

## *Changes in US Parents' Domestic Labor During the Early Days of the COVID-19 Pandemic\**

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Stay-at-home orders and the removal of care and domestic supports during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted US parents' work and family lives. Although much is known about changes in US parents' paid labor arrangements, the evidence regarding changes in unpaid domestic labor has been largely anecdotal. This study uses novel data from 1,025 US parents in different-sex partnerships to provide a descriptive overview of changes in mothers' and fathers' participation in, and division of, housework and childcare from March 2020 to the early days of the pandemic (late April 2020). Findings show an overall increase in domestic responsibilities for mothers who were already doing most of the household labor. Still, both mothers and fathers report a general shift toward more egalitarian divisions of household labor, driven by increases in fathers' contributions. The shift toward more egalitarian sharing of domestic labor is observed across demographic groups and across types of domestic tasks. Consistent with findings from other countries, egalitarian divisions of domestic labor increased among U.S. parents during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mothers, nonetheless, report retaining primary responsibility for domestic labor in the majority of families.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization 2021). Due to state stay-at-home orders, the pandemic profoundly transformed the lives of nearly every American household. The closings of schools, childcare centers, and businesses providing domestic services removed important supports for parents' labor force participation. Understanding shifts in the division of labor may illuminate the consequences of the pandemic for couples' well-being, as the division of domestic labor is central to relationship quality and stability (Carlson, Hanson and Fitzroy 2016; Carlson, Miller, and Sassler 2018; Frisco and Williams 2003). Although much is known about changes in US parents' paid labor arrangements, the pandemic may impact unpaid domestic labor differently, given the multidimensionality of gender inequality (Dernberger and Pepin 2020; England 2010; Pepin and Cotter 2018).

The social and economic conditions of the pandemic suggest dual possibilities regarding changes in men's and women's time in, and division of,

domestic labor. On the one hand, the pandemic may exacerbate gender inequalities within US families. Mothers who already disproportionately bear domestic burdens (Berk 1985; Blair and Lichter 1991; Pew Research Center 2015; Yavorsky, Kamp-Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015) may experience worsening inequality as additional domestic responsibilities have been thrust onto families. Early research showed US women were more likely than men to be laid off or to reduce work hours during the pandemic (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020a, 2020b; Collins et al. 2020), raising concerns that unequal divisions of domestic labor contributed to women's exit from the labor force.

On the other hand, other empirical evidence shows that mothers and fathers' exits from the labor force and a reduction of work hours during the pandemic have been comparable (Kochhar 2020). Research from Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, and the Netherlands suggests that although domestic responsibilities increased during the pandemic—and women are consequently spending more time in domestic tasks—in many instances domestic divisions of labor became more equal during the early months of the pandemic (Chung et al. 2020; Craig and Churchill 2020; Farré et al. 2020; Miller 2020; Shafer et al. 2020; Yerkes et al. 2020a). The United States differs from these other nations, however, in that lockdown measures to curtail coronavirus spread were variable across states and federal work-family supports are historically less extensive and remained limited during the pandemic (Gornick and Meyers 2003; Hallas et al. 2020). The pandemic, nonetheless, may be an opportunity for US fathers to act on their stated desires to be more engaged at home (Dermott 2008; Miller 2010), removing workplace barriers (e.g., lack of paid leave, inability to telecommute) often cited as key impediments to US fathers' domestic involvement (Boston College Center for Work and Family 2019; Lenhart, Swenson, and Schulte 2019).

Relying on novel survey data collected in April 2020 from 1,025 US parents living with a different-sex partner, we assess shifts in parents' divisions of domestic labor and time spent doing domestic work since the beginning of the pandemic. We compare mothers' and fathers' reports of change in domestic labor and examine whether shifts vary across demographic groups. By studying changes in domestic arrangements during the early days of the pandemic, this study provides an important baseline for understanding the consequences of the pandemic in the United States and for illuminating the potential consequences of the pandemic for parents' well-being long-term.

## **Background**

### ***Exacerbating Gender Inequality During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Numerous conditions during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest increasing inequality in the gendered division of domestic labor. First,

the increase in domestic labor itself is likely to exacerbate gender inequalities at home given that domestic labor is conventionally relegated to women. Gender is the primary determinant of who does the domestic labor among different-sex couples (Berk 1985). According to a gender structure perspective (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 1999), gender organizes our social lives by controlling access to resources and opportunities, while shaping cultural interpretations of our behavior. Hegemonic cultural ideals regarding appropriate gender behavior constitute an important part of the gender structure (Goffman 2009 [1963]; Thébaud, Kornrich, and Ruppner 2019; West and Zimmerman 1987). Following gender conventions, couples may therefore assume that additional housework and childcare stemming from the pandemic will be shouldered by women. This may be particularly true for tasks that are traditionally considered women's responsibility, such as cooking. For example, demands for meal preparation likely increased early in the pandemic due to restaurant closures, perhaps leading to increased domestic work among mothers.

