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EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH

COVID-19's Impacts on the Labor Market in 2020

Brad J. Hershbein and Harry J. Holzer

ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

■ *COVID-19 decimated the U.S. labor market in the spring of 2020; a partial recovery in the summer and early fall left historically marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups largely behind, more than in any previous recession.*

■ *Blacks and Hispanics have had slower employment recoveries than whites, even accounting for differences in education and occupation.*

■ *States hit harder by COVID earlier on continue to lag behind in their employment recovery.*

It is no secret that in the spring of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted U.S. labor markets more severely and more quickly than at any point in living memory. A blizzard of research papers, newspaper stories, and calls for economic relief have documented the severe crash in employment in the spring of 2020, and the disproportionate burden borne by workers in leisure and accommodation, workers of color, and workers unable to do their jobs remotely. Far less is known, however, about how employment trajectories have played out for different groups over the rest of 2020, as a nascent recovery first gathered steam and then stalled, and how these patterns varied across states that differed in the timing and severity of their outbreaks and economic restrictions.

In a [recent working paper](#), we draw on publicly available data on detailed employment measures, COVID case rates and mortality, and state restriction policies to shed light on how labor markets have evolved since the pandemic began, capturing trends through the end of 2020. We find that the overall jobs recovery flatlined in October, as caseloads and mortality rose sharply, but that this aggregate pause obscured a continuation of slow gains among higher-paid workers and a second, if much milder, drop among lower-paid workers. We also confirm that Blacks and Hispanics not only had larger initial employment losses in the spring, but that their employment recoveries lagged over the summer and early fall. Even when we control for differences in education and type of occupation, these racial gaps persist, although by year's end there was convergence for Blacks even as the gap for Hispanics began to grow again. Permanent job loss has also been higher among these groups.

In addition to these disparities by race, we also find large and persistent disparities in employment

trends across states. Grouping states into three categories based on when their caseloads first peaked, we document that employment recoveries have lagged among states that had the earliest outbreaks, and that the share of their populations with permanent job loss has increased the most. Delving into the reasons for this dispersion, we show that while economic restrictions hurt

Compared to prepandemic, about 10 million more people were jobless by December 2020, and another 2 million had their work hours reduced.

employment when they are in place, their negative impact quickly fades once they are relaxed. Rather, elevated mortality rates depress employment not only contemporaneously but for months afterward, most likely because a greater number of deaths is a highly visible and persistent signal for the dangers of engaging in economic activity that drives both jobs and the risk of infection. Unfortunately, the rise in mortality rates that occurred at the end of 2020 will likely create headwinds for continued employment recovery in 2021.

To offset these headwinds and increase the chances that the recovery is broad and inclusive, we propose a series of policies to provide financial assistance to the workers hit hardest by the pandemic and to help reskill workers whose jobs are unlikely to return. However, any robust recovery will require efforts to control the spread of the virus in the immediate future, including accelerated vaccination, more widespread and inexpensive testing, and increased incentives for mask wearing and physical distancing.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Making the Child Care Tax Credit Permanently Refundable Could Benefit Low-Income Families

