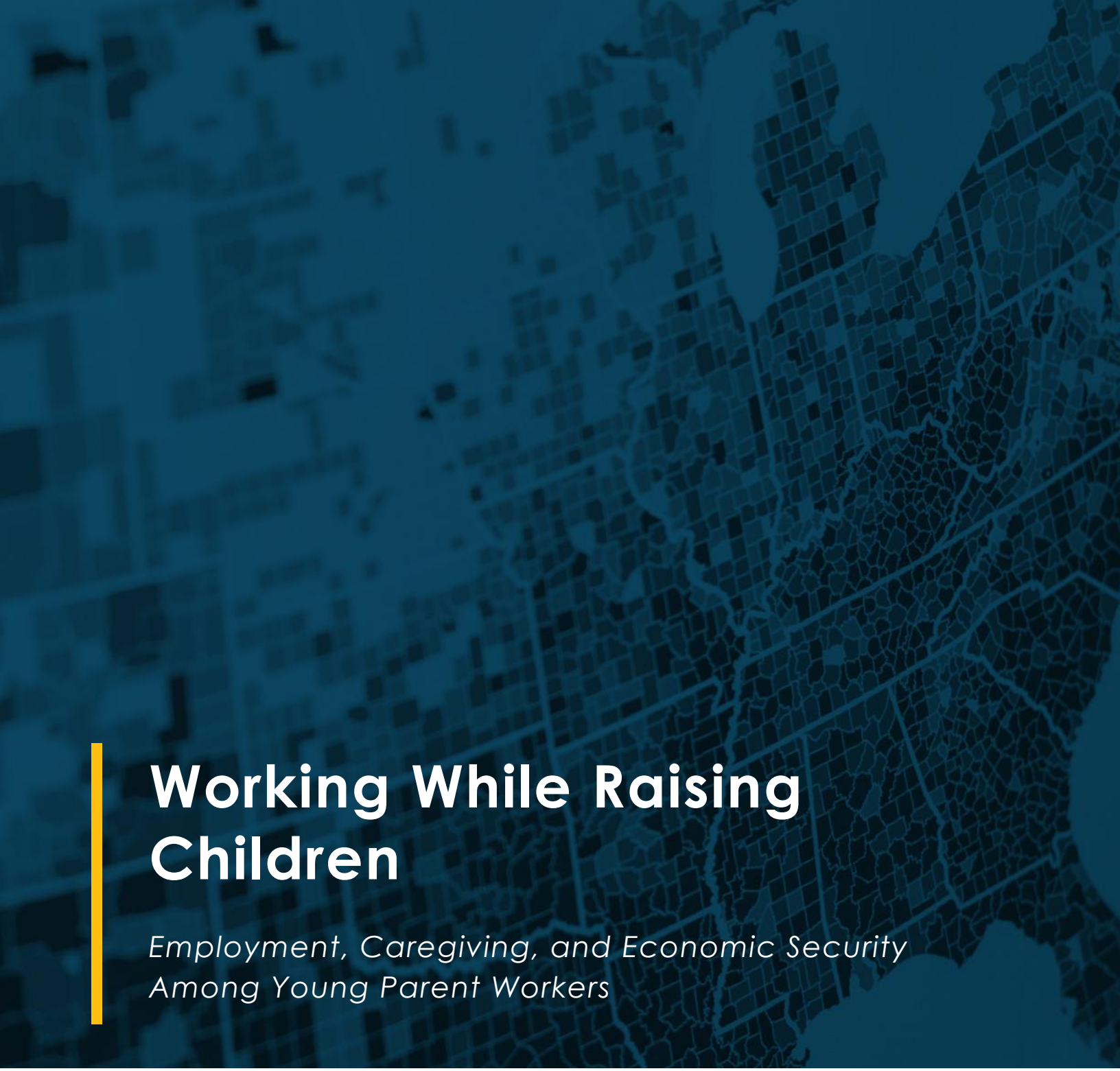

Working While Raising Children

Employment, Caregiving, and Economic Security Among Young Parent Workers

Marokey Sawo **Shayne Spaulding** **Afia Adu-Gyamfi** **Nathan Sick**

URBAN INSTITUTE

RESEARCH REPORT

September 2026



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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

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We are grateful to Amanda Briggs, former Urban employee, who made important contributions to this study. Lexi Mills was responsible for copyediting.

Working While Raising Children: Employment, Caregiving, and Economic Security Among Young Parent Workers

Millions of young parents are working, seeking employment, and supporting children at the same time. They are doing what employers and policymakers often ask of them: they are working, building skills, and supporting children, yet employment alone does not always provide financial stability. This report examines how employment, caregiving responsibilities, and access to supports shape the experiences of young parent workers ages 16 to 30. Drawing on national survey and labor market data as well as interviews with workforce practitioners who work with young parents, the report explores why many young parents remain economically insecure despite working and identifies opportunities to better align work with the realities of raising children.

Young parent workers represent an important segment of the workforce at 7 million—roughly four percent of the nearly 170 million people participating in the US labor force.[1] **In this report, we define young parent workers as adolescents and young adults ages 16 to 30 who are raising children while employed or actively looking for work.** Many young parent workers hold jobs with lower wages, unstable schedules, and limited access to employer benefits. Jobs that have unpredictable schedules—including expectations for evening or weekend work with little notice—make it especially hard for parents when it comes to child care. At the same time, caregiving responsibilities and time constraints shape how they can engage with work, often requiring adjustments such as reducing hours or shifting to part-time roles. Supports such as child care, transportation, paid leave, and public benefits can help parents remain employed and meet basic needs, but access to those supports remains uneven.

Several themes run throughout this report. First, as already noted, young parent workers maintain strong connections to work, but employment does not always translate into economic security. Second, gender is a central part of the story. Mothers and fathers often experience work differently because caregiving responsibilities are distributed unevenly and because workplace expectations can reward or penalize parents in different ways. Third, racial disparities persist across many measures, suggesting that structural barriers continue to shape outcomes, even among groups with similarly strong

connections to work. Finally, the report shows that employment outcomes are shaped not by jobs alone, but by how job conditions, caregiving responsibilities, and supports interact.

This report addresses five practical questions:

1. Who are young parent workers, and how connected are they to work?
2. What kinds of jobs do young parent workers hold, and how do those jobs compare with jobs held by non-parents?
3. In what ways do mothers and fathers experience employment differently?
4. How do caregiving responsibilities, time constraints, workplace structures, and supports shape parents' employment outcomes?
5. What can the field do to promote changes in workplaces and in public policies to better align work with the realities of raising children?

The sections that follow answer these questions in turn, drawing on national data, established literature, and insights from the eight experts we interviewed for the report. We first provide an overview of our methods and data sources. Then we describe who young parent workers are and the jobs they hold, including their employment patterns, job quality, and economic outcomes. Next, we examine the constraints that shape those patterns, including caregiving responsibilities, time poverty, job structure, and access to supports. Finally, we identify where employers, policymakers, philanthropy, and other actors can help better align work with the realities of raising children.

Methods

This report relies on findings from the literature, analysis of publicly available survey data and interviews with experts in the field. The two primary data sources for the demographic and labor force analysis of young parent workers are the 2020–2024 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year survey and data from the 2023–2024 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). Parent definition differs across these two surveys. The ACS, which is the data source for many of our figures given its uniquely large sample that allows for multiple layers of disaggregation, identifies parents based on whether they have their own children (adopted, biological, or stepchildren) living in the same household. As a result, many findings in this report primarily reflect the experiences of parents who reside with their children. Parents who do not live with their children may face different employment, financial, and caregiving circumstances that are not fully captured by these data. Where possible, we supplement these analyses with data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP),

which identifies biological, adoptive, and stepparents regardless of whether they currently live with their children.