Second, norms of intensive mothering may lead mothers to select out of the labor force and into remote working positions to attend to children's needs (Blair-Loy 2009; Collins 2019; Stone 2008). Though norms surrounding the gendered division of labor have changed somewhat over the past several decades—for example, fathers are expected to be more involved and engaged with children (Marsiglio and Roy 2012) and US adults more strongly embrace gender egalitarianism in paid work (Demberger and Pepin 2020; Pepin and Cotter 2018)—others remain firmly entrenched. Especially germane to the gendered division of labor during the pandemic is the norm of intensive motherhood (Hays 1998). The child-centric edicts of intensive mothering implore mothers to prioritize their children's development by devoting immense amounts of resources—including time, money, and energy—to raising them. Norms of intensive mothering also entail that mothers, rather than fathers, will be judged for their children's outcomes. Mothers, therefore, may be more likely than fathers to be concerned about the costs of the pandemic for children's education, social well-being, and development and accordingly they may increase their time in domestic labor to compensate. Even in instances where couples reject intensive motherhood and other gender conventions, they may still rely on hegemonic gender norms when situations are unclear, or equality is difficult to achieve (Blaisure and Allen 1995; Gerson 2010). The anomic and intractable conditions of the pandemic, therefore, may encourage different-sex partners to adhere to conventional gender norms regarding the gendered division of labor during uncertain times. Moreover, pandemic conditions may reinforce conventional gender attitudes that consequently increase mothers' responsibility for domestic labor. Indeed, US adults adopted more conventional attitudes

regarding women's family roles during the pandemic (Mize, Kaufman, and Petts 2021).

A third reason gender inequality may increase during the pandemic is that structural and economic shifts may position mothers to carry the domestic load. Unemployment rates for US women jumped from 4.4% in March 2020 to 16.5% in April, and employed women reduced their time at work during the early days of the pandemic (Collins et al. 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020a). Much of the increase in mothers' unemployment during the early days of the pandemic was the result of female-dominated occupations being more affected by lockdowns (Fuller and Qian 2021). US women are also working from home more often during the pandemic, increasing their available time to complete domestic tasks (Guyot and Sawhill 2020). According to the time availability hypothesis (Stafford, Backman, and Dibona 1977), domestic labor is performed by the partner with the most available time. With more available time compared with fathers, mothers may experience a disproportionate increase in time spent in domestic labor relative to fathers during the pandemic. Mothers' income loss may also lead to greater responsibilities for domestic work at home due to a weakened bargaining position (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Earnings enable some women to pay for market substitutes for domestic work, leading to reduced time in domestic work for themselves and more equal divisions in their partnership (Carlson and Lynch 2017; Gupta 2007). Without the option to outsource domestic labor, employed mothers may see their time and share of domestic work increase.

A final reason the gendered division of domestic labor may become less equal is due to increases in male partners' unemployment. Though they did not fall as steeply, employment and paid work hours also fell for US men during the early months of the pandemic (Collins et al. 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020a, 2020b). Though this suggests an increase in time availability and a potential decrease in relative earnings for men, gender display (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994), and gender deviance neutralization (Greenstein 2000) perspectives suggest reductions in men's domestic labor under these circumstances. Indeed, unemployed men and men who earn less than their partners, spend less time on domestic labor, on average, than their employed partners (Gough and Killewald 2011; Rao 2020). This is because unemployed and financially dependent men may assert their masculinity by refusing domestic labor, and/or women retain responsibility for domestic labor to reduce the gender deviance of their breadwinner status.

Given increases in domestic labor demands, gender norms that prescribe domestic responsibilities to women, and economic conditions that may increase mothers' availability for domestic work and reduce men's willingness to engage domestically, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1*

Parents' divisions of housework and childcare became less equal during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Reducing Gender Inequality During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

There are also reasons to expect that US fathers may increase their time in domestic work during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to more equal sharing of domestic labor. First, beliefs in gender equality have strengthened over the last several decades, and housework engagement is theoretically driven by one's beliefs about domestic roles (Carlson and Lynch 2013; Stafford, Backman, and Dibona 1977). Although recognition of gender discrimination in the public sphere is more widespread than support for egalitarianism in the private sphere (Pepin and Cotter 2018), approximately 70 percent of men and 77 percent of women in the 2018 General Social Survey disagreed with the notion that it is better for men to work and women to tend to the home (NORC 2019; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019). Moreover, consistent with the shifting culture of fatherhood, both men and women widely believe that fathers should be as involved in the care of children as mothers (Churchill and Craig 2021; Marsiglio and Roy 2012).