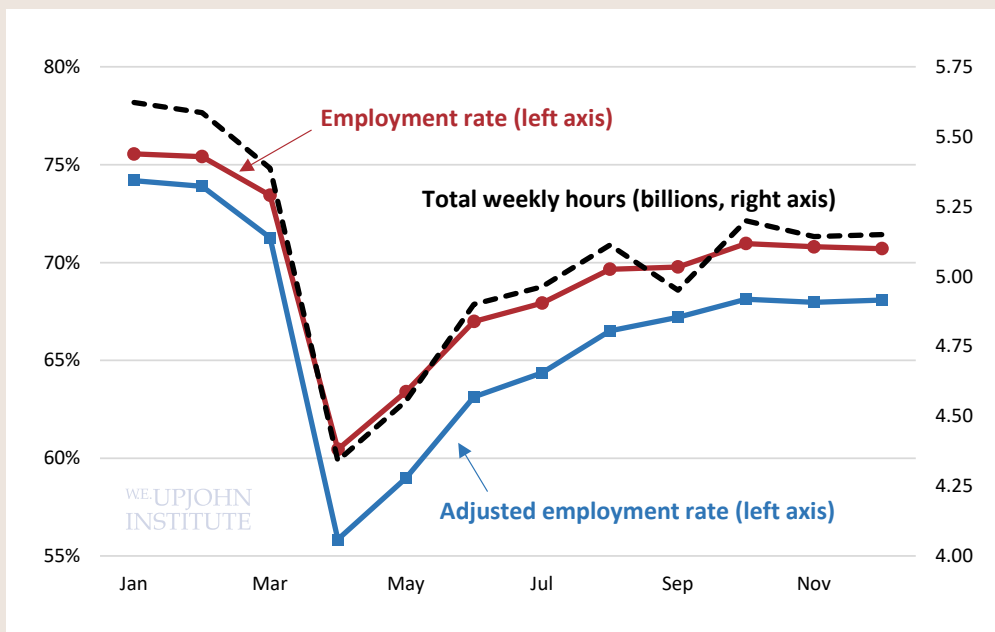
Gabrielle Pepin
page 5

Inviting Submissions for the 2021 Dissertation Award
page 8

W.E. Upjohn Institute Welcomes Beth Truesdale
page 9

COVID-19's Impacts on the Labor Market in 2020

Figure 1 Labor Market Indicators over 2020



NOTE: The employment rate is the share of non-institutionalized civilians aged 18–64 who report being employed, except for those who report being absent from work for unspecified reasons (many of whom are believed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to have been misclassified and are actually unemployed). The modified employment rate excludes individuals who report being employed part-time involuntarily. Total weekly hours is the sum of all hours worked by people during the reference week of the survey.

SOURCE: Current Population Survey; authors' calculations.

2020 Labor Market Trends

Figure 1 presents three indicators of aggregate employment over the course of 2020. The red line with circles shows the employment rate of people aged 18–64—the share of these people with jobs—although we have adjusted this number slightly to exclude individuals who reported being absent from work for unspecified reasons. (The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics believes many of this latter group should have been classified as unemployed instead.) Starting above 75 percent prior to the pandemic, the employment rate dips in March before plummeting over 13 percentage points in April, gradually recovering to 71 percent by October and budging little over the next two months. Nearly 10 million fewer Americans had a job in December than in February 2020.

However, this doesn't capture the full scope of the employment loss, as

many workers have kept their jobs but had their hours reduced involuntarily. Thus, the blue line with squares presents a modified employment rate that excludes individuals who are involuntarily part time. The gap between this measure of employment and the first one is 1.5 percentage points in January and February, but it widens substantially by April to 4.7 percentage points, and even in December is still 2.6 percentage points. This means that, in addition to the approximately 10 million fewer people without a job, another 2 million are employed but working fewer hours than before the pandemic. Finally, the dashed black line shows the total number of hours worked per week across all Americans. This metric has fallen from 5.6 billion in early 2020 to 5.15 billion as of December, a decline of 8.4 percent, about the same percentage decline as the modified

employment rate, suggesting that this employment rate is a good proxy for the strength of the labor market.

The Rising Inequality Gap

This overall recovery, anemic as it is, has not been felt equally by all workers. The two panels in Figure 2 break out trends by occupational wage quartile. Each quartile represents a fourth of workers based on the average hourly wage in their occupation, with 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest. Panel A shows the modified employment rate, as in Figure 1. Although lower wage quartiles have always had lower employment rates, the gap surged after the pandemic began. The modified employment rate of the first wage quartile plummeted by an astonishing 35 percentage points between February and April, before rebounding about two-thirds of the way back by October. Workers in higher wage quartiles suffered much smaller losses, with those in the top quartile down only 2 percentage points from the beginning of 2020 by year's end, and those in the third quartile down 6 percentage points. While modified employment rates continued to rise slightly between November and December for the top two wage quartiles, they reversed course and fell slightly for the bottom two quartiles. These losses occurred simultaneously with rising COVID caseloads and mortality and renewed economic restrictions, particularly in the hospitality and leisure sector, which has many low-paying occupations.

Panel B in Figure 2 examines the share of the population who report suffering permanent job loss (that is, they lost a job and do not consider themselves on temporary layoff). Research has found that such long-term job separation predicts lower earnings and higher health risks even decades later (Ruhm 1991; Eliason and Storrie 2006; Sullivan and Von Wachter 2009). In winter 2020, these shares clustered around half a percent for all

wage quartiles. They rose sharply and diverged, particularly over the summer and fall, with the share peaking at 3.2 percent in October for the bottom quartile. The slight dips seen in December are not necessarily good news—because modified employment rates also fell for the bottom quartiles (panel A), it's likely that workers in the bottom quartile were leaving the labor force entirely rather than finding a new job.

