, reduced income, and short-time work, add a social and economic crisis on top of the health crisis (Blustein & Guarino, 2020), deepening inequalities (Fisher et al., 2020; Karpman et al., 2020).

Since the start of the pandemic, families from lower-SES background, families from ethnic minority and vulnerable groups, and women have experienced heightened effects (Lebow, 2020; Parker et al., 2020). Many single parents (and those from single-income families) had to maintain the work-family balance with few supports. Some researchers caution that the long-term effects of the pandemic may further widen existing inequalities in income and poverty, education and skills, and intergenerational inequalities, particularly children (including vulnerable children), families with children and young people (British Academy, 2021; Horowitz et al., 2021; Sanrey et al., 2021).

One way to conceptualize the varying impacts of the pandemic and its potential long-term effects is through the perspective of ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). From this perspective, family interactions are the foundation for growth and well-being. However, these interactions take place within ever-widening sources of influence, including social networks, cultural community and society. In other words, the quality of interactions within the family is dependent upon the quality of the interactions outside the family, including social policies and the condition of the broader economic environment. Recent research provides a number of examples that demonstrate the influence of contextual factors on how COVID-19 impacted families in different ways. Rural communities offer one contextual explanation for the uneven impact of the pandemic. Drawing on research conducted on rural low-income families over the past twenty years in the US, Sano and Mammen (this issue) describe how fewer employment and educational opportunities, less access to childcare, transportation, and family support services, create a condition of cascading impact. With few resources available within the family and

limited support available in the community, any disruption has the potential to threaten their ability to survive the crisis. Urban immigrant communities provide another contextual explanation for the impact of the pandemic. Solheim et al. (2022) describe the contextual impact of stressors during the pandemic as a pile-up, investigating the problems facing urban Somali, Latinx, and Karen (refugees from Burma) immigrant families in the Midwestern US between June and August 2020. Specifically, a job loss may be the precipitating event for housing insecurity which is further complicated by language barriers, lack of technology skills, and documentation. Despite its global reach, countries had different experiences with and different response to the pandemic. Providing a national context for understanding the impact of the pandemic, Roll et al. (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of household spending and hardship in the US (collected April–May 2020) and Israel (collected June–July 2020). The researchers found several similarities between the countries, including stable housing expenditures but more volatile food and credit card payment expenditures. Of note, whereas racial/ethnic/religious minorities in both countries were more likely to experience spending volatility, only Black and Hispanic (in the US) and Arab (in Israel) households were more likely to experience hardships. Sanrey et al., (2021) examined social class as a contextual factor in understanding the quantity and quality of home-schooling in France during the April 2020 lockdown. Their findings provided some evidence of a widening educational achievement gap during the first wave of the pandemic.

In the context of a pervasive crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, there is much to be learned from the shared experiences of struggle and resilience that families face when juggling work and family roles. This is also an opportunity to revisit inequalities in work and family and their intersections that have been exacerbated and to come together as social scientists to raise awareness and to promote interventions to avoid the long-term consequences of this health crisis.

Financial stress and family relationships

Both couple and family well-being and relationships are impacted in a variety of ways because of financial stress (Dew, 2020; Kelley et al., 2020), and the pandemic has had a significant impact on finances and relationships. When the world essentially shut down in March 2020, families confronted many unknowns. These unknowns included extensive economic challenges and concerns, which led to increased financial stress for many individuals and families (NEFE, 2020). In the face of massive employment disruption worldwide, government financial support provided

essential support for families and households; even with this support, nearly 1 in 3 people reported at least one financial difficulty (OECD, 2021). The financial impacts of COVID-19 in Spring of 2020 led to fear and uncertainty regarding emergency savings, job security, income fluctuations, ability to pay utilities and housing expenses, as well as broader concerns over the financial markets (NEFE, 2020). In essence, virtually all families experienced some change and uncertainty. In addition to economic pressure, lockdown restrictions and mandated shelter-in-home orders impacted family relationships in unprecedented ways. Many people moved in with relatives to cut back on expenses; family members were forced to live in closed physical spaces days on end, while others were forced to stay apart (Liu et al., 2020). For many people, “home” became a basecamp to accommodate a wide range of family activities: a place of work, schooling, parenting, housework, shopping, leisure, and religion (Lee et al., 2020).

Although the economic hardship and forced confinement of families may have strained family relationships, it also provided opportunities for family growth. In a mixed-methods study of adult couples and parents conducted in Spain during the first few weeks of lockdown (Günther-Bel et al., 2020), participants were more likely to indicate an improvement in family relationships (61.7%), such as increased (re) connection, versus deterioration (41.0%) including conflict. Open-ended responses to a social media survey conducted in Spring 2020 among Australian parents of children 0–18 years (Evans et al., 2020), found a wide range of positive and negative impacts, with many families reporting mental health difficulties and strained family relationships and others citing opportunities for strengthening relationships, finding new hobbies, and developing positive characteristics such as appreciation, gratitude, and tolerance. Both benefits and harm were also documented in an online survey study conducted among Chinese adults in Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2021). In this study, the authors found that socioeconomic status (SES) differentiated between the types of responses, with higher SES respondents reporting more perceived benefits on family physical and mental health and family relationships compared to lower (SES) respondents. Lower SES respondents were also more likely to report harm to family income.

