

# Policy Report

## Women, Work, and Economic Hardship in the Pandemic: Analysis of Household Pulse Survey Data for Washington

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### INTRODUCTION

Our previous research highlighted the importance of women in Washington's "essential workforce," including occupations and industries—such as health care, retail sales, and education—that have been hard hit by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. That research also found that women are overrepresented in the most economically precarious occupations, and in many of the occupations associated with the highest hazard of exposure to COVID-19 at work. We found that many of these female-dominated occupations experienced disproportionately high rates of unemployment; and this contributed to increased social assistance applications, e.g., TANF, PUA, and SNAP, in WA in 2020.

In this brief, we report from our ongoing research using the U.S. Census Bureau's *Household Pulse Survey* (HPS)<sup>1</sup> to further analyze the pandemic's impacts on the Washington workforce. The Census Bureau began collecting HPS data in April of 2020, with survey samples drawn on a nearly continuous weekly/bi-weekly basis throughout 2020.<sup>2</sup>

This brief reports some preliminary findings from our HPS analyses, comparing experiences of Washingtonians regarding work/loss of work, and economic hardship during the pandemic. We focus on the experience of women in the workforce, and the intersections of loss of paid work, gender<sup>3</sup>, and race/ethnicity<sup>4</sup> and the connection to economic hardship. We analyze four measures of hardship: *difficulty paying weekly expenses, need to use sources of free food, children food insufficiency, and lack of health insurance*.<sup>5</sup>

### LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION & WORK

*Labor force participation (LFP)*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/technical-documentation.html>

<sup>2</sup> The Census Bureau has collected HPS data in three phases: Phase 1 covered the period from April 23 to July 21, 2020; Phase 2 covered the period from August 19 to October 26, 2020; Phase 3 began on October 28 and continues through March 2021. Unless we refer to changes over time or specific phases of data collection, the analyses are based on pooled data for all phases. Statements about changes over time, etc., are based on analyses of data pooled separately for each data collection phase.

<sup>3</sup> We use the term "gender" rather than "sex", for stylistic reasons; we realize that gender is not a binary category. Respondents are asked "Are you...?", and given the response options "Male" or "Female."

<sup>4</sup> As Freitag and Romich (2021) point out, the HPS collects only very limited data on respondents' race/ethnicity. Racial/ethnic categories that are usually included in Census Bureau data sets such as the American Community Survey (e.g., Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; American Indian / Alaskan Native; etc.). The HPS combines these categories into a catch-all "Multi-racial/Other" category.

<sup>5</sup> See Freitag and Romich March 2021. "Material Hardship in Washington State during the COVID-19 Pandemic" for the construction and analysis of a material hardship measure from HPS data for WA. Our focus on women in the WA workforce means that the HPS sample we analyze here differs in important ways from the sample analyzed by Freitag and Romich.

<sup>6</sup> See appendix, section on "Construction of our proxy measure of labor force participation"

- Over the course of the pandemic, LFP rates among survey respondents decreased slightly for women, while increasing slightly for men. Men's LFP increase by about 1 percentage point, from 84.5 to 85.5%, between phases 1 and 3, whereas women's LFP rate decreased by about ½ percentage point, to 84%, over the course of the pandemic.
- Overall, white women had the lowest LFP rate (76%), followed by white men (77%). LFP rates were highest for Latinas and Latinos, followed closely by Black women (94%, 93%, and 92% respectively).
- Between the Spring of 2020 and Winter of 2020/21, men in all racial/ethnic categories except "white" saw their labor force participation rates increase (in the case of white men: LFP held steady). In contrast, LFP rates decreased by between 1-3 percentage points for white and Black women and Latinas, between the beginning of the pandemic and Winter 2020/21.

#### *Work for pay in previous 7 days*

- Throughout the pandemic, women in the Washington labor force have been significantly more likely (31.5%) than men (24%) to report not having worked for pay in the previous seven days. As we note below, this weighs heavily on women's experience of economic hardship, because loss of work mediates the relationship between gender and some of the forms of economic hardships that we analyze.
- This gap was largest—8 percentage points—in the beginning of the pandemic, but there is still a 5-percentage point gap in phase 3 (Winter 2020/21).
- White male labor force participants were least likely to report recent unemployment; African American men and women, Latinas, and men in the multi-racial/other category had the highest recent individual unemployment rates (of between 38-40%, 37%, 35% respectively).