Recovery Lags for Black and Hispanic Workers

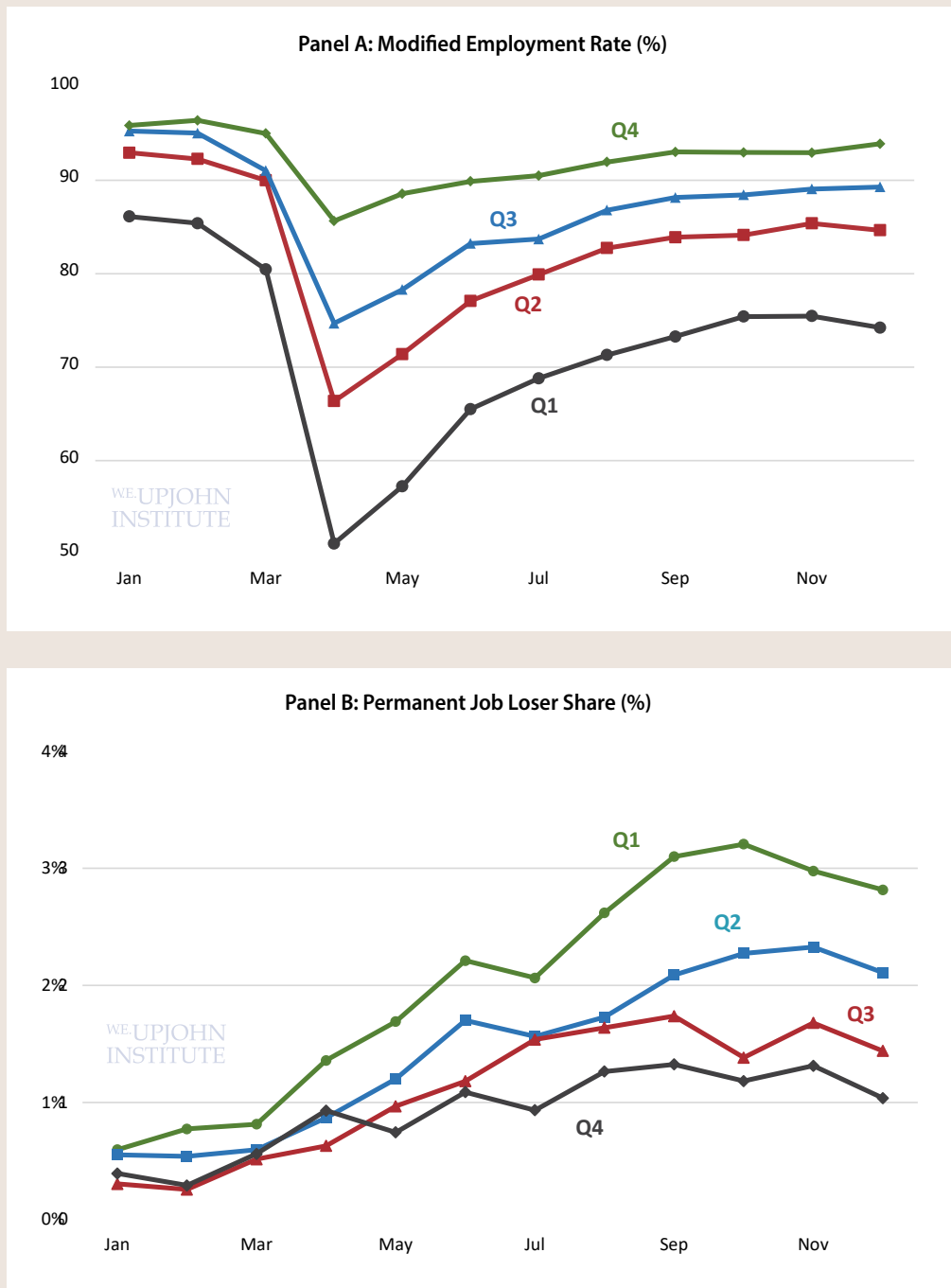
The recovery in the modified employment rate has also varied considerably by race and ethnicity. The solid red and blue lines in Figure 3 show the *change* in the employment rate, in percentage points, for Blacks and Hispanics since January 2020. Hispanics initially fare the worst, but Blacks also suffer greater initial losses than other racial groups (solid gray line). Hispanics have also had a faster recovery, at least into the fall. By December, racial gaps had narrowed, especially for Blacks, although there was some slippage for Hispanics.

Some of these racial gaps may be due to education and occupational differences. Thus, in the dashed lines, we statistically control for these differences. This reduces the gap substantially between Blacks and everyone else in the spring and early summer, but plays a somewhat smaller role afterward. These adjustments make less of a difference for the gap with Hispanics. Thus, not only have Blacks and Hispanics had larger employment losses and slower recoveries, the bulk of these disparities—especially for Hispanics—cannot be explained by educational and occupational differences.