Still, different-sex couples struggle to achieve egalitarian domestic arrangements. This is often attributed to the persistence of structural barriers, such as a lack of family-friendly workplace policies (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015) and to an ideal worker culture of universal availability that pushes men out of the home and women into it (Collins 2019). Many fathers express desires to be more engaged parents and partners, but they lack supportive workplace policies that would enable them to be more engaged at home (Boston College Center for Work and Family 2019; Lenhart et al. 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic may potentially lift some of these barriers due to policy changes that have increased job flexibility and access to paid leave. Recent research indicates that fathers who telecommute from home, even if only occasionally, do more childcare than fathers who do not work from home (Carlson et al. 2021; Holmes et al. 2020; Lyttleton, Zang, and Musick 2020). Taking longer family leave is also associated with greater father involvement in childcare and housework (Bünning 2015; Petts and Knoester 2018). Passed in late March, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) provides employees of covered employers (i.e., public and private employers with fewer than 500 employees) with up to two weeks emergency paid sick leave and up to 10 weeks of emergency paid family and medical leave (U.S. Department of Labor 2020). Notably, workers can use this policy to take leave to care for a child whose school

or childcare center has closed due to the pandemic. As such, increased work-family supports for fathers may increase their time in, and shares of, domestic labor.

Access to supportive work-family policies suggests two pathways to increasing fathers' domestic contributions during the pandemic. First, fathers who are inclined to contribute domestically due to pre-existing beliefs in gender equality and father involvement may take advantage of access to remote work and paid leave during the pandemic to follow through on their desires (Ewald, Gilbert and Huppertz 2020; Hilbrecht and Lero 2014). Second, fathers' perspectives can be altered when they spend substantial amounts of time at home (Petts and Knoester 2018). Fathers who are exposed to domestic needs due to forced furlough/layoffs and forced remote work may find themselves doing more at home even if they previously did not embrace domestic responsibilities (Shafer, Milkie, and Scheibling 2020). For example, compared with fathers who do not work from home, fathers who work from home do more childcare even on days they do not work from home (Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2021). Similarly, fathers who take paternity leave increase their contributions to domestic labor even after leave ends (Bünning 2015; Petts and Knoester 2018). Men may be particularly likely to increase their contributions to domestic labor during times of crisis. Even though male-dominated occupations were hit worst during the Great Recession (2007–2009) in the US (Goodman and Mance 2011), men increased their domestic contributions (Berik and Kongar 2013). This suggests that time availability may supersede gender norms when families face emergencies.

Lastly, more egalitarian divisions of domestic labor may stem from the way pandemic lockdowns affected the needs for certain domestic tasks. Some tasks that are significant contributors to parents' time commitments most certainly increased in the early months of the pandemic, whereas others decreased. Though routine housework and childcare tasks remain largely the responsibility of mothers, research suggests some variation in individual task sharing. Among routine housework tasks, mothers are more likely to be solely responsible for cooking, cleaning, and laundry whereas fathers are more likely to engage in dishwashing and shopping (Carlson, Miller, and Sassler 2018). Regarding childcare, mothers are more likely to be responsible for physical care and managing children's lives while fathers are more likely to spend time interacting and playing with children (Kotila, Schoppe-Sullivan, and Kamp Dush 2013; Raley et al. 2012). Due to lockdowns, laundry and shopping may be greatly reduced during the pandemic. Managing children's schedules, home-schooling aside, may become less time consuming, while spending time with children may become more so. Reductions in mothers' time in housework and childcare due to the elimination of household and childcare management tasks

paired with increases in fathers' time in interactive childcare may contribute to more egalitarian divisions of domestic labor during the pandemic.

In sum, although there are reasons to suspect growing inequality in parents' divisions of domestic labor, valuation of egalitarianism, increases in fathers' time availability, and increases in demand for tasks that fathers are more likely to engage in indicates that fathers' shares of domestic labor may increase during the pandemic. Therefore, we hypothesize:

### ***Hypothesis 2***

Parents' divisions of housework and childcare became more equal during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Data and Methods**

### ***Data***

Data for this study comes from an original sample obtained from Prolific ([www.prolific.co](http://www.prolific.co)), an opt-in platform designed to facilitate panel-based surveys. Prolific was intentionally built for scientific research and its samples are a substantial improvement over other types of non-probability samples (e.g., convenience and snowball sampling). Prolific elicits panelists' demographic characteristics prior to granting eligibility to participate on the platform, decreasing contamination of sample selection stemming from dishonest participants (Palan and Schitter 2018). Samples from Prolific are more diverse than participants from MTurk and the data quality is comparable, and in some ways preferable (Peer et al. 2017), and data obtained from panel-based samples tend to be fairly representative of those with regular Internet access (Tourangeau, Conrad, and Cooper 2013).

We obtained a sample of 1,207 respondents from Prolific that was restricted to parents in the United States who resided with a spouse or partner and a biological child. Data collection took place in late April 2020, approximately one month after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. We oversampled men, Black people, individuals who did not complete college, and people who identify as conservative to increase the diversity of our sample. After employing data quality checks to identify respondents who did not complete most of the survey, and respondents who did not pass the attention filters, our sample was reduced to 1,157 respondents (i.e., 4% of initial respondents were removed due to data quality issues). For this study, we excluded respondents who identified as a gender other than male or female ( $N = 8$ ) and respondents who reported being in a same-sex relationship

( $N = 86$ ) due to the focus on gender differences in this study. After these restrictions, our analytic sample consisted of 1,060 respondents. Listwise deletion of the small amount of missing values in our data results in a final sample size of 1,025 parents who reside with a different-sex spouse/partner and child.