Our analysis of job quality is based on Urban's job quality framework, which calculates a job quality score from 0 (the lowest-quality job) to 100 (the highest-quality job). Different iterations of this framework have been published by Sick and colleagues (2024), Scott and colleagues (2024), and Biu and colleagues (2023). The scale is relative, meaning it compares jobs to each other rather than assigning intrinsic units. It is also unweighted, so each element (e.g., hourly wages or on-the-job training) has the same importance.

Urban's job quality framework was created using a methodology to aggregate, clean, and impute a wide range of publicly available data from various US statistical agencies and government sources, including: the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) and Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS); the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS); a database by the US the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration called O*NET that provides work context, work activities, and education and training modules; and the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), an integrated system of surveys providing primary data on higher education. The model estimates various aspects of work conditions, compensation and benefits, including wages, health insurance, retirement benefits, paid time off, on-the-job training availability, and full-time and full-year work.

The framework has three components:

- **Job quality**: Hourly wages, full-time hours, weeks worked, health insurance, on-the-job training (OJT) days, flexibility and autonomy, stress, hazards, irregular schedule, stability, and AI exposure.
- **Access**: The sum of licensure percentage, years of education required, and days of work required.
- **Growth**: The number of new positions to be added in the next 10 years.

A central question throughout this report is whether young parents are able to access high-quality jobs. Although there is no single definition of a "good" job, jobs generally vary in the wages, benefits, working conditions, advancement opportunities, and flexibility they provide. The job quality framework described above assigns each occupation a score from 0 to 100 based on these characteristics. To estimate access to high-quality jobs, we define jobs in the top third of the job quality distribution (those at or above the 66th percentile) as "good jobs."

Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with nine experts including representatives from workforce development organizations, labor and advocacy organizations, employer intermediaries, and other nonprofit service providers.

Why Focus on This Population

Young parent workers represent an important segment of the workforce, with an estimated 7 million working or seeking employment, about four percent of the overall workforce and 15 percent of workers ages 16–30. For young parents, this is not only a critical time for human development, but also for career development. During young adulthood, many people complete education, gain work experience, and establish career pathways that shape future earnings and economic mobility. For young parents, these transitions occur while they are also raising children and managing caregiving responsibilities. As a result, employment experiences during this stage can influence not only parents' long-term economic security but also the resources and opportunities available to their children (Chetty et al. 2026).[1] Understanding the experiences of young parent workers can therefore help identify ways to strengthen both family well-being and economic mobility across generations.

The findings presented throughout this report suggest that employment outcomes for young parents depend not only on whether they work, but also on how jobs fit the realities of family life. Job quality, caregiving demands, time constraints, and access to supports such as child care, transportation assistance, public benefits, paid leave, and workforce services all help shape whether parents can remain employed, advance in their careers, and achieve financial stability. Understanding these dynamics can help employers, policymakers, philanthropy, and workforce organizations identify strategies that support young parents' long-term attachment to the workforce while creating pathways to economic mobility for their families.

> **"One of the big things that we have noticed is that so much of the conversation around the parents and other caregivers is the stereotype that comes into people's mind is like it's a 37-year-old, you know, white working professional woman who's trying to like, juggle it all. And that's what you see in the media. That's what so much of the policies are meant for. So for us, we said, how do we really center the voices of young [parent] workers and figure out what is it that they actually need?"**
>
> *—Better Balance staff member*

Defining Young Parent Workers

Young parent workers vary by age, race and ethnicity, and gender, but one feature is consistent across groups: most remain strongly connected to work while balancing family responsibilities. The figures below describe who young parent workers are and how they participate in the labor market.

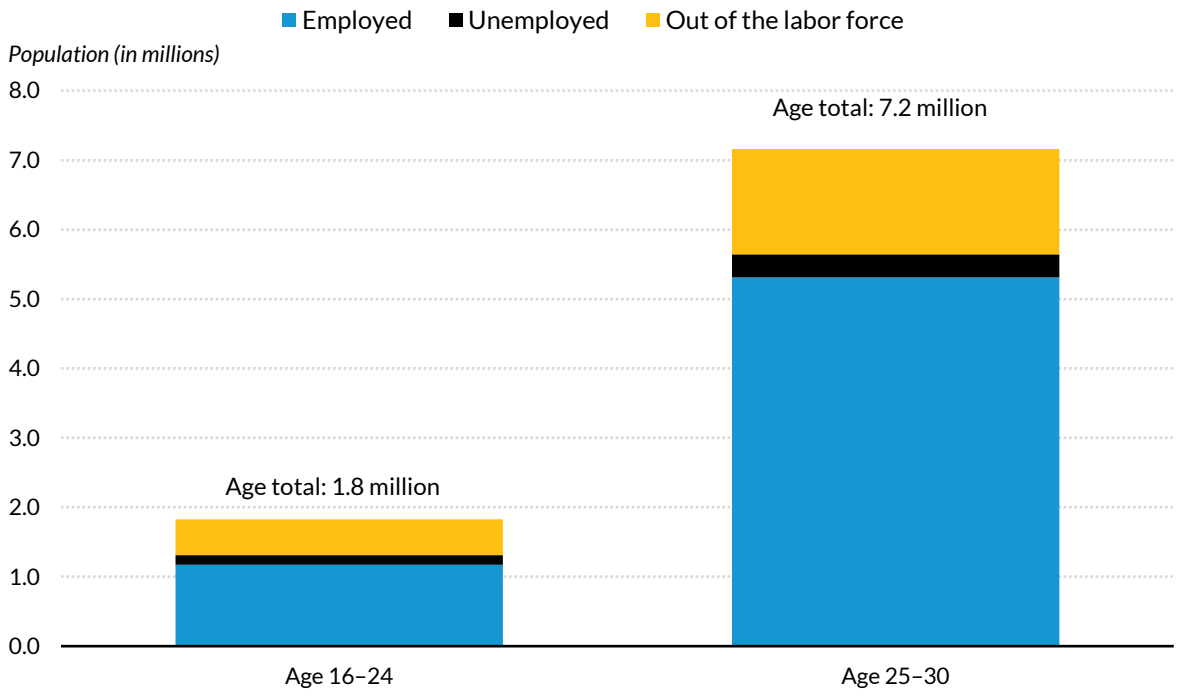
Labor force participation is generally high during the ages when many people become parents. In 2025, roughly 84 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 participated in the labor force, including 89 percent of men and 78 percent of women.[2] As the figures below show, young parents are also highly engaged in work. Their labor force participation rates are broadly comparable to those of similarly aged adults overall, though differences between mothers and fathers are more pronounced than those observed in the general population.

Across age groups, millions of young parents are either employed or actively looking for work. An estimated 7 million young parents are either working or looking for work, including roughly 5.3 million ages 25 to 30 and 1.2 million ages 16 to 24 (figure 1) who are employed. These findings show that many young parents remain connected to work while balancing the demands of building a career and raising children.

FIGURE 1

Seven Million Young Parents Are Either Employed or Actively Looking for Work

Population count estimates of young parents by age group and employment status



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of 2020–2024 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year survey data obtained from IPUMS USA. For full dataset, see Steven Ruggles et al., IPUMS USA: Version 16.0 [2020–2024 ACS five-year survey] (Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2025), https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V16.0.

Notes: Unemployed people are those who currently do not have a job but are actively looking for one. They are considered part of the labor force along with employed people. People who are currently not employed and are not actively seeking one are considered out of the labor force. Parental status using the ACS is defined as whether a survey respondent has any child of their own residing with them, and includes adopted, biological, and stepchildren.

Workforce participation of young parents varies across demographic groups.[3] Among young mothers, participation increases with age (figure 2). Black mothers are especially likely to be working or actively looking for work. For example, 79 percent of Black mothers ages 25 to 30 are employed or actively seeking employment, compared with 70 percent of White mothers and 59 percent of Asian American and Pacific Islander mothers in the same age group (figure 2). Similar patterns are present at younger ages, though participation rates are lower.