#### *Reasons for not working<sup>7</sup>*

- When asked to explain why they had not worked in the past seven days, women were vastly more likely than men to respond that they stayed home from to do unpaid care-giving work at home. About 21% of women who had not worked in the previous week gave this reason, compared to about 8% of men. In contrast, 54% of male respondents did not work in the previous seven days due to pandemic-related business interruptions, compared to 38% of women.
- White women had the lowest proportion (18%) of all women who were unemployed because they had to provide care to a household member. Proportions for women of color ranged from 23% (Black women & Latinas), to 25% (Asian women). Among male labor force participants recently staying home from work, Latinos were most likely to stay home to do care-giving labor (10.5%), while only 3% of Black men offered this reason.
- We also found an alarming 25% of Black men and 24% of Latinos reported having stayed home from work in the previous week due to illness—in most cases due to COV19 symptoms, particularly for Latinos. Among women, the proportion staying home from work due to illness or disability were highest among multiracial/other women (23%), and lowest among Black and Asian women (11%).

#### *Household loss of employment since March 2020*

- Throughout most of 2020, women were only slightly more likely than men to report that someone in their household had experienced loss of employment since the beginning of the pandemic.
- Asian women were least likely to report that an adult in the household had lost work since March 2020 (47%), followed by Asian men (48%); men in the multiracial/other category (63%) and Latinas (60.5%) were

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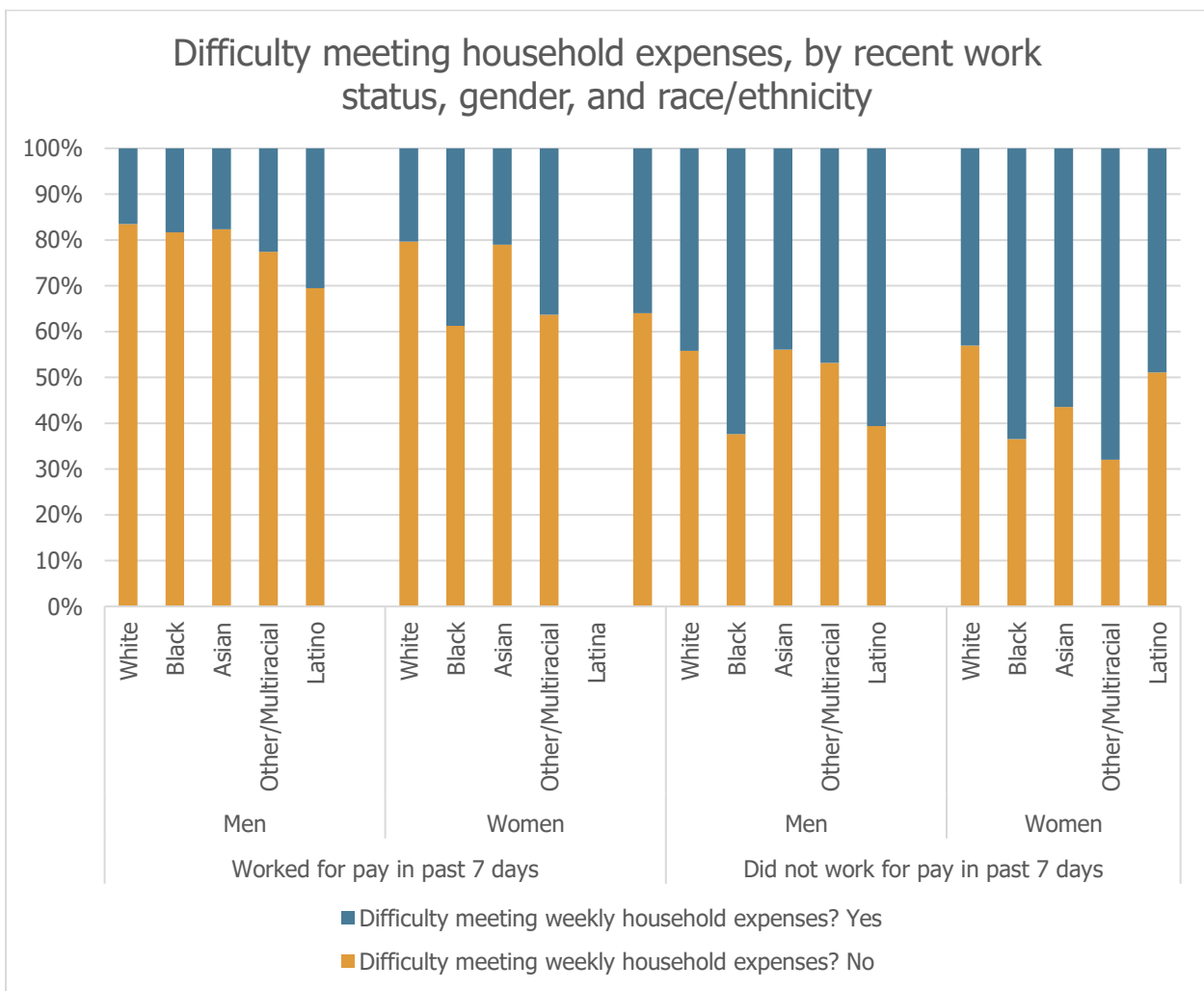
<sup>7</sup> We combined detailed HPS response categories to distinguish between four major types of reasons selected by respondents in the WA labor force to explain why they had not worked in the past seven days: business/employer disruptions due to pandemic; care-giving work at home due to pandemic; sickness or disability (including COV19 symptoms), and "other." See appendix section on "Construction of 'major reasons for not working' measure."