To account for demographic variation potentially biasing our sample, all results are weighted using estimates from the April 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) to be representative of US parents who reside with a partner and child based on parent's gender, age, and race/ethnicity. We also compared our sample with other data sources to assess sample representativeness. Our sample is comparable with national estimates for different-sex couples with children at home across numerous dimensions.<sup>1</sup> Descriptive statistics for the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Tables S1 and S2 and Figure S1.

### *Division of Domestic Labor*

Respondents were asked to report on the division of numerous domestic tasks between themselves and their partners (options of  $0 = I$  do it all,  $1 = I$  do more of it,  $2 = we$  share it equally,  $3 = my$  partner does more of it,  $4 = my$  partner does it all) both *before* and *during* the pandemic. Additionally, respondents also reported on how their time, and their partners' time, in domestic tasks changed since the start of the pandemic (options of  $-2 = doing$  much less,  $-1 = doing$  somewhat less,  $0 = no$  change,  $1 = doing$  somewhat more,  $2 = doing$  much more). Measures of parents' domestic labor are identical to those used in other international studies assessing change during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Shafer et al. 2020). Assessments of housework and childcare focused on routine tasks since they are the most time consuming and central to couples' relationship quality (Blair and Lichter 1991; Carlson et al. 2018; Craig 2006; Hochschild and Machung 1989).

For housework, respondents reported on each of the following routine tasks: preparing and cooking meals, laundry, shopping for groceries and other household needs, washing dishes, and house cleaning. For childcare, respondents were asked to report on behavior specific to their youngest child. For parents of younger children (younger than age 6), respondents reported on each of the following: physical care (e.g., bathing, feeding, dressing), talking/listening to child, looking after child, putting child to bed, reading, playing, organizing, and enforcing rules. Parents of older children (ages 6–17), reported on talking/listening to child, monitoring, attending events, reading, playing, organizing, enforcing rules, picking up/dropping off, and helping with homework. Notably, our focus on routine childcare does not include all tasks associated with the virtual homeschooling that took place early in the pandemic, such as time spent



creating or finding learning content. However, it does capture time spent monitoring children and helping with homework (i.e., school learning assignments).

For our analyses, we report both on individual tasks as well as summary measures of housework and childcare that combine information on all tasks. Data are individual level, not couple level. As such, respondents reported on both their own behavior and their partner's behavior. To construct measures for parents' divisions of housework and childcare, we first create gendered indicators of the relative division of housework and childcare (i.e., 0 = *mother does it all*, 1 = *mother does more of it*, 2 = *shared equally*, 3 = *father does more of it*, 4 = *father does all of it*). We then create mean scales ranging from 0 to 4 to indicate the division of labor both *before* and *during* the pandemic, and produce categories for *mother does majority (60% or more)*, *shared equally (between 40%–60%, based on scale score between 1.6 and 2.4 out of 4)*, or *father does majority (60% or more)*. Second, we use information on how time spent in domestic labor has changed to create summary measures for average change in housework and childcare. Scores on individual tasks are averaged to create a mean score ranging from  $-2$  (*doing much less*) to  $2$  (*doing much more*), with 0 equaling no change. From the mean change score, three dichotomous variables are created: *father/mother doing more* (mean score of  $.5$  or higher), *father/mother no change* (mean score between  $-.5$  and  $.5$ ), *father/mother doing less* (mean score of  $-.5$  or lower).

### **Analytic Strategy**

Our primary aim is to provide a descriptive overview of how parents' time in, and division of, domestic labor has changed since the beginning of the pandemic. We report estimates from mothers and fathers separately, as survey respondents may provide biased estimates of their own and their partners' time in domestic tasks (Bianchi et al. 2000; Lee and Waite 2005; Press and Townsley 1998; Yavorsky et al. 2015). Moreover, gender discrepancies in partners' reports of domestic arrangements in surveys, especially regarding men's time in domestic labor, are well documented (Kamo 2000; Lee and Waite 2005; Milkie et al. 2002; Yavorsky et al. 2015). This includes research on domestic labor during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shafer et al. 2020). Thus, presenting estimates from both mothers' and fathers' reports provide greater transparency in regard to potential biases.

We first provide estimates of parents' divisions of housework and childcare before and during the pandemic (Table 1 and Figure 1). Next, we show changes in the divisions of specific housework and childcare tasks (Figure 2). Third, we provide estimates for changes in mothers' and fathers' time in housework and childcare (Table 2 and Figure 3). We then descriptively examine how changes in parents' time spent in domestic labor are associated with shifts