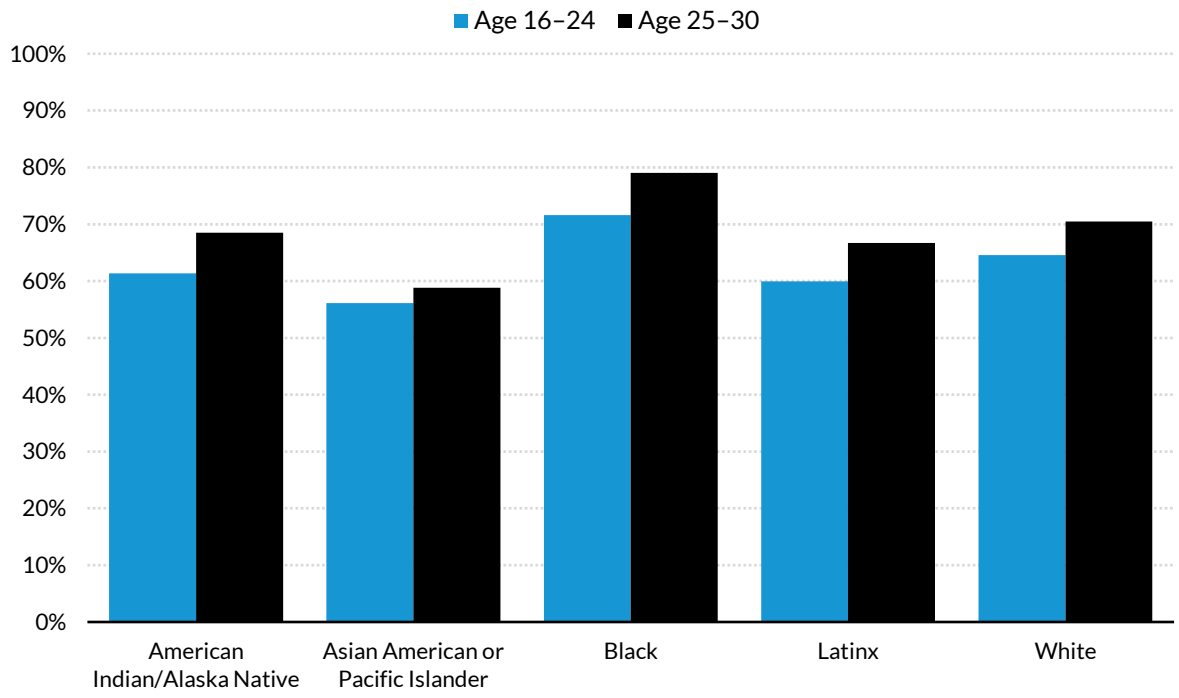
This pattern reflects a broader trend in the US labor market, where Black women have long had among the highest labor force participation rates (Banks 2019).[4] As discussed later in the report, these high rates of workforce participation do not necessarily lead to stronger financial outcomes,

highlighting the importance of job quality and broader barriers that influence what workers gain from employment.

FIGURE 2

Young Black Mothers Are More Likely Than Other Young Mothers to Be Working or Seeking Work

Labor force participation rates among young mothers by race/ethnicity and age group



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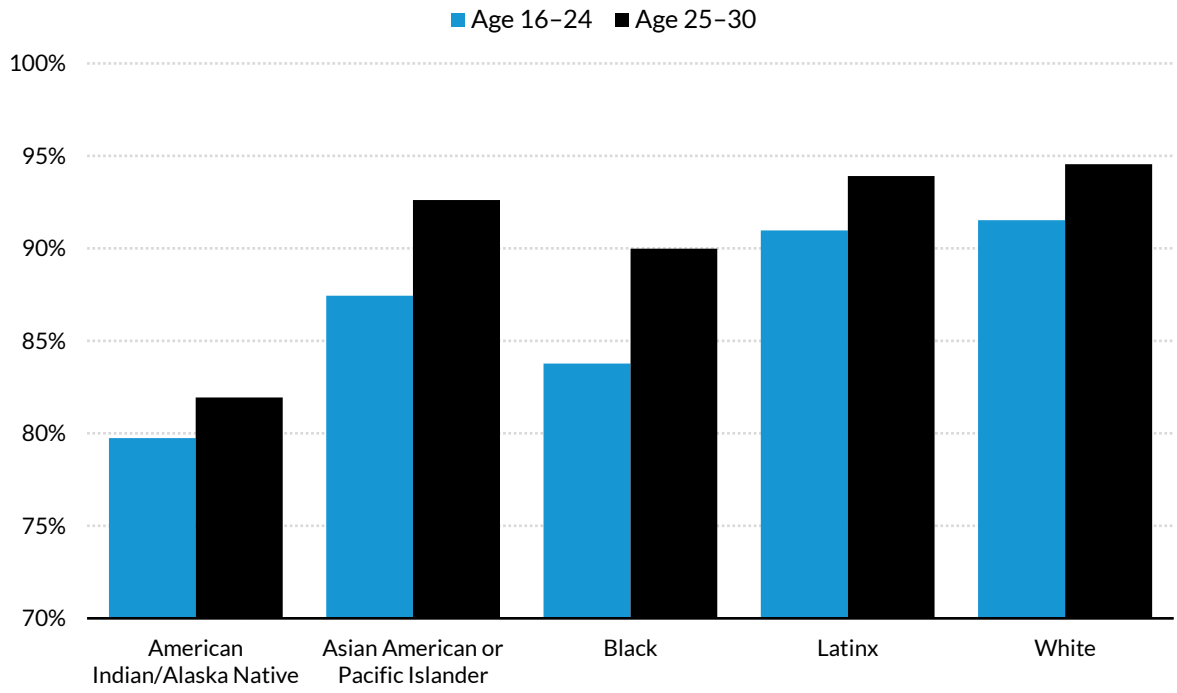
Notes: Labor force participation rate for a group refers to the percentage of people who are either employed or actively looking for a job. Parental status using the ACS is defined as whether a survey respondent has any child of their own residing with them, and includes adopted, biological, and stepchildren.

Young fathers are consistently likely to be working or looking for work across demographic groups (figure 3). Among fathers ages 25 to 30, participation rates exceed 89 percent for all racial and ethnic groups and reach nearly 95 percent for White fathers (figure 3). Even among younger fathers ages 16 to 24, most are engaged in the labor force, with participation rates ranging from about 80 percent to more than 90 percent across groups.

FIGURE 3

Young Fathers Are Consistently Connected to Work Across Demographic Groups

Labor force participation rates among young fathers by race/ethnicity and age group



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These patterns likely reflect a combination of caregiving responsibilities, labor market incentives, and gendered expectations surrounding work and family roles. Mothers are more likely to adjust work schedules or hours in response to child care needs.[5, 6] Fathers, meanwhile, are more likely to remain employed full time after becoming parents. At the same time, the employment patterns presented here do not directly measure caregiving involvement and should not be interpreted as showing that fathers are less engaged in supporting their children. Because men earn more on average than women, families may also face economic incentives to maintain fathers' labor force attachment while mothers take on a larger share of day-to-day caregiving responsibilities (Prehel and Baxter 2025).[7]

> **"When you're a new worker, you're trying to build revenue for your family. As a new worker, you're getting the lower wage. Now you're a parent, so you can't work all the hours. Both of you can't work all the overtime. Someone is taking the route of doing the work. Someone may be taking the route of the care for home and in the case of those individual parents, they may especially lean on [community] for support."**
>
> *—I AM Union staff member*

These differences are reinforced by job structures and employer expectations. Jobs in STEM fields such as technology and engineering that require long or inflexible hours are often associated with higher pay and advancement, but these demands are more difficult to meet for parents with primary caregiving responsibilities (Cha 2013; Loustaunau, Stepick, and Kneebone 2023). Together, these factors may help explain why labor force participation rates differ between young mothers and fathers.

