



# **Underrepresented Americans: How The Pandemic Rooted Societal Barriers and Derailed Career Trajectories**

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## **Abstract**

The U.S. labor market experienced a period of unprecedented irregularities with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the effects of this volatile situation were ubiquitous in all sectors of the population, the impact on American workers' job market and career trajectories varied across race, ethnicity, and socio-economic groups. The purpose of this white paper is twofold: a) to explore changes in career trajectories of underrepresented populations from 2021 through 2023 and b) to explore barriers experienced by these groups during this period. The assertions made in this paper were supported by data extracted from three surveys conducted by the University of Phoenix Career Institute in January 2021 through 2023. The results of the surveys revealed that people of color and workers from different ethnic backgrounds, including women and Americans making under \$50 K a year, experienced drastic career derailment compared to their counterparts. Secondly, deep-rooted societal roadblocks, such as financial insecurity, perceived deficiencies in job preparedness to face the future job market, and a decline in emotional well-being, were exacerbated for this population stratum during the pandemic.

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## Introduction

Pandemics such as COVID-19 have occurred throughout history. The Black Death, Ebola, Cholera, and the Spanish Flu were some of the deadliest pandemics experienced by humanity (Sampath et al., 2021). Pandemics cause a profound disruption to countries and people from all walks of life. However, inequalities manifest disproportionately in health and economic distress in underrepresented population sectors (Feigenbaum et al., 2019).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.), underrepresented communities are hit harder as policies and practices deprive individuals of opportunities based on income, ethnicity, or racial background; for example, Khatana and Groeneveld (2020) explained that during the H1N1 influenza pandemic, minorities living in dense areas were disproportionately affected. In addition, Pellowski et al. (2013) noted that HIV has been more prevalent in poor communities and communities of color in the last 30 years. According to Wright and Merritt (2020), the COVID-19 virus killed African Americans at a higher rate than any other group.

Data collected during COVID-19, from 2021 through 2023, by the Career Institute at the University of Phoenix revealed how the pandemic aggravated the economic distress among underrepresented populations, generating personal strain and job uncertainty for women, people of color, and low socio-economic sectors of the American workforce. Over the years, underrepresented populations have made invaluable contributions to the nation's workforce (Weeks, 2017) and have had a critical role in advancing the U.S. economy. Hence, learning about the career path of this population sector and the barriers these groups encountered may help policymakers prevent future detrimental outcomes for the U.S. economy and the American people. Therefore, the following research questions are oriented toward ascertaining how career

trajectories among underrepresented groups shifted during the pandemic, including barriers faced by this critical sector of the American workforce:

- RQ1- What can be learned about underrepresented American workers' career trajectories during the pandemic from 2021 through 2023?
- RQ2- What barriers were experienced by underrepresented working Americans during this period?

### **Underrepresented Working Americans: Career Trajectories During the Pandemic**

According to the Career Institute (2021, 2022, 2023), Americans did not see a clear path for advancing their careers as the pandemic ravaged the labor market and disrupted the flow of the American economy, and by 2022, 77% of Americans felt prepared to search for a new job or were actively looking for one (52%). In 2023, 66% of Americans perceived their jobs as unfitting. Among those claiming significant career shifts were underrepresented American workers. Perceived career derailment and negative feelings about career advancement were two critical indicators surveyed by the University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index, thus spotlighting these disparities. Table 1 summarizes data comparing career trajectory perceptions by race and socio-economic group from 2021 to 2023.

**Table 1**

*Career Trajectory Path of Underrepresented Working Americans Compared to Counterparts From 2021 Through 2023*

Year	Population	Indicators	Percentage
2021	Latinx	Perceived Career Derailment	38%
	White		31%
	Black		48%
2022	Latinx		47%
	Asians		41%
	White		36%
2023	Women	Negative Feelings About Career Advancement	43%
	Men		34%
	Latinx		35%
	Black		31%
	Under 50K		40%
2023	\$150 K	32%	
	White	40%	

**Note:** Table 1 shows how the pandemic affected underrepresented Americans' careers compared to their counterparts from 2021 to 2023. Data was extracted from the Career Institute (2021, 2022, 2023).

## **Barriers Experienced by Underrepresented Workers**

The past three years have been onerous for all Americans. However, data from the University of Phoenix Career Institute (2021, 2022, 2023) showed that vicissitudes were pervasive in American society and excessively affected the lives and careers of women, Black Americans, Latinx, Asians, and people making less than \$50K a year. Some of the barriers faced by these workers took a turn for the worse as the brunt of the pandemic precipitated financial insecurity, a perceived deficiency of job preparedness to face the future, and a decline in emotional well-being.