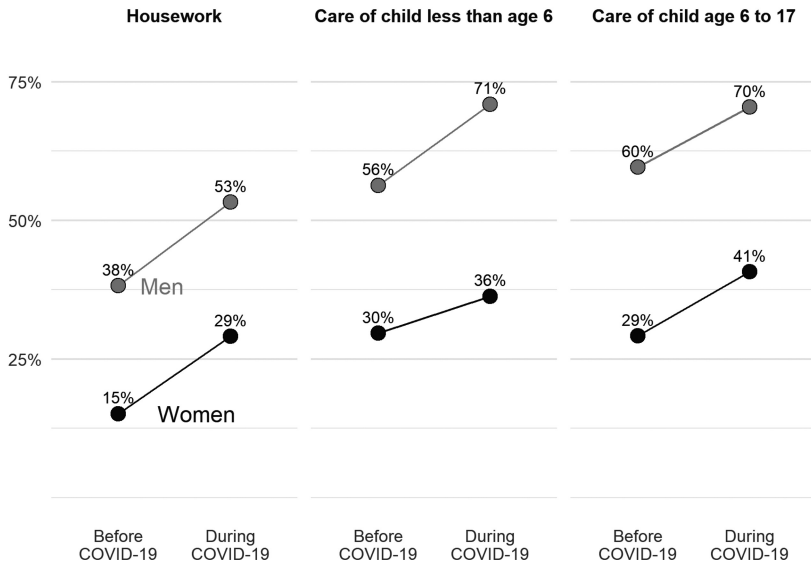
**Table 1 Parents' Reports of Divisions of Housework and Childcare Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic**

	Mother does most		Shared equally		Father does most	
	Before (%)	During (%)	Before (%)	During (%)	Before (%)	During (%)
<b>Fathers' reports</b>						
Division of housework	47.6	30.1***	38.2	53.3***	14.2	16.6
Division of care for children less than age 6	37.7	17.8***	56.3	71.0***	6.0	11.2
Division of care for children age 6 to age 17	28.8	15.4**	59.6	70.4*	11.6	15.4
<b>Mothers' reports</b>						
Division of housework	82.2	67.4***	15.1	29.1***	2.7	3.6
Division of care for children less than age 6	69.8	59.7***	29.7	36.3 <sup>†</sup>	0.5	4.0
Division of care for children age 6 to age 17	69.0	55.3***	29.2	40.7**	1.8	3.9

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; asterisks indicate proportion is significantly different compared to before pandemic.

Percent of parents who say they 'share \_\_\_\_\_ equally'

About 1 month before and after COVID-19 restrictions



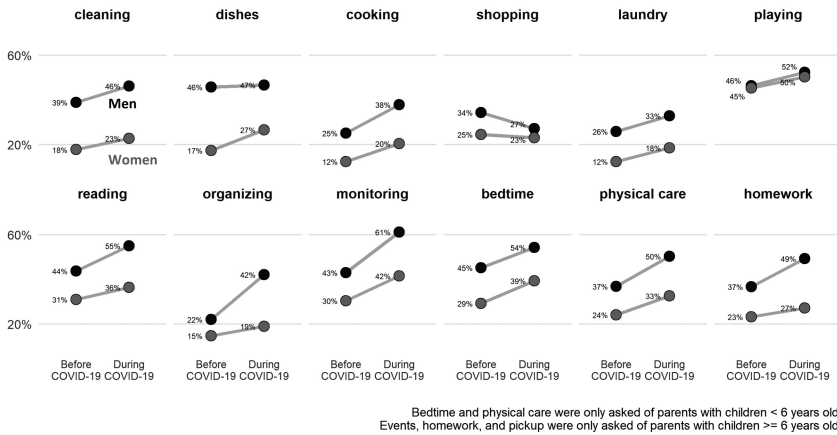
**Figure 1** Egalitarian Divisions of Domestic Labor Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

toward egalitarian divisions of domestic labor since the beginning of the pandemic (Figure 4).

**Results**

According to both mothers' and fathers' reports, the percentage of couples equally sharing housework and childcare responsibilities increased during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 1 and Figure 1). This pattern is observed across a wide range of sociodemographic characteristics (see Tables S1 and S2 and Figure S1). Thirty-eight percent of fathers' report sharing housework equally with their partners prior to the pandemic compared with 53% during the early days of the pandemic. The increase in couples equally sharing housework coincides with a decrease in conventional housework arrangements, in which mothers are doing the majority of the housework and childcare. According to fathers, the percentage of couples where mothers performed the majority of housework decreased from 48% before the pandemic to 30% during the pandemic ( $p < .001$ ). Fathers note similar increases in the

Percent of parents who say they 'share \_\_\_\_\_ equally'  
 About 1 month before and after COVID-19 restrictions



**Figure 2** Prevalence of Equal Divisions of Individual Domestic Tasks Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic.