The Jobs Young Parent Workers Hold

In this section, we look at the quality of the jobs that young parent workers hold. Many young parents work and remain connected to the labor market, yet they are less likely than their non-parent peers to hold high-quality jobs and more likely to experience economic insecurity. The analysis below examines several dimensions of this pattern. We first assess the quality of jobs held by young parents and non-parents using Urban's job quality framework (see Methods section above). Then we examine the occupations, working conditions, and employment patterns that help explain why their experiences diverge over time.

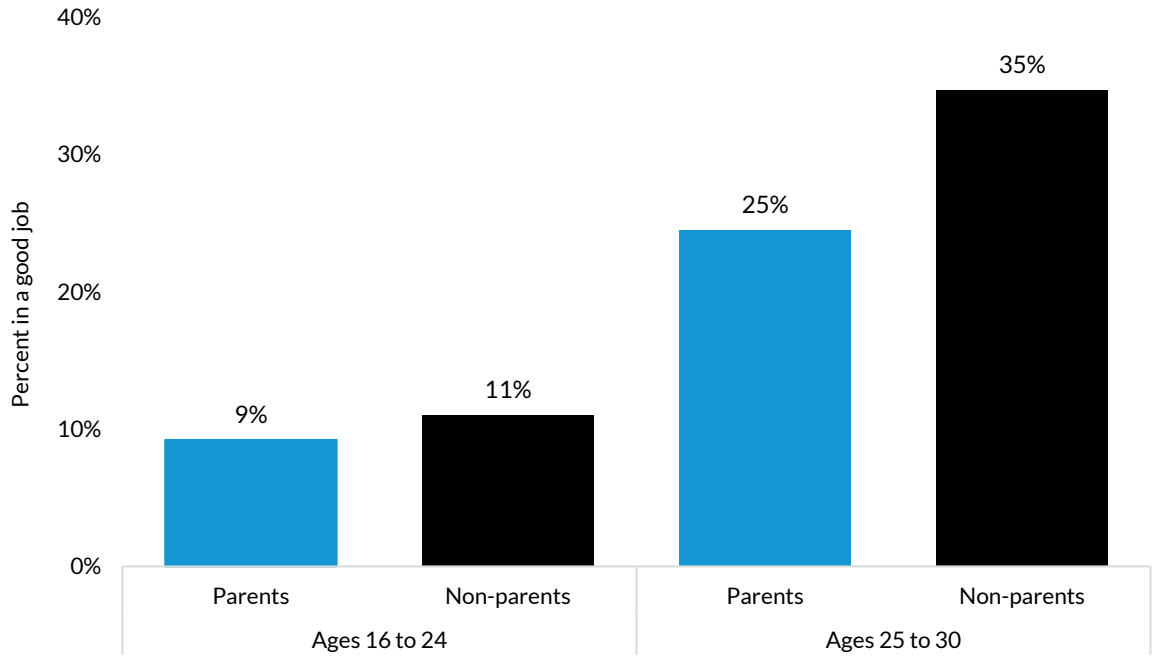
Employment Patterns and Occupational Concentration

When we examine who holds a good job, young parents are less likely than their non-parent peers to hold higher-quality jobs (figure 4). Before age 25, the difference is small: 11 percent of non-parents and 9 percent of parents hold a good job, a difference of two percentage points. By their late twenties, however, the gap widens to 10 percentage points, with 35 percent of non-parents compared with 25 percent of parents holding a good job. This 10-percentage point gap translates to more than 650,000 parents ages 25 to 30 who may otherwise hold a high-quality job.

FIGURE 4

Young Parents Fall Behind Their Non-Parent Peers in Access to Good Jobs by Their Late Twenties

Percent of young parents and young non-parents with a good job



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of public labor market data (see Methods section above).
Notes: A good job is defined by the 66th percentile of job quality among workers of all ages, which equates to 60 out of 100 on Urban's job quality scale.

Several of the organizations we interviewed played roles in helping young parents build skills and access entry-level jobs that might lead to higher paying jobs in the future. To support advancement, these organizations strategically focused on sectors with potential for quality jobs; relied on assessments to determine the match to individual career goals, skills, and caregiving responsibilities; provided supportive services such as child care assistance, transportation support, mentoring, and case management to help young parent workers navigate the challenges of balancing work and family; and, in some cases, worked to change employer practices to improve the quality of jobs that young parent workers hold. One practitioner noted that they worked with employers to make career pathways more visible to entry-level workers so that they could understand how to advance. In the next section, we discuss some of the job quality issues that are particularly salient when it comes to young parent workers.

Job Quality and Working Conditions

This section examines several workplace characteristics that help explain why job quality differs and how those conditions affect parents' ability to remain employed and support their families.

Access to Job Benefits

Many young parent workers work in service-sector jobs that often offer lower pay, unpredictable schedules, and fewer employer benefits (Woods et al. 2024). Scheduling instability in particular is common in these roles (Schneider and Harknett 2021). Work hours may vary daily or weekly and may include just-in-time scheduling, where workers receive little advance notice of shifts (Carrillo et al. 2017; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022). Young workers report more harassment at work, potentially because they tend to hold jobs in the service sector where such conditions are more prevalent (Ahlquist, Grumbach and Thai 2023).

Access to employer-provided benefits varies widely. Many young parent workers are concentrated in lower-wage jobs where access to employer-provided benefits is often lower (Joshi et al. 2022). Young and low-income parents are more likely to have access only to unpaid leave, making it harder to take time away from work without losing income (Gault et al. 2014; IMPAQ International 2017; Zagorsky 2017). Lower-wage workers are especially unlikely to have access to paid leave, and they generally are substantially less likely to receive employer-provided leave benefits (Boyens et al. 2024, 2022).[8]

> **"Folks in their young 20s, they tend to be concentrated in professions where there are less workplace benefits and supports. So paid leave is a major issue that we have worked on in this area because what we have found is that young people desperately need paid leave."**
>
> *—Better Balance staff member*

Part-Time Work

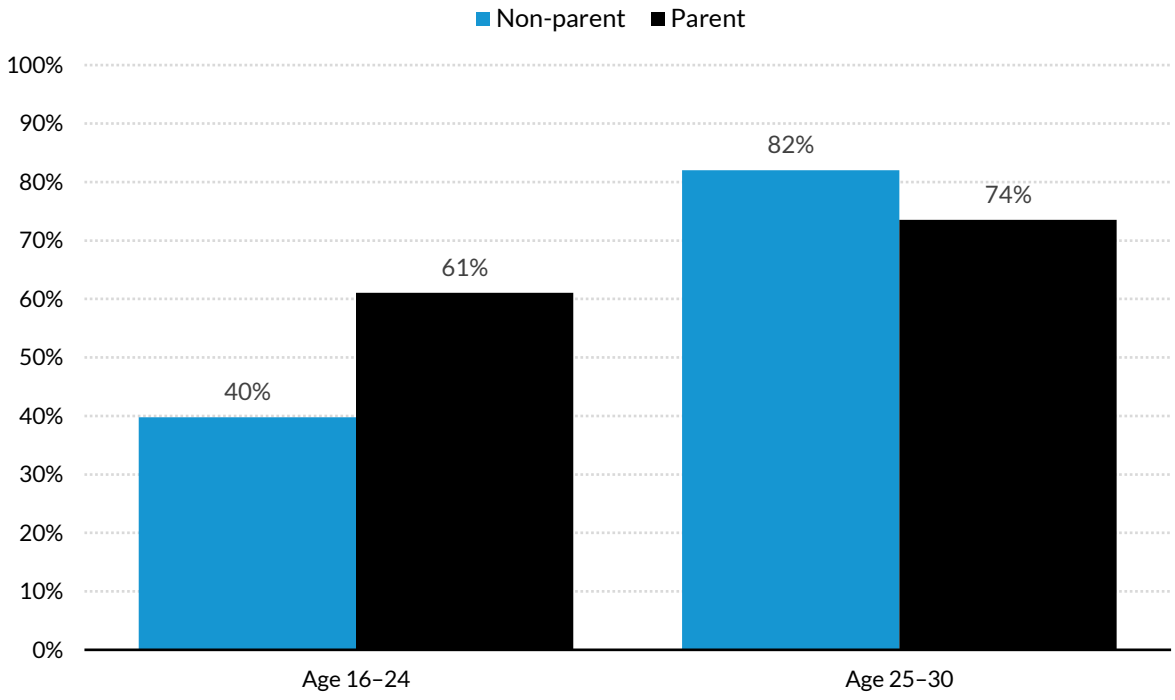
Part-time work is another important feature of employment for many young parents. Among employed people ages 16 to 24, young parents are more likely than non-parents to work full time. For example, 61 percent of employed young mothers in this age group work full time compared with 40 percent of non-parent women (figure 5). This difference is more dramatic among employed men: 86 percent of employed young fathers ages 16 to 24 work full time, compared with 52 percent of their non-parent peers (figure 6). A potential explanation for why parents are more likely to work full-time jobs is that

they need that full-time work to support their families, while non-parents in these younger years may be combining part-time work with education or training.

