

# The COVID-19 Crisis and Family Dynamics in Economically Vulnerable Households

In May through July 2020, we conducted a survey on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic with 572 families in the Chicago area. All families had a preschool age child who had been enrolled in subsidized child care prior to the pandemic. The families were participating in other research studies at the BIP Lab. The COVID-19 surveys were administered online or by phone.



BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS AND PARENTING LAB  
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

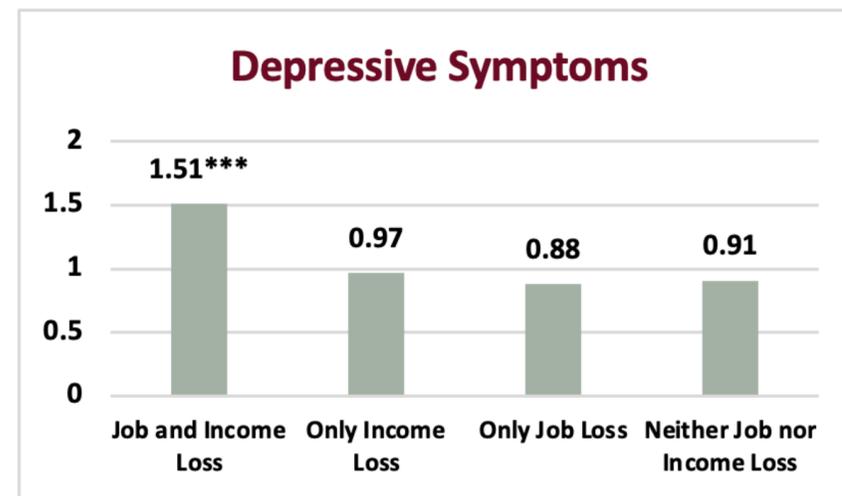
How did the COVID-19 crisis affect the well-being and dynamics of disadvantaged families with preschool-age children in Chicago?

## What We Asked About

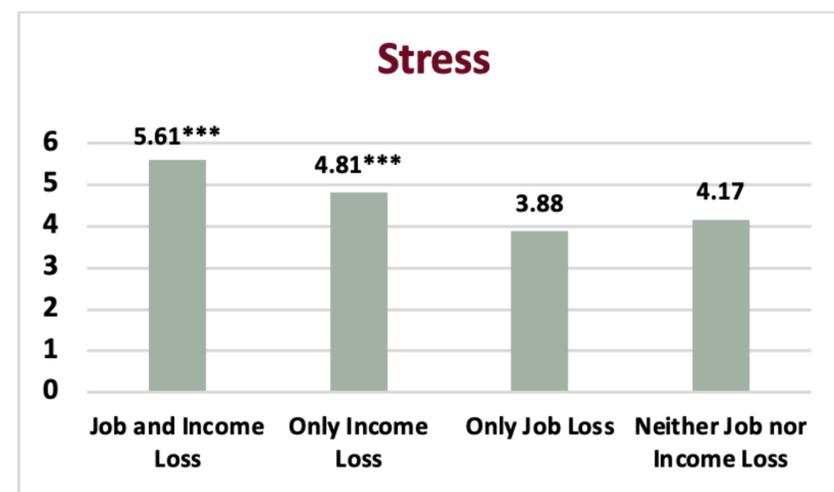
Changes in parents' financial and employment circumstances, childcare circumstances, virus exposure, mental health, interactions with children, and experience surrounding school closures as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

