



AT THE HEART OF THE PANDEMIC: MARYLAND WOMEN AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Executive Summary



To learn how women in Maryland fared during the COVID-19 pandemic and the period when institutions began to open up, the Maryland Commission for Women conducted a study that included both a survey and focus groups. Over 4,500 women responded to the survey that was available between August and mid-October 2021 and another 37 women participated in focus groups in October 2021.

WHO RESPONDED?

- **4,595 women** across the state of Maryland responded to the survey.
- **Jurisdiction:** Every jurisdiction was represented.
- **Race:** While the pool of respondents is diverse, certain groups did not respond in proportion to their representation in the state.
- **Age:** Survey respondents ranged in age from 18 to 96.
- **Education, Occupation, Income:** Overall, respondents were a highly educated group and their occupations and incomes reflected their higher education levels.

The survey sheds important light on issues affecting women across Maryland and efforts were made to ensure that the needs of all women are addressed in recommendations resulting from this study.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Physical health

- **43%** of respondents delayed other medical care.
- **40%** exercised less.
- Over half, **54%**, of the women reported unwanted weight gain.
- Pregnancies and births during the pandemic were stressful.

Mental and emotional health

- Almost two thirds, **65%**, experienced more anxiety or felt anxious more often.
- Almost half, **48%**, felt lonelier or more isolated.
- **45%** felt more depressed or depressed more often.
- **40%** had more difficulty sleeping.

THE PANDEMIC AND WORK

A series of questions asked women to report their job situation and that of their spouse/partner. In all cases, women fared worse.

Lost job

- Respondent – **9%**
- Spouse/partner – **4.5%**

Employer reduced hours

- Respondent – **10%**
- Spouse/partner – **4.5%**

Quit job because of family needs

- Respondent – **3%**
- Spouse/partner – **0.5%**

Quit for reasons not related to family

- Respondent – **2.3%**
- Spouse/partner – **1.3%**

- About **8%** of respondents had to take paid leave and **5.4%** had to take unpaid leave.
- Over a fourth (**27%**) of respondents did not feel safe at work, although only **4%** indicated employers did not follow COVID safety guidelines.

FINANCES AND THE PANDEMIC

Survey respondents fell on both ends of the financial continuum.

- **24%** increased their savings.
- **10%** relied on savings or other retirement income.
- **9%** received financial assistance from a state or federal program.

Concerns for the future

- **25%** were concerned about finances.



RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY

Relationships

- Over a quarter, **27%**, of respondents reported increased tension with a spouse/partner.
- **4%** experienced divorce, separation or a breakup during the pandemic.

Extended family

- Over half of respondents (**56%**) were not able to attend a family event in person.
- **40%** were unable to visit parents.
- **21%** were unable to visit children or grandchildren.

Grandparents often played a significant role during the pandemic.

- Grandmothers and mothers described considerable involvement of grandparents, ranging from babysitting to homeschooling to having grandchildren move in with them.

Concerns with children under 18

- Slightly over half, **51%**, were concerned their children were getting behind in school.
- Half, **50%**, had difficulty juggling children's care and schooling with work.
- **39%** noted increased anxiety in their children due to COVID.

CONCERNS GOING FORWARD

Being in public

- **73%** of respondents were concerned about being around unvaccinated people.
- **56%** were concerned about attending social gatherings or religious services.
- **45%** were reluctant to use public transportation.

Employment and finances

- A quarter of respondents were worried about money.
- Almost a quarter (**24%**) were concerned that their employers would not provide the flexibility needed to juggle their children's schedule and work.

Mothers with children

- Half were concerned about their children returning to school.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the study findings laid bare situations impacting women long before the pandemic. Recommendations were developed that address these situations as well as those that were brought about by COVID-19.



Maryland Commission for Women

Aware that our survey did not reach an audience as diverse as the Maryland population, the Maryland Commission for Women intends to do the following:

1. Expand our reach by supporting the efforts of local Commissions for Women and, where Commissions for Women do not exist, provide assistance to counties to develop one.
2. Increase our involvement and education beyond our current initiatives to include initiatives that affect a more diverse audience.
3. Empower current and future Commissioners to adequately amplify the voices of women and issues that impact them in their local jurisdictions.

Government Agencies and Private Businesses, Schools and Programs

1. Paid leave should be available, encompassing and flexible enough to deal with the community and health issues described in this report.
2. Plans should be developed to address the complex and sometimes conflicting needs of parents and workers for child care during times of crises.
3. Every effort should be made to increase both the salaries and benefits of child care workers.
4. Methods should be developed to compensate fairly those who took on the health risks presented by the pandemic to ensure that Marylanders had access to basic necessities and health care.
5. Training for new occupations available post-pandemic and for upskilling, especially in technical fields, should be developed and made available.
6. Affordable and consistent internet access is needed for all residents of Maryland.
7. Planning should begin immediately to rectify the inequities in access to and experience using technology.
8. Schools, public and private, should address the academic needs of students head-on and develop programs to help students catch up and engage once again in learning.
9. Programs should be developed that help students understand and cope with the psychological stresses resulting from the pandemic.
10. Programs should be developed that address the mental health needs of women on all fronts.