most likely to report loss of work for at least one of the adults in the household since March, closely followed by Black women (58%), Black men (57%) and Latinos (57%).

### ECONOMIC HARDSHIP, WITH AND WITHOUT PAID WORK

#### Difficulty meeting weekly household expenses

- Women in the Washington labor force were far more likely than men to say that they had experienced difficulty meeting typical household expenses in the past seven days (31% of women vs. 25.5% of men).
- Women in households where at least 1 adult (including the respondent) lost employment were significantly more likely (45%) to report difficulty making ends meet, compared to men in households experiencing job loss (40.5%) during the pandemic.
- White men were least likely to report difficulty meeting weekly household expenses (22%); at the other end of the privilege spectrum, 45% of Black women and Latinas reported struggling to make ends meet.



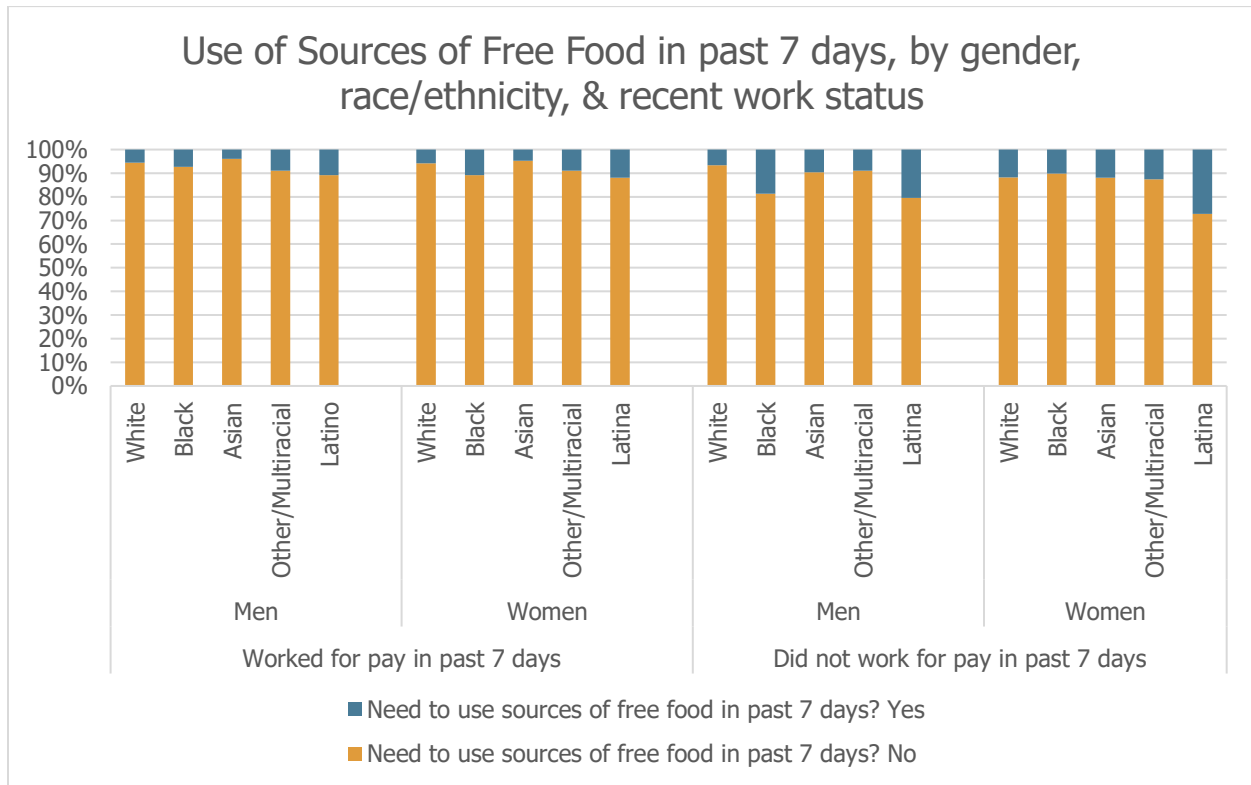
- We also see different patterns over time with regard to making ends meet—the proportion of respondents reporting difficulty decreased or held steady for white, Black, and Asian women between summer 2020 and winter 2020/21, whereas it increased for Latinas and women categorized as multiracial or other racial/ethnic background. In contrast, the proportion reporting difficulty making ends meet increased for all men of color, and held steady for white men, over the course of the pandemic; the