FIGURE 5

Young Mothers Are More Likely Than Non-Mothers to Work Full Time at Ages 16 to 24, but Less Likely to Do So at Ages 25 to 30

Percentage of employed women ages 16–30 who work full time by age group and parental status



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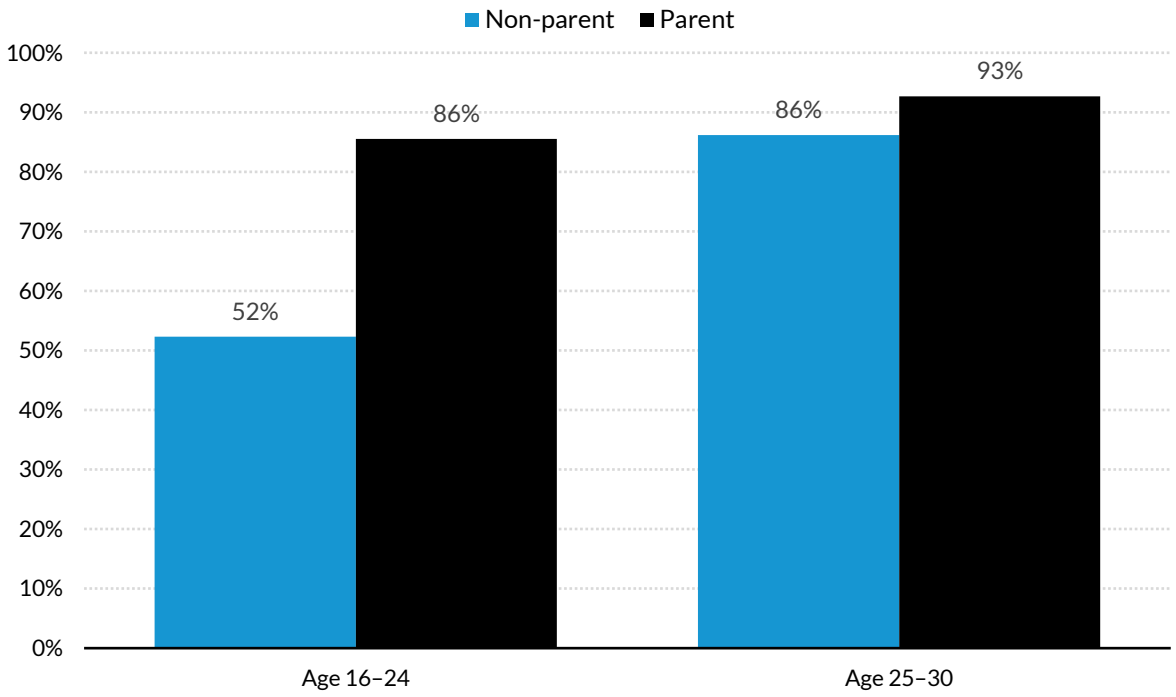
Notes: Parental status using the ACS is defined as whether a survey respondent has any child of their own residing with them, and includes adopted, biological and stepchildren. Full-time and part-time work are defined based on how many usual hours respondents work in a typical work week, where full-time work refers to working 35 or more hours in a week. Figure shows share of women ages 16–30 working full time among those who are employed, work for wages (i.e., are not self-employed), and have positive wage earnings. Self-employed persons are excluded.

As workers move into their late 20s, full-time work becomes more common for both parents and non-parents. Among workers ages 25 to 30, 74 percent of employed young mothers work full time, compared with 82 percent of non-parent women (figure 5). In contrast, full-time work remains the norm for young fathers and men generally, with 93 percent of fathers and 86 percent of non-parent men working full time (figure 6).

FIGURE 6

Young Fathers Are More Likely than Non-Fathers to Work Full Time Across Age Groups

Percentage of employed men ages 16–30 who work full time by age group and parental status



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Part-time work is associated with lower pay and reduced access to employer-sponsored benefits (Landivar et al. 2022a). Mothers are more likely to hold part-time roles and are more often concentrated in lower-paying industries. In contrast, fathers who work part time are more likely to hold positions with greater flexibility or higher pay (Landivar et al. 2022a; O'Herron, Schneider, and Harknett 2024; Tucker and Vogtman 2020). Part-time workers are also less likely to qualify for employer-based health insurance because eligibility is often tied to hours worked (Winger, Rae, and Klaxton 2025).[9]

Differences in job quality matter because they shape not only working conditions but also financial well-being. The next section examines whether employment translates into economic security for young parents.

Economic Insecurity

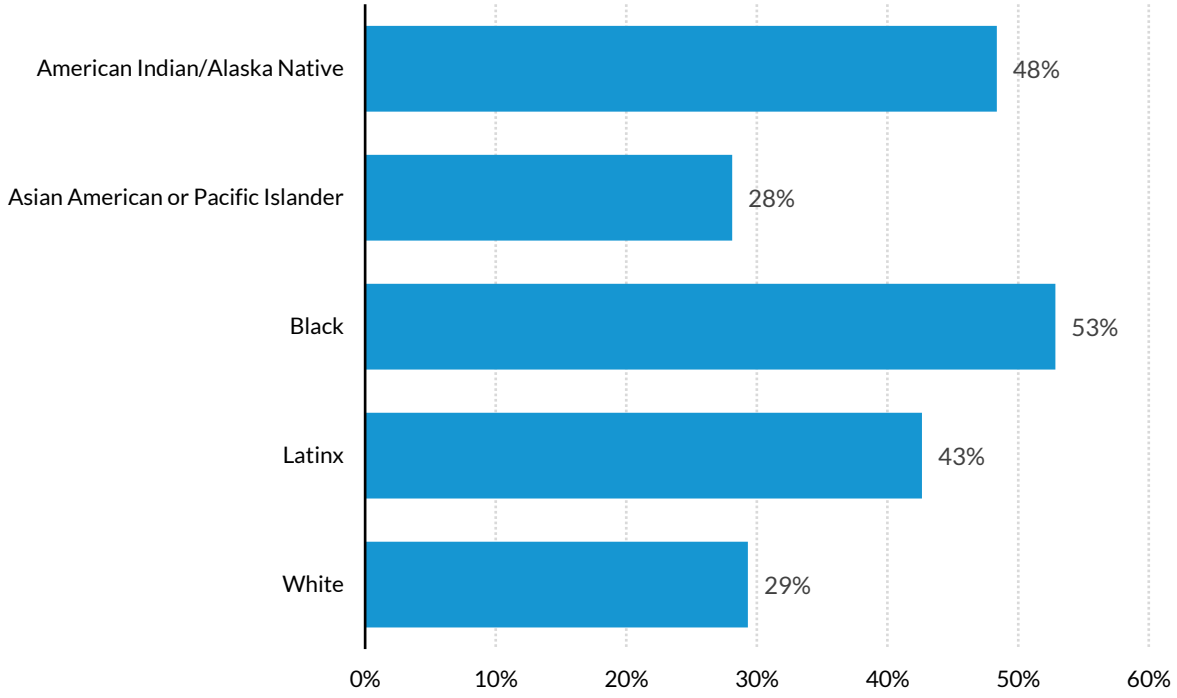
Despite working at high rates, many young parent workers experience economic insecurity. A substantial share live in families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (figure 7). This threshold, commonly used in research, reflects that families often need to earn wages roughly twice the official poverty line to meet basic needs, including housing, child care, and other essential expenses (Cauthen and Fass 2007; Wallace, Padilla-Frausto, and Smith 2010). By definition, families with children have higher poverty rates than families with similar incomes without children, given that poverty thresholds are higher for families with children to account for family size. We focus the analysis here on only young parents.