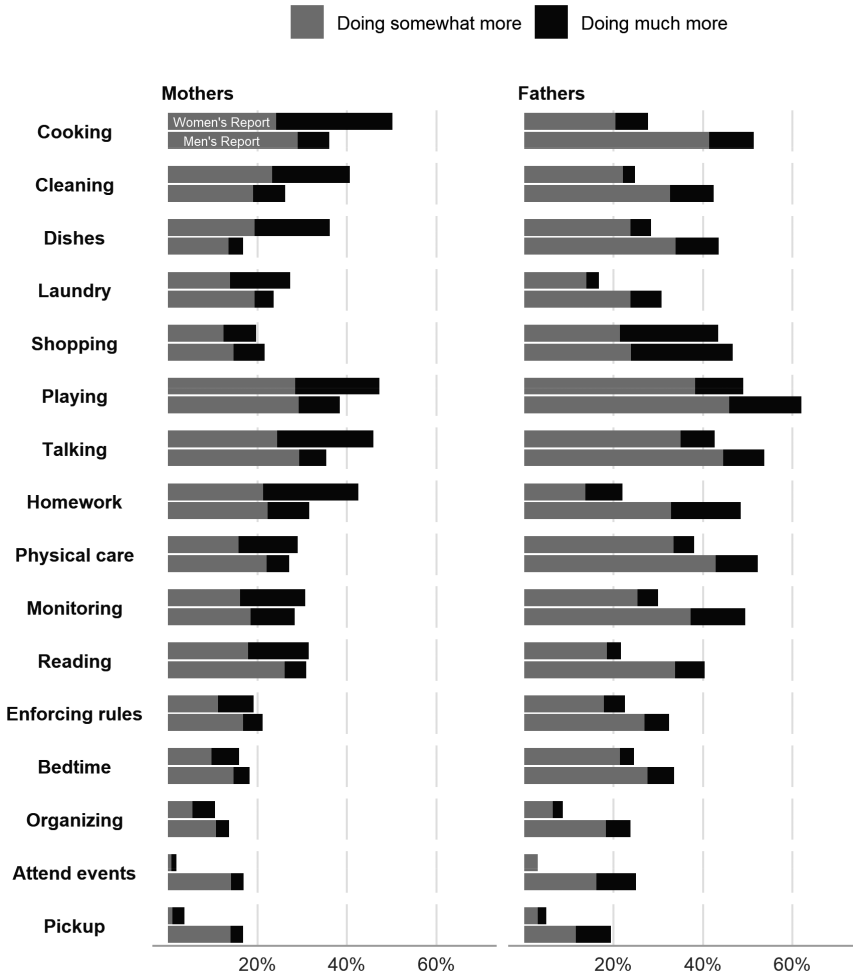
equal sharing of childcare. The percent sharing relatively equally in the care of pre-school children (less than age 6) rose from 56% to 71% ( $p < .001$ ) while the percent sharing care for older children (age 6–17) rose from 60% to 70% ( $p < .001$ ). Conventional childcare arrangements were reduced by about half; mothers doing the majority of care for pre-school-aged children decreased in prevalence from 38% to 18% ( $p < .001$ ) and from 29% to 15% ( $p < .001$ ) for school-aged children.

Although fathers are more likely to report sharing housework and childcare relatively equally than mothers at both time points, evidence of the shift away from conventional to more egalitarian divisions of labor persist when analyses are restricted only to mothers' reports. Mothers report that the percentage of couples who share housework relatively equally rose from 15% before the pandemic to 29% during the pandemic ( $p < .001$ )—a 93% increase—while the percentage of couples where mothers did the majority of housework declined from 82% to 67% ( $p < .001$ ). Similarly, mothers report increases in the percentage of couples who share childcare relatively equally. Among parents of pre-school age children, the percentage who shared childcare equally increased from 30% before the pandemic to 36% during the pandemic ( $p < .10$ ), while the percentage of couples where mothers did the majority of care decreased from 70% to 60% ( $p < .001$ ). Forty-one percent of mothers of school-aged children reported sharing childcare relatively equally with their

**Table 2 Crosstab for Change in Mothers/Fathers Time by Division of Housework/Childcare Before Pandemic**

Source	Fathers			Mothers			Total
	Doing less	No change	Doing more	Doing less	No change	Doing more	
Housework							
Father's report	6.9%	52.0%	41.0%	19.4%	60.2%	20.5%	100.0%
Mother's report	11.4%	62.5%	26.0%	14.9%	55.0%	30.0%	100.0%
Averaged	9.1%	57.1%	33.8%	17.2%	57.7%	25.1%	100.0%
	chi-square <sup>2</sup> = 27.75 (2) ( <i>p</i> < .01)			chi-square <sup>2</sup> = 13.55 (2) ( <i>p</i> = n.s.)			
Childcare							
Father's report	5.6%	50.2%	44.2%	12.1%	61.5%	26.3%	100.0%
Mother's report	9.0%	64.8%	26.2%	13.5%	59.1%	27.3%	100.0%
Averaged	7.2%	57.1%	35.8%	12.8%	60.4%	26.8%	100.0%
	chi-square <sup>2</sup> = 34.51 (2) ( <i>p</i> < .001)			chi-square <sup>2</sup> = 0.71 (2) ( <i>p</i> = n.s.)			