The Role of COVID Mortality and Economic Restrictions

Employment rate losses and recoveries also differ across states. We find, for example, that states that had

Figure 2 The Bottom Wage Quartile Has Had a Much Weaker Recovery Than the Top Quartile

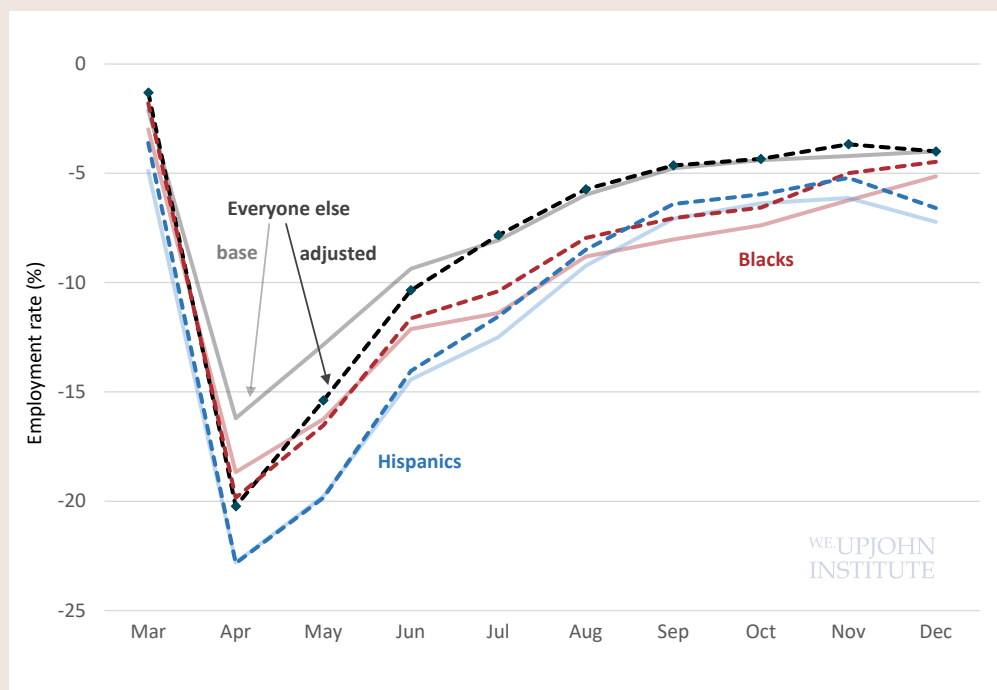


NOTE: See note to Figure 1 for the definition of the modified employment rate. The permanent job loser share is the share of the population (not just the unemployed) who report having lost a job and do not expect to be recalled. The (hourly) wage quartiles are based on detailed occupation from Occupational Employment Statistics and are population weighted; Q1 thus represents the bottom quarter of workers in terms of hourly pay, while Q4 represents the top quarter.

SOURCE: Current Population Survey; Occupational Employment Statistics; authors' calculations.

COVID-19's Impacts on the Labor Market in 2020

Figure 3 Blacks and Hispanics Have Experienced Slower Employment Rate Recoveries, Even after Adjusting for Education and Occupation



NOTE: See note to Figure 1 for the definition of the modified employment rate. Light, solid lines show the change, in percentage points, of the modified employment rate since January 2020 for each racial group. The darker, dashed lines control for worker education and occupational wage quartile.

SOURCE: Current Population Survey; Occupational Employment Statistics; authors' calculations.

initial COVID-19 caseload peaks in the spring of 2020—the well-known New York and New Jersey, but also Minnesota, Virginia, and Colorado—had deeper declines and less robust recoveries than states that reached their first caseload peak only in the fall, such as New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Oregon. A key question is how COVID caseload and mortality rates, as well as state restrictions on economic activity—including stay-at-home orders and bans on indoor dining, among others—have affected employment. Using regression analysis, we find that current case rates are positively associated with employment, while current mortality rates and the severity of current economic restrictions reduce employment rates. This likely reflects the short-run trade-off between heightened economic activity and greater virus transmission

when there are fewer restrictions.