## Mental Health

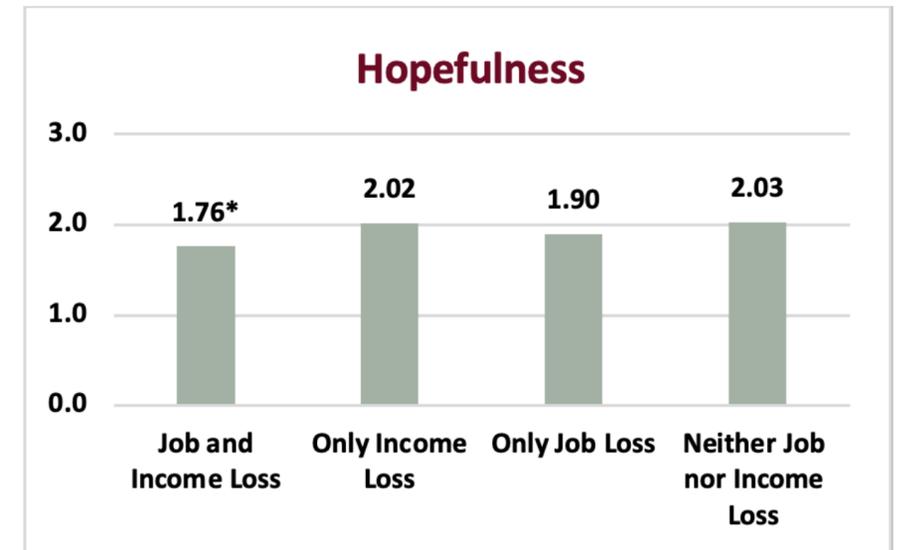
Results suggest that those who experienced both job and income loss showed worse mental health than their counterparts without these experiences: they reported higher levels of depressive symptoms and stress and were less likely to be hopeful about the future. Those who experienced just income loss also had higher stress, as did those who had to spend a lot more time in childcare. However, those who lost their job without losing income were in no worse mental health. Additionally, no group reported significant changes in feeling overwhelmed by parenting stress.



Note: Depressive symptoms are measured on a 6-point scale, constructed based on the number of and severity of depressive symptoms. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate a significant difference from those with "Neither Job nor Income Loss" at the 0.10, 0.05, and 0.01 levels respectively.



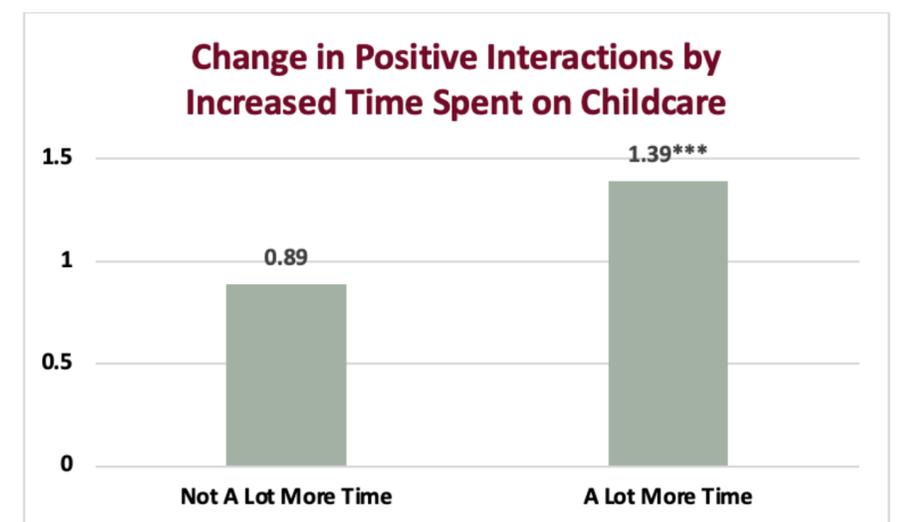
Note: Stress is measured with one item on a 10-point scale assessing the individual's self-reported stress level. Stress is measured on a 10-point scale based on the individual's self-reported stress level. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate a significant difference from those with "Neither Job nor Income Loss" at the 0.10, 0.05, and 0.01 levels respectively.



Note: Hopefulness is measured on a 3-point scale, constructed based on the individual's self-reported hopefulness level. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate a significant difference from those with "Neither Job nor Income Loss" at the 0.10, 0.05, and 0.01 levels respectively.

## Parent-Child Interactions

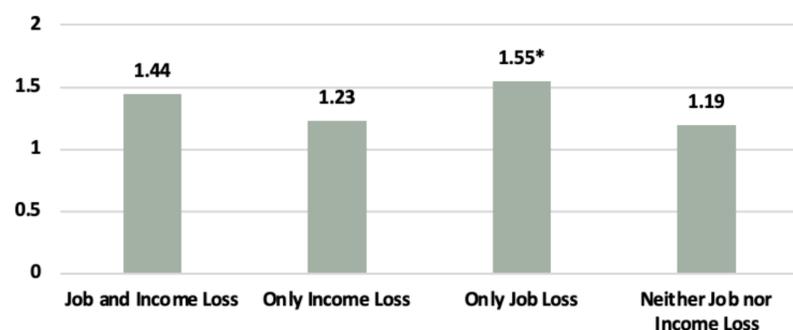
Those who had to spend a lot more time on childcare due to the pandemic reported more positive interactions (cuddling, playing games, having fun) with their child, as did those who lost their job without losing household income. On the other hand, those who lost just income or both job and income reported an increase in yelling or losing their temper with their child. Those who had someone in their household exposed to COVID reported significantly fewer positive interactions and increased behavior problems from their child.