Among young parents working or looking for work, economic insecurity remains elevated but varies across groups. For example, the majority (53 percent) of Black young parents and nearly half (48 percent) of American Indian or Alaska Native young parents employed or looking for a job live in families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, the highest rates across the groups (figure 7). These rates are lower than those for young parents who are not working or looking for work, indicating that employment is associated with greater economic stability (numbers not shown). However, the shares remain high even among workers. In other words, employment improves financial security for many young parents, but it does not eliminate financial hardship.

FIGURE 7

Many Working Young Parents Remain Economically Insecure

Share of young parents ages 16–30 in the labor force who are in families at or below 200 percent of the poverty threshold by race/ethnicity



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Constraints and Supports: Why Work Looks This Way

Understanding these employment patterns requires examining the constraints young parent workers face both within and outside the workplace.

Time and Caregiving Constraints

Time poverty refers to not having enough time to balance paid work, caregiving, and household responsibilities (Douthitt 1994; Rodgers 2023). For young parents, time poverty can mean the

pressures and difficulties around leaving work in time to pick up a child after school, arranging child care when work schedules change unexpectedly, caring for a sick child when paid leave is unavailable, or trying to fit education and training around work and parenting responsibilities. These challenges can make it difficult to maintain stable employment even when parents remain strongly connected to the labor force. Research suggests that many employed parents, especially mothers, are part of a "hidden poor" population whose economic challenges become more visible when time constraints are taken into account (Zacharias et al. 2026). Young parent workers often combine low-wage or unstable work with intensive unpaid caregiving responsibilities. This creates tension between work and family responsibilities and can make it harder to stay steadily employed (Giurge, Whillans, and West 2020; Luhr et al. 2022; Mugglestone 2015; Sandstrom et al. 2019). These challenges do not affect all parents equally. Employed mothers spend more time on unpaid caregiving responsibilities and are more likely to reduce work hours or exit employment when caregiving demands increase.[10, 11] Such challenges are especially common among low-income mothers and those with young children, creating scheduling pressures and making it harder to pursue education or career advancement (Conway et al. 2021; Luhr et al. 2022; Schneider 2025; Wladis, Hachey, and Conway 2024). These pressures help explain why mothers are more likely to work part time or reduce work hours.

Job Structure and Caregiving Constraints

The demands of raising children often conflict with how many jobs are structured. Many of the jobs young parents hold include features such as unstable or unpredictable schedules, including just-in-time scheduling, which makes it difficult to plan child care and maintain consistent work hours (Carrillo et al. 2017; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022).

Parents often respond by relying on informal child care arrangements where possible or by changing how they work. These adjustments can include reducing hours, shifting to part-time work, or exiting the labor force (Kleven et al. 2023; Landivar et al. 2022a).

At the same time, many higher-paying jobs expect employees to demonstrate commitment through long hours, consistent availability, and taking on additional responsibilities (Cha 2013; Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Hodges and Budig 2010). For parents, meeting these expectations can be difficult when caregiving responsibilities require flexibility, schedule changes, or time away from work. Parents who cannot meet these demands because of caregiving responsibilities may miss opportunities for advancement, earn less, and experience greater job instability (Cha 2013; Loustaunau, Stepick, and Kneebone 2023).

> **"Employers are finding that there are some challenges to attracting talent, especially for roles with rigid shift schedules or when candidates struggle to find child care."**
>
> *—SHRM Foundation staff member*

Gender shapes how these constraints are experienced through patterns known as the "motherhood penalty" and "fatherhood premium," which describe how parenthood affects labor market outcomes differently for mothers and fathers. Researchers use the term motherhood penalty to describe the disadvantages mothers often face in hiring, pay, and advancement after having children. These penalties are often linked to employer perceptions that mothers are less competent or less committed, which reduces access to promotions and higher wages (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Torres et al. 2024). Experimental evidence shows that mothers are rated lower on competence and commitment than otherwise similar workers (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007). Mothers are also more likely to adjust their work patterns in response to caregiving demands, including reducing hours or working part time, which can further limit access to higher-quality jobs (Landivar et al. 2022a).[12]

The fatherhood premium refers to the tendency for fathers to experience wage and job advancement after becoming parents. Fathers may be perceived as more stable or committed workers, contributing to higher earnings and promotion opportunities, with estimated gains of 6 to 10 percent (Hodges and Budig 2010). However, these gains are not shared equally. Research suggests they are larger among white fathers and those with higher incomes, more education, and stronger labor market positions (Rehel and Baxter 2015).

Together, these dynamics show how caregiving responsibilities and workplace structures contribute to unequal returns to work for young mothers and fathers, particularly during early career stages.

Supports Like Paid Leave and Child Care Can Enable Sustained Employment

Child care, transportation, and paid leave often determine whether young parent workers can remain employed consistently.

Child care access and affordability are central. Subsidies, Head Start, and state-funded pre-K programs are associated with higher maternal employment, particularly among low-income parents (Joshi et al. 2022; Landivar et al. 2022b). These supports reduce costs and help families access more stable care, though access remains uneven, particularly for parents working nonstandard hours.

> **"So, thinking specifically about what the supportive services needs are for working parents, there are a range of considerations. When we can have the opportunity to try to help design somebody's job search and choices based on the needs their family, we take into account specialized supportive services like a paying for a car seat or diapers, and working to align work schedules with quality childcare choices."**
>
> *—Towards Employment staff member*

This is also true for parents receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits. We heard from one practitioner about the challenge parents face when child care does not kick in until they secure a job, but they need child care to engage in a job search.

Transportation can also affect whether parents are able to get to work consistently. Many young parents rely on public transportation to travel between home, child care, and work. Limited access and long travel times can make it difficult to coordinate these responsibilities (Wang and Xu 2020).[13] One service provider we interviewed described transportation as "the next biggest obstacle" after child care for many parents seeking employment. Another interviewee emphasized the importance of screening for transportation needs early and providing transit assistance to help participants remain engaged.

Paid leave and sick time can make the difference between staying employed and having to leave work when family needs arise. Young and low-income parents are more likely to have access only to unpaid leave, which may be difficult to use due to financial constraints (Adelstein and Peters 2019; Gault et al. 2014). Paid leave and flexible schedules help parents stay employed while managing caregiving responsibilities (IMPAQ 2017; Pilarz 2022). One interviewee shared how leave policies do not reflect the needs of young parents.