However, we also find that there are no lingering effects of economic restrictions; once these are relaxed, the employment rate bounces back. On the other hand, we do find an accumulating impact of COVID mortality (but not caseloads) on employment rates. By December, a state with 100 more total deaths per 100,000 people—about the difference between the 90th percentile (Rhode Island; 131.8 deaths per 100,000 people) and the 10th percentile (Utah; 28.6 deaths per 100,000)—would be expected to have an employment rate 3 percentage points lower, everything else equal. The surge in mortality rates that occurred nationwide in November 2020 through January 2021 thus could pose a looming threat to continued economic recovery in 2021.

Conclusion

The labor market recovery from the COVID-19 recession was brief and uneven in 2020, leaving behind workers disadvantaged by race, ethnicity, and economic status. As cases ebb and flow around the country, states that have suffered—or will suffer—numerous COVID deaths may experience a slower recovery through 2021. An equitable and broad economic recovery will need a rapid and comprehensive vaccine rollout, but we argue in [the paper](#) for several additional policies to spur employment. These should include fiscal relief for state and local governments to stave off further cuts, wage insurance programs for those who struggle to find new jobs, and enhanced funding for sectoral training and community college education for industries and occupations that will continue to grow, such as construction, health care, and IT.

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For additional details, see the working paper at <https://research.upjohn.org/externalpapers/94/>.

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Making the Child Care Tax Credit Permanently Refundable Could Benefit Low-Income Families

Gabrielle Pepin

The Child and Dependent Care Credit (CDCC), a tax credit based on income and child care expenses, subsidizes child care costs for working families. The federal CDCC is available to households with children younger than 13 in which all parents have positive annual earnings. While many families meet these criteria, from its introduction in 1976 through 2020, the CDCC was nonrefundable, so only families with positive tax liability after other deductions benefited. This generally precluded very-low-income families from receiving CDCC benefits, and many policymakers advocated making the credit refundable. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 made the CDCC refundable and increased its generosity during tax year 2021 only. I estimate how CDCC eligibility, benefits, and marginal tax rates would change for different groups if the credit were made *permanently* refundable.

Using data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, which documents income, demographics, and child care expenses of U.S. households, I find that making the CDCC permanently refundable would lead to relatively large increases in eligibility among single-parent, Black, and Hispanic households, which are all less likely to qualify for the nonrefundable credit. Specifically, some 3 percent of Black households, 2 percent of Hispanic households, and 1 percent of white households would gain eligibility, all else equal. About 5 percent of single parents would gain eligibility and receive on average over \$1,000 in benefits annually. This increase is substantial, constituting 18 percent of existing child care spending and 10 percent of adjusted gross income (AGI). Nevertheless, refundability would generate small increases in marginal tax rates for some moderate-income taxpayers. Making the CDCC permanently refundable

would increase government spending each year by about \$800 million, or 21 percent of CDCC spending during the late 2010s.

How Does the CDCC Work?

Congress implemented the CDCC in 1976 and expanded it in 1981 and 2001. The latter expansion took effect in 2003, and between 2003 and 2020, households were able to claim up to \$3,000 worth of child care expenses per year for each of up to two children younger than 13. Such households could receive a tax credit worth up to

If the CDCC were made permanently refundable, low-income taxpayers would receive larger benefits.

35 percent of those expenses, up to \$1,050 per child. Beginning at \$15,000 in AGI, the benefit rate decreased by 1 percentage point for each additional \$2,000 until it remained at 20 percent for those with \$43,000 or more in AGI, who could receive up to \$600 per child in benefits. The CDCC, however, was nonrefundable, so taxpayers without positive tax liability were ineligible.

Moreover, CDCC claimants must work to qualify for benefits, including both spouses among married taxpayers filing jointly. Additionally, if either spouse's earnings are less than child care expenditures, the CDCC is capped by the pay of the lower-earning spouse. Almost any child care expenditures are eligible for the credit, except care provided by a noncustodial parent, but to claim the credit, taxpayers must list their earnings, child care expenditures, and child care providers' tax identification or Social Security numbers.

How Would Permanent Refundability Affect CDCC Eligibility and Benefits?

Nonrefundability generates a difference between statutory and

ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

- *The Child and Dependent Care Credit (CDCC) subsidizes child care costs for working families.*
- *In 2021, the CDCC was made temporarily refundable, so even families with no positive tax liability after other deductions could benefit.*
- *If refundability were made permanent, around 5 percent of single parents would gain eligibility and receive on average over \$1,000 per year in benefits.*
- *Permanent refundability would also lead to large increases in eligibility among Black and Hispanic households.*
- *Some moderate-income taxpayers would experience small increases in marginal tax rates.*

Making the Child Care Tax Credit Permanently Refundable Could Benefit Low-Income Families

actual benefits received. In Figure 1, I compare maximum effective CDCC benefits with and without refundability as of 2020.¹ Taxpayers’ incomes must exceed the tax filing threshold of \$18,650 to be eligible for nonrefundable benefits. For taxpayers with incomes above this threshold, nonrefundable benefits (red lines) increase with income before reaching peaks of about \$860 at \$27,600 in AGI for households with one eligible child and \$1,530 at \$34,100 in AGI for households with two or more eligible children. Benefits then decrease until they plateau at \$600 per child for taxpayers with \$43,000 or more in income.