Percent of parents who are doing (somewhat) more \_\_\_\_\_  
 About 1 month after COVID-19 restrictions

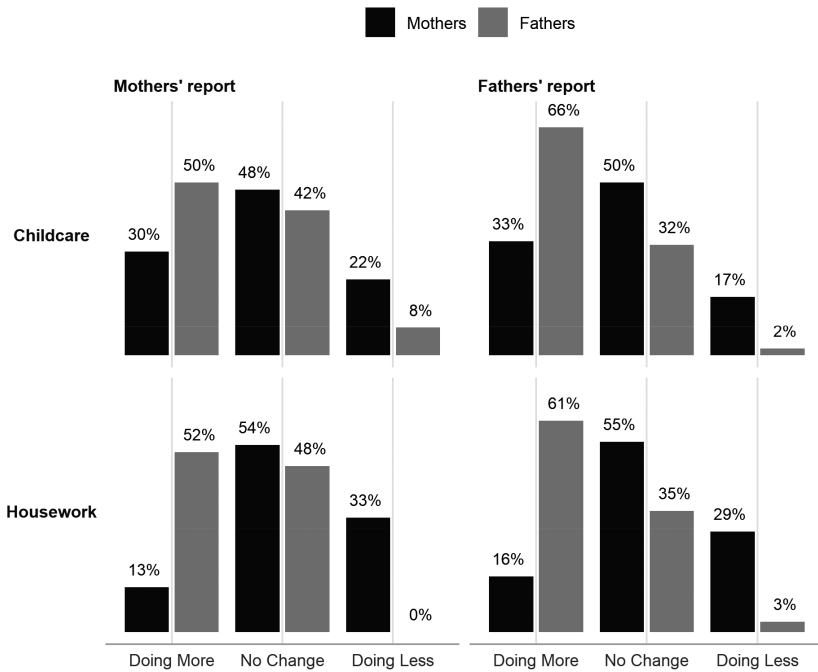


Bedtime and physical care were only asked of parents with children < 6 years old.  
 Events, homework, and pickup were only asked of parents with children >= 6 years old.

**Figure 3** Change in Mothers' and Fathers' Time Spent in Individual Domestic Tasks Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic.

Change in time spent in housework and childcare

Among those with newly egalitarian divisions of labor after COVID-19 restrictions



Childcare consists of tasks for children age 17 and younger.

**Figure 4** Change in Mothers’ and Fathers’ Time in Domestic Labor Among Newly Egalitarian Parents.

partner during the pandemic compared with 29% before the pandemic ( $p < .01$ ), while the percent doing the majority of childcare declined from 69% to 55% ( $p < .001$ ). Given the similarities in trends in childcare of younger and older children from both mothers’ and fathers’ reports, results for childcare are combined for the remaining results.

Shifts away from conventional domestic arrangements and toward more equal sharing were observed across nearly every domestic task examined. As shown in Figure 2, both fathers and mothers report an increase in equal sharing of cleaning, dishwashing, cooking, and laundry. Both mothers and fathers reported cleaning and dishes as the tasks most likely to be shared during the pandemic. Both fathers and mothers reported a more than 50% increase in the

sharing of cooking responsibilities, whereas mothers also reported substantial increases in the sharing of dishwashing (17%–27%; 59% increase) and laundry (12%–18%; 50% increase). Although mothers report less task sharing overall, mothers reported a larger relative increase in task sharing than fathers across all tasks. Among housework tasks, shopping was the only task that did not see growth in egalitarian sharing. This, however, was due to the fact that shopping became more likely to be done solely by fathers during the pandemic (result not shown).

Results in Figure 2 also show similar increases in equal sharing across childcare tasks. According to fathers, bedtime, reading, and monitoring children were the tasks most likely to be shared during the pandemic. Among mothers, playing, monitoring, and bedtime were the tasks most often shared equally. Fathers were more likely than mothers to report equal shares of most childcare tasks, however, parents had remarkable agreement on sharing of play responsibilities with kids (52% of fathers and 50% of mothers). Parents' reports of change were fairly consistent, as both mothers and fathers reported between 20% and 33% growth in egalitarian sharing of childcare tasks. Fathers, nonetheless, reported substantially more change in the division of organizing children's activities than mothers.

Although all childcare tasks are relevant to parents' divisions of labor, two areas—monitoring and playing with small children and homework for older children—became especially relevant during the early days of the pandemic due to daycare and school closures. In all instances, mothers and fathers reported increases in the sharing of these tasks, although the increase in helping with homework was most pronounced in fathers' reports. Egalitarian sharing of helping children with homework increased 36% according to fathers compared with only 17% according to mothers' reports. Regarding the monitoring of children, fathers report a 42% increase in equal sharing compared with 40% among mothers.

Because an equal division of household labor can be the product of women doing less, men doing more, or both, we examined changes in men's and women's time in domestic tasks (Table 2 and Figure 3). Table 2 shows changes in mothers' and fathers' performance of housework and childcare. Regardless of parental gender, findings indicate that the majority of parents reported no substantial change in their own or their partners' time spent on housework and childcare during the pandemic. Consistent with past research on men's and women's time use, mothers and fathers generally agree on changes in mothers' performance of domestic labor, but disagreements emerge over changes in fathers' time. Fathers were more likely to report that they were doing more than to report their partners were doing more. In contrast, mothers were as equally likely to report that they were doing more as they were to



report that their partner was doing more. Indeed, while 41% of fathers reported doing more housework themselves, only 20% reported their female partner was doing more. Conversely, 30% of mothers reported doing more housework themselves and 26% also reported their male partner doing more. A similar pattern was found regarding childcare.