increase in difficulty making ends meet was largest by far (10% points) among men in the “other/multiracial” category.

- The biggest differences in making ends meet are based on recent individual work status. As the above figure shows, even among those who *did work* in the previous seven days, the proportion reporting difficulty making ends meet ranged from 16.5% (for white men) to 39% (for Black women). Among labor force participants who *did not work* in the previous seven days, the proportions range from a low of 43% (white men) to above 60% for Black men and women, Latinas, and men in the multiracial/other category.

*Food insecurity*

- Women in the Washington labor force were more likely (9%) than men (7%) to have to use sources of free food in the previous seven days. When we distinguish between those who worked and those who did not work in the previous seven days, we see that the gender difference for food insecurity pertains only to respondents who did not work in the previous 7 days – 14% of women in this category, vs. only 10% of men, relied on free food during the past week. Among those who did work, 6.2% of men and 6.8% of women – a statistically negligible difference – relied on free food in the previous week.
- Furthermore, the gender gap in reliance on free food among those who did not work in the previous seven days, grew between Spring 2020 and Winter 2020/21. In phase 3 of HPS data collection (Winter 2020/21), women who had not worked for pay in the previous seven days were much more likely (18%) than recently unemployed males (12%) to report recent reliance on free food.
- We found a similar pattern when we analyzed reliance on free food using the HPS household unemployment measure (households where at least one adult had experienced unemployment since March 2020).



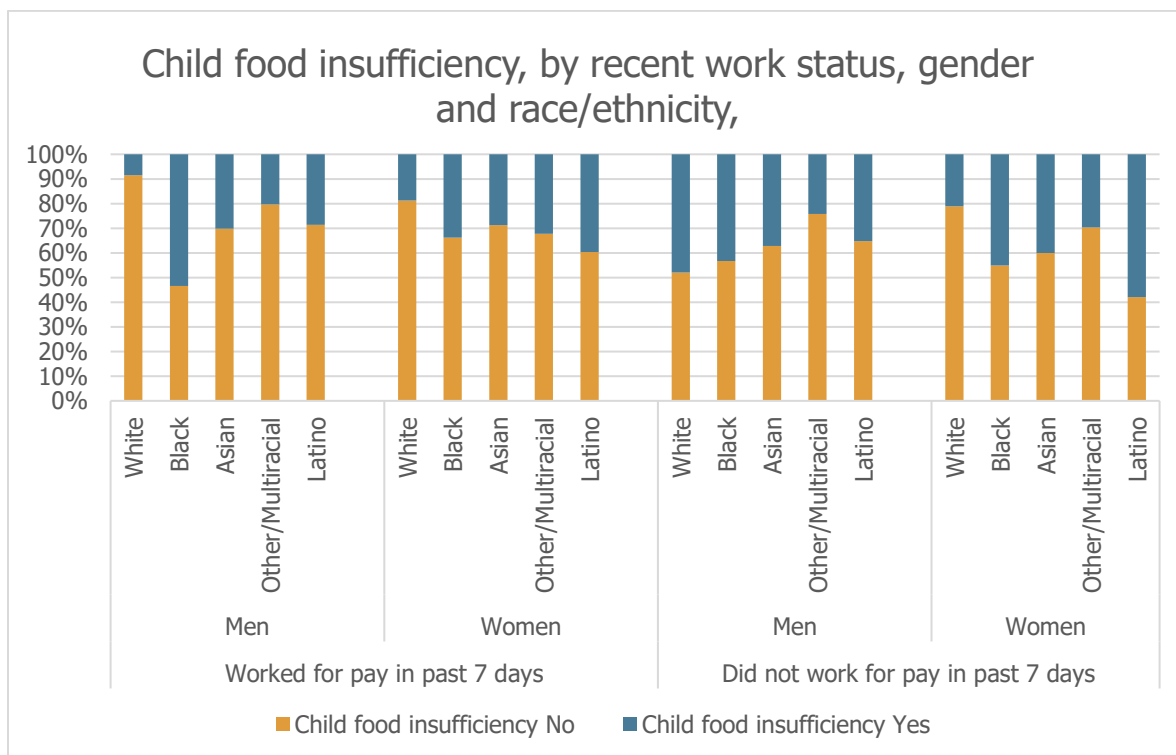
- In every racial/ethnic category, women are somewhat more likely than men to report needing to use of sources of free food. We also find, however, that racial/ethnic differences among respondents greatly outweigh gender differences. For example, the largest gender gap is the 4.5-point gap between Latinas