Figure 1 also shows that if the CDCC were made permanently refundable (blue lines), low-income taxpayers would receive larger benefits. For very-low-income taxpayers, refundable benefits increase as income increases and then hold steady at \$1,050 per child at incomes up to

\$15,000. For taxpayers with AGI above \$15,000, refundable benefits steadily fall as income increases until they converge with nonrefundable benefits. Hence, making the CDCC permanently refundable would increase generosity among low-income taxpayers without affecting benefits for those with higher incomes.

How Would Permanent Refundability Affect Work Decisions?

As a subsidy for child care, CDCC benefits encourage child care spending and effectively increase wages net of child care costs. Since all parents must work to receive benefits, increases in benefits promote labor force participation. However, the CDCC generates complex work hours incentives. To examine how making the CDCC permanently refundable would affect work hours, I compare marginal tax rates with respect to income—the taxes that parents would owe on an additional dollar of income—with

and without refundability. When marginal tax rates increase, the value of an additional dollar of earnings falls, which discourages parents from working more.

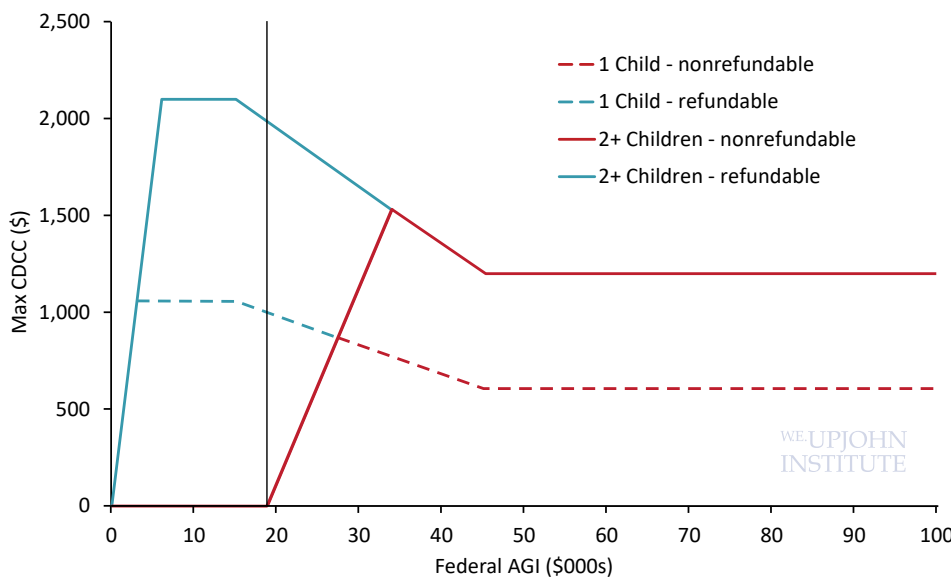
Figure 2 displays these marginal tax rates for households with the maximum qualifying child care expenditures as of 2020.² Panel A, which shows marginal tax rates for single parents with one eligible child, indicates that making the CDCC permanently refundable would decrease marginal tax rates by 35 percentage points for those with less than \$3,000 in AGI. (Marginal tax rates are already negative in this range, implying that an additional dollar of earnings is worth *more* than a dollar because of the credit.) Refundability would not affect marginal tax rates for single parents between incomes of \$3,000 and \$15,000, but it would increase rates by 1.5 percentage points between incomes of \$15,000 and \$25,000 and by 11.5 percentage points between incomes of \$25,000 and \$33,000.

Marginal tax rates for married parents with two eligible children, depicted in Panel B of Figure 2, exhibit a similar pattern. Thus, a permanently refundable CDCC would reduce marginal tax rates for households with very low incomes, incentivizing increases in their work hours, but it would increase marginal tax rates for households with low to moderate incomes, discouraging their work hours.

How Would Permanent Refundability Affect Different Families?