Note: Positive interactions include "hugging or cuddling" and "playing games or having fun with" the child. Parents self-reported either a decrease (coded as -1), the same (coded as 0), or an increase (coded as 1) for each of the two activities, and their sum is the positive-interactions scale ranging from -2 to 2. Parents self-reported spending "a lot more", "a little more", "about the same", "a little less", or "a lot less" time taking care of the children in their household since schools closed due to COVID-19. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate a significant difference from the "Not a Lot More Time" group at the 0.10, 0.05, and 0.01 levels respectively.

# The COVID-19 Crisis and Family Dynamics

## Change in Positive Parent-Child Interactions by Job and Income Loss

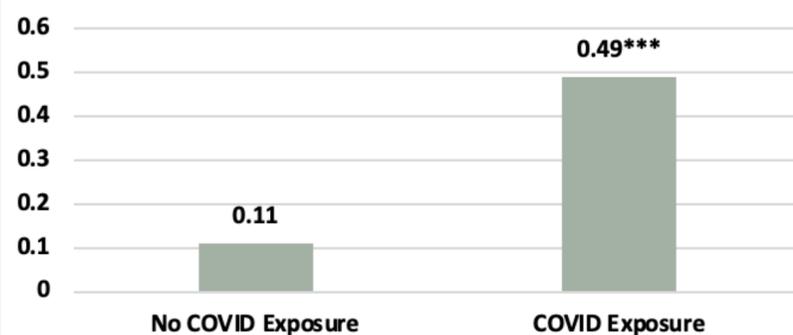


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## Children's Adjustment

Parents overall did not report increased non-compliance and negative behaviors from their child with the exception of parents who reported that someone in their household was exposed to the COVID-19 virus.

## Change in Child's Non-Compliance by COVID Exposure



Note: COVID Exposure is defined as someone in the household exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19. Non-compliant behaviors include "arguing or being disobedient" and "cooperating less". Parents self-report either a decrease (coded as -1), the same (coded as 0), or an increase (coded as 1) for each of the two activities, and their sum is the Non-Compliance scale ranging from -2 to 2. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate a significant difference from those with "No COVID Exposure" at the 0.10, 0.05, and 0.01 levels respectively.

"Unanticipated and uncontrollable economic stress is correlated with declines in parent mental health and increases in parent stress...Without economic support the gaps that may open up are going to lead to long-run differences between those who are experiencing the stresses from this pandemic and those who are more shielded from it."

- BIP Lab Co-Director Ariel Kalil

## Bottom Line Results

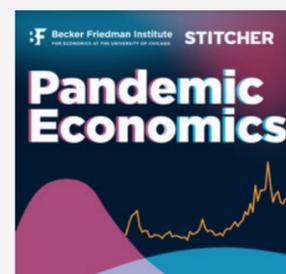
Parental job and income losses are strongly associated with parents' depressive symptoms, stress, diminished sense of hope, and negative interactions with children. However, these negative effects do not occur for parents who lose jobs but do not experience simultaneous income losses. In fact, job losses without income losses and increased time investments in childcare as a result of the pandemic are associated with more positive parent-child interactions.

With thanks to the Becker Friedman Institute (BFI), we are releasing our working paper highlighting the results of this work: Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Family Dynamics in Economically Vulnerable Households.

→ [Working Paper](#)



[Podcast](#)



## Feedback Requested

What are your most pressing questions that we have left unanswered? Please let us know!

Email: [biplab@uchicago.edu](mailto:biplab@uchicago.edu)

Website: [biplab.uchicago.edu](http://biplab.uchicago.edu)

Social:   

## What Does This All Mean?



**45% of our sample** experienced either a job loss or a substantial household income loss due to the pandemic. But it is the combination of job and income loss that seems to create stress and hurt child development. These results suggest that government efforts to stem the income loss associated with job loss could greatly contribute to family stability and child success.



**75% of the parents** in our sample reported that they were spending much more pandemic-induced time caring for their young children. However, these same parents report more positive interactions with their children even when they have lost jobs or income or both, and they do not report feeling more overwhelmed by their responsibilities as parents.



While parents who have lost income report more negative interactions with their children, parents who only lost their job but not income report more positive but not more negative interactions with their children. This suggests that given financial stability, parents have the potential to improve their children's outcomes when they have more time to spend with them.