With stay-at-home orders and lockdowns, combined with increased economic uncertainty and stress, many couples felt increased stress and anxiety, and this combined with poor coping strategies led to alarming increases in reports of domestic violence both in the US and internationally (Boserup et al., 2020). In March 2020, calls to domestic violence hotline in Spain increased 10.5% and online requests increased 182.93% and in Italy requests for help to the anti-violence centers increased by 75% percent as

compared to the same period the previous year (Donato, 2020). In the UK, calls and contacts to the Helpline during the lockdown averaged a 66% increase weekly compared to the pre COVID-19 period (Gibson, 2020; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2022) investigated the potential risk factors that contributed to incidences of couple conflict and intimate partner violence focusing on a group of lower-income residents in North Carolina. Unexpectedly, the majority of the participants did not report an increase. However, the participants who did report an increase were more likely to be unemployed, and also reported having difficulty getting needed social support and losing their health insurance. Using mobile device tracking data and city-level unemployment data, the study by Henke and Hsu (2022) suggests that the effects of the pandemic on domestic violence wane over time (mid-March to mid-June 2020). Researchers have called for an increase in policy responses and resources for domestic violence survivors and victims, as well as focusing on historically marginalized groups who may have felt additional strain from the public health protocols enacted to address COVID-19 (Galea et al., 2020; Piquero et al., 2021). The results of social isolation, economic instability, and increasing relationship and family conflict will likely produce long-term effects on women's mental and physical health, similar to what has been seen before resulting from natural disasters and other epidemics (Parkinson, 2019; Piquero et al., 2021).

While the labor market has shown signs of improvement since the beginning of the pandemic and the immediate financial stressors have eased somewhat, it is longer-term impacts that are still concerning for many. In a Pew Research Institute study, about half of respondents indicated that the outbreak will make it harder for them to achieve their long-term financial goals (Horowitz et al., 2021). However, that number is higher among households that experienced job or wage loss. Income matters in this context; 76% of low-income adults indicated that their finances were in fair or poor shape compared to only 14% of upper-income adults at the same time period (Horowitz et al., 2021). As the pandemic lingers, financial concerns have become less pressing as compared with the early months of 2020, but many still worry about their basic needs. This is more prevalent among lower-income households and those with job or wage losses (Horowitz et al., 2021). The recovery appears to be having unbalanced outcomes, likely having longer and more negative effects for those who were already experiencing poverty prior to COVID-19.

The body of research regarding the long-term effects and implications of COVID-19 on family wellbeing and the functioning of relationships is only just emerging. It is clear that COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns and changes in lifestyle have increased stress, and even conflict, within

relationships (Brown et al., 2020), and how that stress is handled is critical for relationship outcomes. Experiencing COVID-19-related stress is likely to increase negative processes in relationships, including hostility, withdrawal, and less responsive support. These harmful processes compromise and diminish relationship quality (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). The effects and outcomes on relationships and family well-being largely depend on where they were before COVID-19. Relationships that were experiencing stress and were already struggling before COVID-19, were more likely to experience an increase in harmful processes (e.g., hostility), and this may have been exacerbated by the felt effects of financial distress. On the other hand, those with stable relationships and stable finances may have been able to increase relationship quality due to unexpected time together.

Where do we go from here?

As families resume more typical daily routines in terms of work and schooling, many are feeling exhaustion (OECD, 2021). In 2020, 22% of people reported not being able to complete necessary housework after paid work, but in 2021, that number had increased to 33% (OECD, 2021). What was hoped to be a short-term disruption for households has become a chronic stressor event for family and household finances and functioning. What does the post-pandemic future hold? Although global economic growth increased by 5.5% in 2021, global growth is projected to soften to 3.2% in 2023; for developing economies (i.e., Northern Africa, Western Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean), the projected 2023 growth is still below their 2019 levels (World Bank, 2022). In the US, finances improved during 2021 for many households with the receipt of economic stimulus payments and enhanced childcare tax credits; however, many families, particularly low-income families, continue to struggle financially, as most economic relief measures ending (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022). Over 65% of U.S. adults report that the impact of the pandemic will make it harder for them to achieve their financial goals and nearly a quarter of U.S. adult workers aged 50 and older expect to delay their retirement (Horowitz et al., 2021). Rising global concerns are further complicating the economic recovery, including inflation, energy prices, and supply chain disruptions due to geopolitical instability and conflicts (Seiler, 2022). According to a recent report by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021, the scarring effects of the pandemic are deep, and the economic recovery for families and countries may be slow and complex. To address the long-term bidirectional effects of the

pandemic on family well-being and the well-being of the global economy calls for research that crosses disciplinary divides.

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