Work and Supports Function Together to Shape Stability

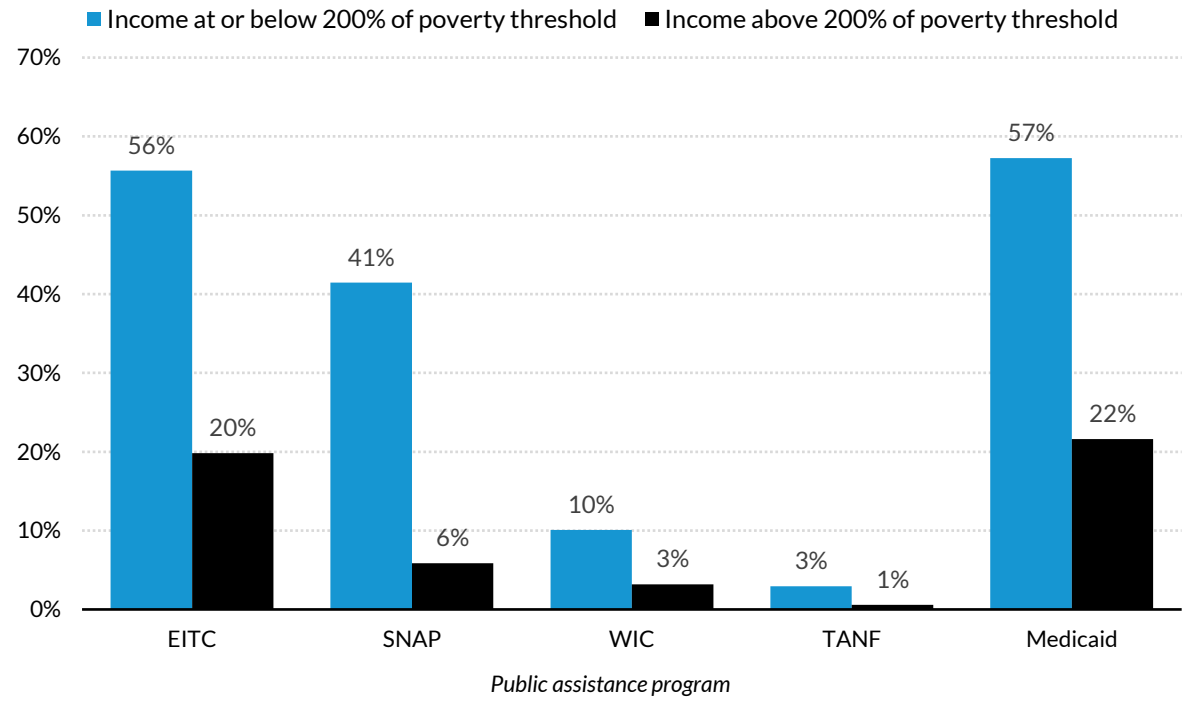
For many young parent workers, a job alone is not enough to provide financial stability. Earnings and public benefits often work together to help families cover essential expenses. Among low-income young parents working or looking for work—those in families below 200 percent of the official poverty threshold—56 percent receive the Earned Income Tax Credit and 41 percent receive SNAP benefits (figure 8).

> **"All of public assistance are work support strategies. Working families count on SNAP, Medicaid and child care to help lessen the fiscal cliffs that they have to advance to their careers, the most dramatic of which is child care."**
>
> *—Cuyahoga County agency staff member*

FIGURE 8

Public Benefits Often Supplement Work for Low-Income Young Parents

Share of young parents ages 16–30 in the labor force with public assistance programs by poverty status



URBAN INSTITUTE

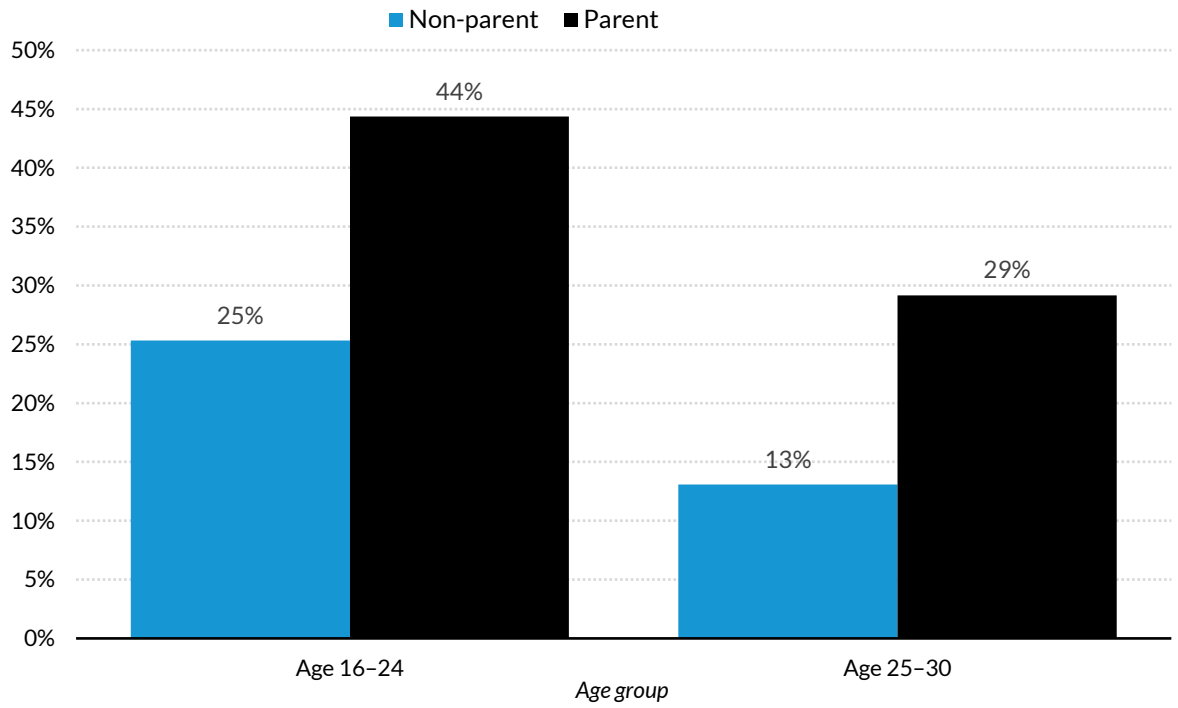
Source: Urban Institute analysis of the 2023-2024 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data.
Notes: In the SIPP, parents are defined as those who are the biological, step, or adoptive parent of someone regardless of whether they currently live with the person or not. This contrasts with the residential-based definition of parents in the ACS.

Health coverage shows a similar pattern. Among workers ages 16 to 24, 44 percent of young parents rely on Medicaid compared with 25 percent of non-parents (figure 9). This gap suggests that public supports frequently complement wages rather than replacing work.

FIGURE 9

Young Parents Are Substantially More Likely Than Non-Parents to Receive Medicaid Coverage

Share of people ages 16–30 in the labor force with Medicaid benefits by age and parental status



URBAN INSTITUTE

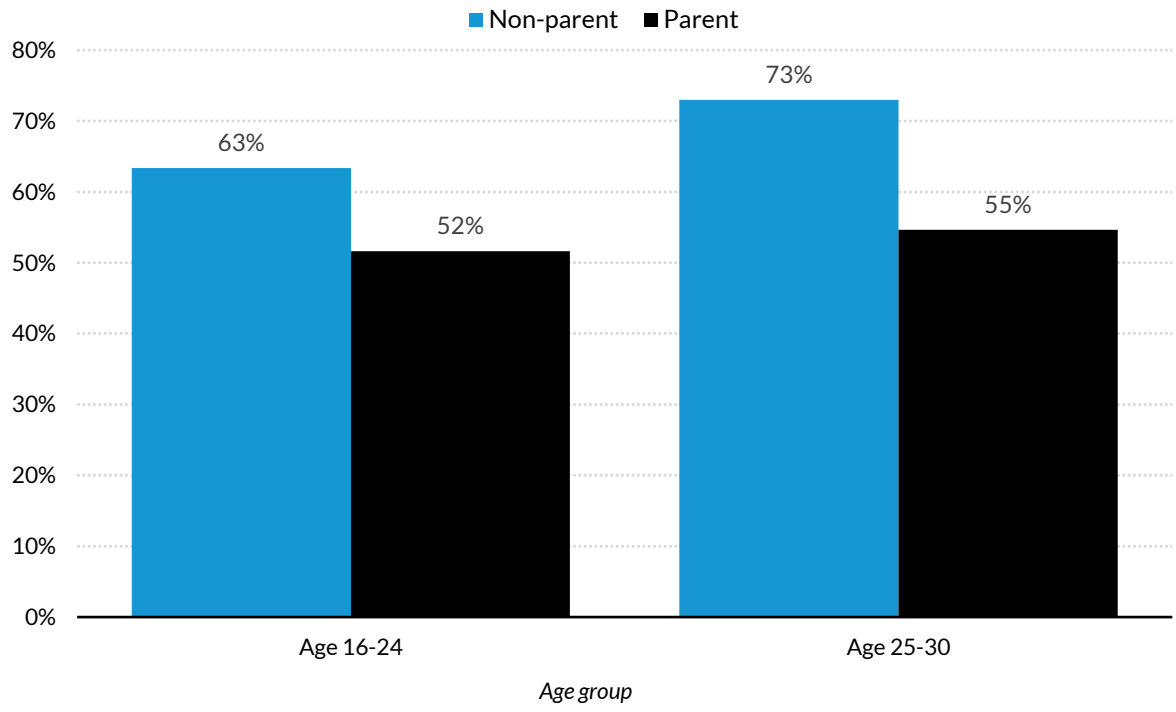
Source: Urban Institute analysis of the 2023–2024 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data.
Notes: In the SIPP, parents are defined as those who are the biological, step, or adoptive parent of someone regardless of whether they currently live with the person or not. This contrasts with the residential-based definition of parents in the ACS. To annualize the monthly level SIPP labor force data, we define as in the labor force respondents who spent the majority of their reported months in a year as employed or unemployed.