As refundability has different impacts on tax rates across the income distribution, which households would likely benefit from a permanently refundable CDCC? To answer the question, I simulate impacts of refundability, drawing on the 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation for taxpayer characteristics and child care spending

Figure 1 Maximum Federal CDCC Benefits by Federal AGI



NOTE: The figure shows expected federal CDCC benefits for households with one (dashed line) or two or more (solid line) eligible children as of 2020. The maximum credit with refundability is shown in blue and without refundability is shown in red.

SOURCE: Author’s calculations using federal tax forms.

among households with children younger than 13. The data allow me to estimate CDCC eligibility rates by family structure and race and observe how permanent refundability would affect CDCC benefits and marginal tax rates across households that face different child care and labor supply incentives.

I find that 15 percent of single parents and 19 percent of married parents are eligible for nonrefundable CDCC benefits. About 5 percent of single parents have incomes too low to qualify for the nonrefundable benefits but would become eligible if the credit were made permanently refundable. Another 56 percent of single parents would gain eligibility if refundability led them to pay for child care. The remaining 25 percent of single parents do not work and have incomes too low to qualify for the nonrefundable CDCC. Among married parents, 10 percent have incomes too low to qualify for the nonrefundable CDCC, but virtually none of these households pay for child care and therefore would remain ineligible under a refundable credit. Most married parents are ineligible for the CDCC because they do not pay for child care or one of the parents does not work.

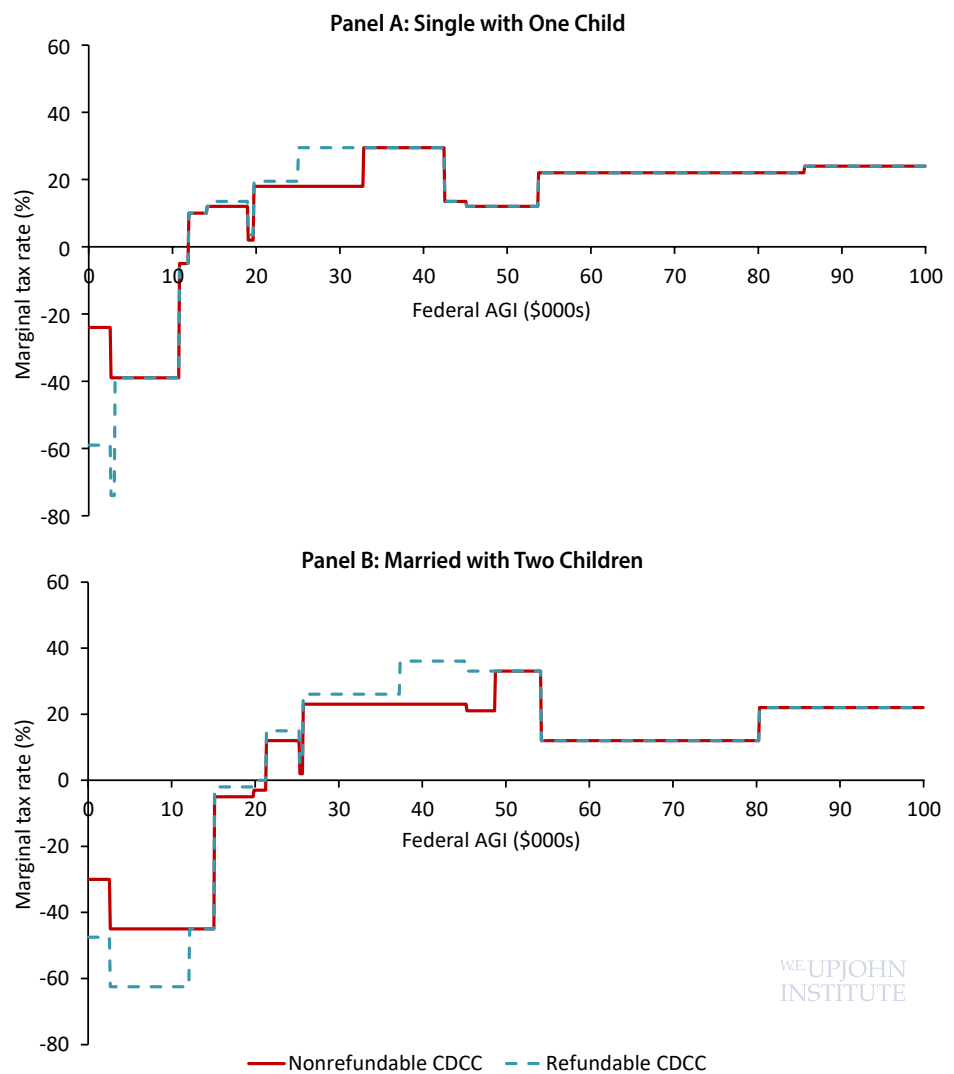
CDCC eligibility rates also vary by parents' race and ethnicity. Black and Hispanic households, which tend to have lower incomes, are less likely than white households to be eligible for the nonrefundable CDCC. Whereas 21 percent of white households are eligible, only 17 percent of Black households and 13 percent of Hispanic households are eligible. Making the CDCC permanently refundable would increase eligibility by about 3 percentage points among Black households, by about 2 percentage points among Hispanic households, and by about 1 percentage point among white households. Another 14 percent of Black households, 8 percent of Hispanic households, and 7 percent of white households have incomes too