### **Financial Insecurity Barriers**

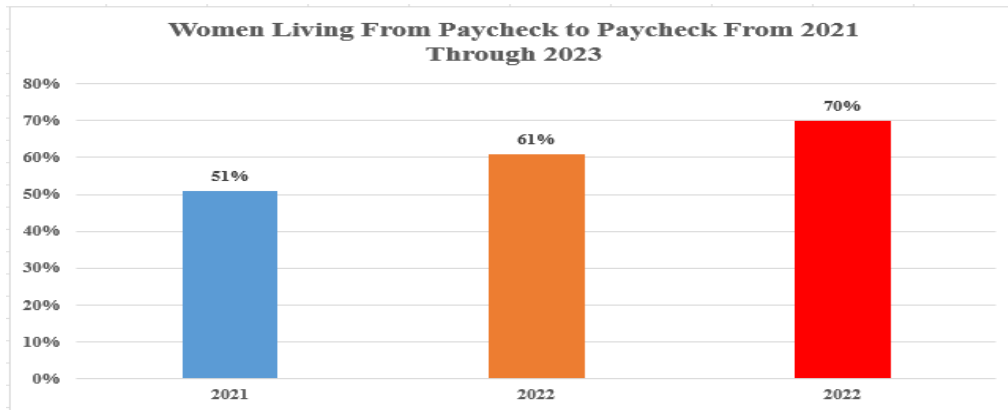
According to Wapner (2020), 20 million people lost their jobs in the U.S. from February to May 2020 during the first wave of the Coronavirus, resulting in a whopping 5.4 million without health insurance. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) reported that during the pandemic, the overall unemployment rate was the highest for Black Americans (8.6%), followed by Latinx (6.8%), and Asians (5%). White counterparts, with an unemployment rate of 4.7%, showed the lowest numbers.

While the job loss was a cause of financial insecurity, even before the pandemic, many hourly-paid workers in the U.S. were worried about their finances. According to Henwood (2023), on many occasions, workers went to work sick or did not attend important family events to ensure they had their basic needs covered. In 2021, almost one year into the COVID-19, more women (51%) than men (36%), and more Black Americans (61%) and Latinx (49%) than Whites (40%) lived paycheck to paycheck (Career Institute, 2021). It is important to note that American women reporting financial turmoil, such as living paycheck to paycheck, was the highest among

all sectors of the underrepresented American workforce from 2021 to 2023 (Career Institute, 2022, 2023). See Figure 1.

**Figure 1.**

*The Number of American Women Living Paycheck to Paycheck Increased from 2021 through 2023*



**Note:** Figure 1 represents the increased financial barriers women have experienced since 2021, living paycheck to paycheck until 2023 (Career Institute, 2021, 2022, 2023).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), working women, an underrepresented group of the American workforce, experienced the worst financial effects of the COVID-19 recession on many fronts during the pandemic. For instance, the economic downturn significantly affected industry sectors where women's jobs were more concentrated than men's. Secondly, with schools and daycare centers closing, many women had to stay home to care for their children (The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The lack of income to pay bills and the rising cost of living sent women into financial disaster. Consequently, 50% of women expressed being more overpowered by debt than men (43%) (Career Institute, 2023). Women were also the highest group experiencing dissatisfaction with salaries (Career Institute, 2023).

**Perceived Deficiency in Job Preparedness to Face the Future**

In 2021, employees were concerned about upskilling as technology and discoveries continuously transformed the workplace (Career Institute, 2021). According to Minahan (2021),

82% of American workers understood the need to hone or acquire new skills to sustain a competitive edge in the global job market. Mentoring is at the vanguard of learning at work and has been the vehicle for handing down knowledge for centuries (Darwin, 2000). Mentoring has also been associated with career advancement and higher salaries. Darwin (2000) also explained that mentoring may be linked with recycling power within workplace relationships; hence, women and racial minorities may be excluded or receive fewer mentoring opportunities in organizations primarily dominated by men or racial counterparts (Darwin, 2000). When surveyed by the University of Phoenix in 2023, Black Americans and people earning under \$50K a year were among the least likely to have a professional mentor (Career Institute, 2023).

Significantly, employees' and employers' perspectives regarding upskilling opportunities are incongruent. In 2023, data showed that 89 % of employers perceived themselves as providing these opportunities for employees. On the other hand, only 61% of workers agreed that employers provided frequent opportunities for upskilling and mentoring. The disparities are steeper among Blacks (74%) and Latinx (64%), as they were less likely to identify their employers as a source of enhancing workplace skills (Career Institute, 2023).

### **Decline in Emotional Well-Being**

Emotional barriers manifested in low self-confidence, fear of change, low motivation, and hopelessness (Career Institute, 2021, 2022, 2023). Demographic data showed that while many Americans worried about losing their jobs due to the state of the economy, women, Blacks, Latinx, Asian Americans, younger generations, and people making under \$50K a year exhibited significant distress, leading to a decline in mental health and burnout. Consequently, the percentage of Americans seeking mental health resources to help manage their work-related stress increased from 33% in 2022 to 39% in 2023 (Career Institute, 2023). Notably, women



(77%) felt more stressed about their jobs, and 42% sought mental health resources to cope (Career Institute, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

Underrepresented populations have faced many challenges during the course and in the aftershock of the COVID-19 pandemic. Career trajectories were derailed, and underrepresented Americans felt it with great force. Furthermore, disparities among underserved working Americans accentuated the financial, educational, and emotional barriers affecting poor Americans, people of color, and women. Addressing these disparities promotes transparency and fosters a more resilient workforce better equipped to navigate the uncertainties of the post-pandemic world. Employers and society must empower all individuals to create an inclusive and harmonious work environment.

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