As a parallel, a smaller share of young parents have access to employer-sponsored health insurance relative to their non-parent peers (figure 10).

FIGURE 10

Young Parents Are Less Likely Than Non-Parents to Have Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance

Share of people ages 16–30 in the labor force with access to employer-sponsored health insurance by age and parental status



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute analysis of the 2023–2024 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data.
Notes: In the SIPP, parents are defined as those who are the biological, step, or adoptive parent of someone regardless of whether they currently live with the person or not. This contrasts with the residential-based definition of parents in the ACS. To annualize the monthly level SIPP labor force data, we define as in the labor force respondents who spent the majority of their reported months in a year as employed or unemployed.

Conclusion and Opportunities for Action

Young parent workers are already doing what employers and policymakers often ask of them: they are working, building skills, and supporting children. Yet many remain economically insecure despite their strong connection to work. The findings in this report suggest that the challenge is not a lack of work effort, but a mismatch between the realities of raising children while building a career and the design of jobs, workplace benefits, and public policies.

Many of the jobs young adults tend to hold, particularly in service and frontline occupations, offer lower pay, fewer benefits, and schedules that change with little notice. At the same time, many higher-paying jobs expect workers to remain highly available, work long hours, and take on additional responsibilities. For young parents, both types of jobs can create challenges. As a result, young parents often face difficult tradeoffs between maintaining stable employment, advancing in their careers, and meeting caregiving responsibilities.

Improving outcomes for young parent workers is therefore not solely a question of increasing employment. It is a question of ensuring that jobs, benefits, and public systems better reflect the realities of raising children while building an early career. Doing so can help more young parents remain employed, advance in their careers, and achieve long-term economic security.

Addressing these challenges will require action both within workplaces and across the systems that support working families. Some opportunities can be pursued immediately by employers, workforce organizations, and service providers, while others require broader policy changes.

How Employers Can Change Workplaces to Support Young Parent Workers

Employers directly shape the day-to-day conditions that determine whether young parents can remain and advance in work. Employers can improve job quality with the following strategies:

- **Provide predictable schedules and advance notice of hours.** Many young parents work in service-sector jobs where schedules can change with little notice. Providing advance schedule notice, allowing shift swaps, and adjusting start or end times where feasible can help workers balance employment and caregiving responsibilities while improving retention and attendance. Two job training providers we interviewed noted how they worked with employers to help with scheduling issues that arose on the job. For example, one interviewee described a young father who was always running late because of need to drop his child at day care and get to work. The organization helped to work through this challenge in partnership with the employer.
- **Expand access to paid leave and health benefits, including for part-time workers**. Many young parents work in jobs that offer limited benefits. Paid leave, sick leave, and affordable health coverage can help workers remain employed when family needs arise rather than forcing parents to choose between caregiving responsibilities and earnings. Interviewees consistently described paid leave as an important tool for helping young parents remain employed when caregiving needs arise, particularly following the birth of a child or when caring for a sick child. Employers can provide paid leave and sick time to all types of workers and ensure workers

understand how to access benefits through clear and accessible information to workers about available accommodations.

- **Create advancement pathways, including training and internal mobility**. Many young parent workers have limited time for education and training outside of work because they are already balancing employment and caregiving responsibilities. Employers can support advancement through paid apprenticeships, internships, on-the-job training, structured career ladders, and meaningful leadership opportunities that allow workers to build skills, gain experience, and increase earnings while remaining employed.
- **Increase flexibility without reducing pay or access to benefits.** Flexible scheduling practices, including shift swapping, flexible start and end times, and remote work where feasible, can help parents respond to caregiving demands while maintaining stable employment and career progression.

Policy to Strengthen Systems that Support Working Families

The report's findings suggest that employment and public supports often operate together rather than serve as substitutes. Policymakers can help address the gap between the supports young parents need and those currently available through workplaces and public systems. Policymakers can strengthen systems with the following strategies:

- **Expand access to affordable, reliable child care**, including during nonstandard work hours by investing in child care funding and scholarships (e.g., local tax-supported child care funds) to reduce access barriers for young parents. Child care challenges emerged repeatedly in both the literature and interviews as a barrier to employment stability and advancement. Expanding access to care can help parents remain connected to work while reducing schedule-related disruptions.
- **Strengthen labor standards and scheduling protections.** Many young parent workers are concentrated in jobs characterized by unpredictable schedules, fluctuating hours, and limited worker control. Scheduling protections and minimum-hours policies can help workers maintain stable earnings and plan around child care responsibilities.
- **Ensure benefits and protections are accessible to part-time workers.** Many young parents, particularly mothers, adjust work schedules in response to caregiving demands. Policies that

link benefits exclusively to full-time employment may leave some working parents without access to supports they need.

- **Ensure access to paid family and medical leave**, particularly during pregnancy and early parenthood. Enact and preserve paid family/medical leave and paid sick time at state and federal levels and expand coverage for young, low-wage workers.

These actions can help ensure that work more consistently contributes to economic stability.

Building Evidence, Demonstrating Solutions, and Strengthening the Field

Better outcomes for young parent workers and their families will require stronger evidence on what works, greater coordination across workforce and family support systems, and continued attention to the voices and experiences of young parents themselves. Researchers, workforce organizations, community-based organizations, philanthropy, employers, and public agencies each have a role to play in testing solutions, building evidence, and bringing effective practices to scale. These actions are important for achieving changes in public policies and workplaces to benefit young workers and their families.

Field-building activities could include the following:

- **Build evidence on effective strategies.** Support research that identifies effective approaches for improving hiring, retention, advancement, and job quality for young parent workers. Such research would likely require partnerships with employers, evaluation of workplace pilots, and better information on employment practices and worker outcomes.
- **Improve access to and retention in quality jobs.** New strategies for supporting young parent workers could be tested and evaluated in sectors and occupations that offer good prospects of quality jobs. Program models could be designed to support parents in balancing caregiving, work, and advancement through paid on-the-job training and access to free child care. Strategies that involve on-site worker supports and joint problem-solving with employers could be tested and replicated across employer networks.
- **Support implementation.** Provide technical assistance to employers and workforce organizations seeking to adopt workplace practices that support young parent workers. Foundation funding could be used for special initiatives within employer and workforce associations, such as "employer resource networks," where employers share best practices and collaborative funding.[14]

- **Elevate worker voice.** Center the experiences of young parent workers in program design, evaluation, and policy discussions to ensure solutions reflect the realities of balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. A variety of strategies can promote youth worker voice, including supporting young workers to advocate for themselves on the job, creating opportunities for them to provide input on design solutions within programs and in workplaces, and giving them roles in advocating for and offering advice on public policy improvements (Scott, Sirois, and Spaulding 2023).

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