low to qualify for the nonrefundable CDCC but would become eligible if refundability led them to pay for child care. These results suggest permanent CDCC refundability would decrease eligibility gaps between whites and underrepresented groups.

Permanent refundability would also change benefit amounts for different families. Among single parents who work and already pay for child care,

23 percent are ineligible for the nonrefundable CDCC, another 23 percent fall in the phase-in region of the CDCC, where benefits increase as income rises, and the remaining 54 percent fall in the phase-out/plateau region of the credit, where benefits decrease or remain constant as income rises. Households in the ineligible and phase-in regions on average spend about \$6,000 and \$11,000 per year,

Figure 2 Marginal Tax Rates for Different Families by CDCC Refundability



NOTE: The figure shows marginal tax rates with respect to AGI under the federal CDCC, Child Tax Credit, Earned Income Tax Credit, and federal individual income tax schedule as of 2020, assuming the CDCC is nonrefundable or refundable.

SOURCE: Author's calculations using TAXSIM and federal tax forms.

respectively, on child care. If the CDCC were made permanently refundable, average annual benefits would increase from \$0 to \$1,037 in the ineligible region and from \$617 to \$1,249 in the phase-in region. These increases are substantial: in the ineligible region, the increase constitutes 18 percent of existing child care spending and 10 percent of AGI. In the phase-in region, it constitutes 6 percent of child care spending and 3 percent of AGI.

These benefit increases also affect marginal tax rates. In the ineligible region, the average marginal tax rate on an additional dollar of income would fall by 5 percentage points under refundability, while in the phase-in and phase-out/plateau regions it would rise by about 2 percentage points. However, the benefits also subsidize the cost of child care, effectively

making it cheaper. For households in the ineligible region, the effective (postsubsidy) cost of an additional dollar of child care spending decreases by 16 percent. In the phase-in and phase-out/plateau regions, the cost decreases by 9 and 4 cents on the dollar, respectively. Thus, moderate-income households have slightly higher marginal tax rates on their incomes offset by cheaper child care costs, with the latter possibly mitigating work disincentives caused by the former.

How Would Permanent Refundability Affect Government Spending?

Finally, CDCC benefit increases under refundability would increase government spending. If all households with benefit increases were to claim the CDCC, making it permanently refundable would increase government

spending annually by about \$800 million, or about 22 percent of total CDCC spending in the late 2010s.

Notes

1. I assume single taxpayers file as head-of-household, married taxpayers file jointly, and all income comes from earnings among very-low-income taxpayers.

2. I assume households do not have older children, all income comes from earnings, and married parents have equal earnings, though results are similar for married parents with unequal earnings.

For additional details, see the working paper at https://research.upjohn.org/up_workingpapers/344.

Gabrielle Pepin is a postdoctoral researcher at the Upjohn Institute.

Inviting Submissions for the 2021 Dissertation Award

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A first prize of \$2,500 is being offered. Up to two honorable mention awards of \$1,000 may also be given.

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Applicants are advised that they will need to supply a copy of their entire dissertation if they are selected as a finalist, and they may apply for the award only once.

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W.E. Upjohn Institute Welcomes Beth Truesdale

The Upjohn Institute is excited to announce that Beth C. Truesdale will be joining its research team this summer.



Currently a research associate at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, Truesdale is a

sociologist specializing in issues of income inequality and how the changing nature of work affects worker wellbeing and retirement decisions. A Rhodes Scholar, Truesdale earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Oxford before earning her doctorate in sociology from Harvard University.

Upjohn Institute President Michael Horrigan lauded the expertise and perspective Truesdale brings to the Institute. "Her focal areas and her experience with case studies, ethnographic research, and public policy make Beth a wonderful complement to other Institute researchers and will help us serve our mission of promoting employment strategies and good jobs for all," Horrigan said.

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