(17.5%) and Latinos (13%). The largest racial/ethnic gap is the 10.5-point gap between Latinas and Asian women (7%).

- Turning to those who *did not* work for pay in the previous week, we find a similar pattern of racial/ethnic and gender differences in reliance on free food, but with higher average proportions of respondents reliant on free food in all categories. Thus 27% of Latinas recently out of work, and 20.5% of Latinos, reported using free food sources; white (7.5%) and Asian men (9.5%) had the lowest proportions using free food. Again, in these analyses of the recently unemployed, gender differences are significant, but outweighed by much larger differences across racial categories.

### Sufficient food for children

- We also find disparities between men and women in the Washington workforce over the experience of household children’s food insufficiency, particularly since October 2020. Among respondents surveyed in this phase of data collection, women experience food insufficiency for household children at significantly higher rates than their male counterparts. In the analyses discussed here, a gender difference exists regardless of individual or household loss of employment.
- As with use of free food, however, we find that racial/ethnic differences in reports of child food insufficiency greatly outweigh differences between men and women. Rates of child food insufficiency reach a staggering 49% among Latina respondents, 48% among Black male respondents, and 40% among Black female respondents. Indeed, with the exception of men in the multiracial/other category (21.5%), the proportions reporting insufficient food for children exceeded 30% for all respondents of color, compared to about 20% for white respondents.



- The above figure shows, once more, the powerful influence of loss of work on child food security. A staggering 53.5% of Black men, nearly 40% of Latina respondents, and 34% of Black women reported child food insufficiency *despite having worked in the past seven days*.
- Among those who had not worked in the previous seven days, child food insufficiency is pervasive. At the low end of the distribution, about one in five white male respondents, and about one in four men in the “multiracial/other” category, reported child food insecurity. Respondents in all other demographic

categories reported rates above 30%. We found the highest rates of child food insufficiency among recently unemployed Latinas (58%), white women (48%), and Black women (45%) and Black men (43%).

### *Health Insurance Status*

- Our bivariate gender analyses of health insurance for Washington workers indicates that this is an exception to the larger pattern of women's disadvantage: men in the labor force are consistently and significantly more likely (9%) than women (7%) to report having no health insurance coverage. An analysis by employment status shows, however, that the gender gap in health insurance status is limited to those who have not worked in the past week—within this group, 22% of men, compared to about 13% of women, report not having health insurance. In contrast, among those who did work in the past seven days, the difference in health insurance status between men and women is negligible (5.8% vs. 5.2%).
- The respondent's health insurance may depend, however, on another household member; to address this possibility, we repeated this analysis, limiting the sample to single-adult households. About 12% of the male labor force participants in this single-adult households subsample had no health insurance, compared to about 7% of women. In households with more than one adult, men's uninsured rates were only 9% (7% for women).
- In these descriptive analyses, the gender gaps in health insurance coverage increase in magnitude when we consider loss of individual or household employment, and when we limit the analysis to single adults in the labor force and their households.
- When we consider the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender for health insurance, we again find that gender differences persist, but the differences across racial/ethnic categories are larger. Among Latina respondents, 18% are without health insurance, compared to 4.5% of Asian women. 16.5% of Latino respondents have no health insurance, compared to 7% of Asian men. Among those who had not worked in the past seven days, 33% of Black men and 30% of Latinos had no health insurance, compared to 18.5% of recently unemployed white men, and 27% of Latinas were without health insurance, compared to 9% of white women.

### **CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Unemployment** - This report details the gender and racial differences in employment for Washington workers during the pandemic. The UI system should be modified to make it more flexible during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, with more protections for vulnerable workers. The minimum benefits should be increased to a higher percentage of the average weekly wage (currently only 15 percent), and the system needs changes to improve access to benefits and claims processing.
- **Childcare** - This report documents how women, and especially women of color, have been forced to leave the workforce to respond to family care burdens. Washington's childcare system was already in trouble before the pandemic, and reductions and many cases permanent closure of childcare services during the pandemic created an unprecedented crisis for their children as childcare providers closed or reduced service. To expand supply of affordable childcare, Washington should expand the Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) program, expand its eligibility for middle-class families, fully cover the cost of care under the program, including affordable health insurance for providers, and ensure that essential workers can find coverage for nonstandard hours of care.
- **Worker Safety** - This report documents the high percentages Black men and Latinos reporting illness—in most cases due to COVID-19 symptoms, particularly for Latinos, and insurance coverage gaps for men. Public health reports have documented large numbers of cases associated with health care, agriculture, fishing and forestry, retail, manufacturing and food service sectors in Washington. Policymakers should advance policies such as the Worker Protection Act and Airborne Transmissible Disease Standards to address these employment-related hazards.

## APPENDIX

*Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey:* Documentation for the dataset used in this paper can be found here: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/technical-documentation.html>. In the analyses reported here, we used the person-weights which the Census Bureau supplies with the data.

*Statistical analyses:* We used Stata 14.2 statistical software for all statistical analyses. Throughout this paper, we used a critical value of 0.05 to report significant statistical effects or differences. It is important to note that the results reported here are based on Chi-squared tests of crosstabulations of a small number of variables. Associations that are significant in these analyses may not be significant in regression models that report the effects of race, gender and work status on economic precarity, while simultaneously controlling for the effects of a number of different variables.

*Construction of our proxy measure of labor force participation:* Respondents who answer that have not worked are next asked to select a reason for not working. In this analysis, we treat those who report that they are retired or “did not want to be employed at this time” as respondents who are not participating the force at this time.<sup>1</sup> We consider those respondents who chose one of the other possible reasons for not working as labor force participants. We use this as our proxy measure of labor force participation. This measure is higher than the most recent BLS data for WA. We suspect that this is in part because some respondents who are not in the labor force (e.g. full-time students who are not working/looking for work) may choose “Other” as a reason for not working. Unfortunately, the qualitative data for the “Other” responses are not yet available to the public. In the absence of these data, if the respondent selected “Other” as a reason for not working, we coded that person as a labor force participant. It is important to note that the “Other” category in the question about reasons for not working in the previous seven days represents a known source of error in our proxy LFP measure, though we are not able to estimate its magnitude. In this paper, all references to labor force participation in connection with HPS data refer to the proxy measure outlined here.

*Construction of “major reasons for not working” measure:* To simplify the analysis of “reasons for not working in the past 7 days” among labor force participants, we collapsed the remaining categories (after recoding “retired” and “did not want to work for pay” as non-labor force participants) as follows:

Detailed response	=> Major Category
Sick with COV19 symptoms	=>Sickness/disability
Sick (not COV19 related) or disabled	=> Sickness/disability
Caring for someone with COV19 symptoms	=> Caregiving labor
Caring for children not in school or daycare	=> Caregiving labor
Caring for an elderly person	=> Caregiving labor
Laid off due to pandemic	=> Employer/pandemic related
Employer reduction in hours (incl. furlough) due to pandemic	=> Employer/pandemic related
Employer closed temporarily due to the pandemic	=> Employer/pandemic related
Employer closed permanently due to the pandemic	=> Employer/pandemic related
I was concerned about getting or spreading the coronavirus	=> Employer/pandemic related
Other reason	=>Other

## LITERATURE CITED

Freitag, Callie and Jennifer Romich. 2021. “Material Hardship in Washington State during the COVID-19 Pandemic”. West Coast Poverty Center. University of Washington.