In Figure 3, we show the discrepancy in mothers' and fathers' reports about who is doing more of each domestic task. Disagreement in terms of how much more housework fathers are doing is apparent for nearly every housework task except for shopping. The reverse is also true, more mothers report they are spending increased time on each housework task than fathers report about mothers' housework. In terms of childcare, more fathers than mothers report that fathers are doing more homework, monitoring, and reading with children during the pandemic compared with before the pandemic. This is important as homework and playing/monitoring are two areas where time demands may have significantly increased during the pandemic. Forty-eight percent of fathers reported doing more or much more when it came to helping children with homework. Only 22% of mothers said the same for fathers. Conversely, while 42% of mothers reported spending more time helping children with homework, with half spending "much more" time, 32% of fathers said mothers were doing more. In terms of monitoring, 40% of fathers reported doing more. Only 16% of mothers said the same for their male partners. Interestingly, fathers and mothers agreed that approximately 19% of mothers were doing more monitoring of children during the early parts of the pandemic. Changes in parents' time playing with children mirror their division of parenting. Both mothers and fathers report that each was spending substantially more time playing with children in mid-April.

Though mothers' and fathers' reports of who was doing more domestic work are uneven, there was greater consensus regarding the share of parents who were doing less domestic work during the pandemic. Although doing less total domestic work was uncommon during the early days of the pandemic, both mothers and fathers more often reported mothers rather than fathers were doing less domestic labor in the early days of the pandemic (Table 2). There were no statistically significant differences in mothers' and fathers' reports of who was doing less housework. On average, nearly twice as many mothers were doing less housework (17%) than fathers (9%;  $p < .05$ ). Patterns for time in childcare are similar to housework, though a smaller proportion of parents' report doing less childcare.

Next, we examined how change in time allocation was associated with the division of labor during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 4 shows changes in parents' time spent in domestic labor among those reporting a shift from a non-egalitarian division of household labor prior to the pandemic to an egalitarian

division in the early days of the pandemic. In all, 203 respondents reported shifts to an egalitarian division of housework and 169 reported a shift to an egalitarian division of childcare. Estimates from both mothers' and fathers' reports show remarkable similarity. Bivariate chi-square tests (not shown) indicate that there are no significant gender differences in parents' reports of change in mothers' and fathers' time in housework and childcare among those in newly egalitarian arrangements. As shown in the figures, both mothers and fathers who report having new egalitarian divisions of housework and childcare during the pandemic most commonly note that fathers were doing more domestic work during the pandemic. Few parents reported fathers doing less, suggesting that shifts toward equal sharing are largely the product of those with conventional arrangements becoming more equal.

Although shifts toward more egalitarian divisions of housework are primarily the result of fathers doing more, parents' reports indicate that shifts toward egalitarian divisions are also the result of some mothers doing less (one-third of couples sharing housework; one-fifth of couples sharing childcare). Nonetheless, mothers in new egalitarian arrangements appear just as likely to have increased their time in housework and childcare (approximately one-third increased time in childcare; one-in-seven increased time in housework) as to have decreased it. Consequently, even though fathers increased their contributions to domestic labor during the early days of the pandemic, leading to more equal sharing, mothers' domestic burdens often increased as well. Generally, however, findings suggest that among partners with new egalitarian arrangements, mothers' time in domestic tasks did not change.

Overall, results from our study support Hypothesis 2. In general, the domestic division of labor among different-sex parents became more equal in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by increases in fathers' domestic contributions. Mothers and fathers, nonetheless, disagreed substantially on the degree of equality achieved. Fathers report sharing housework and childcare equally in the majority of families, while mothers report retaining responsibility for domestic labor in the vast majority of families despite increases in fathers' domestic contributions.

## Discussion

Our findings show that from the beginning of the pandemic in early March 2020 through the end of April, egalitarian sharing of housework and childcare increased among US parents whereas the prevalence of conventional domestic arrangements (where mothers are primarily responsible for housework and childcare) decreased. Mothers, nonetheless, retained primary responsibility for domestic labor in most families. Remarkably, this shift occurred broadly, with the change identifiable across most US demographics. Shifts toward more equal

sharing were also observed for nearly every domestic task examined, and in the singular case where sharing of task responsibilities did not become more equal—shopping—this was due to more fathers taking on primary responsibility for the task. This is noteworthy given that shopping is the one routine housework task that fathers have historically been more likely to engage in (Carlson, Miller, and Sassler 2018). It is possible that the perceived dangers of going out in public in the early days of the pandemic made shopping a more masculine task as well.

Increases in egalitarian sharing of domestic work is not unique to the United States, as research shows parents in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, and the Netherlands also increased the degree to which they shared domestic responsibilities equally, despite experiencing overall increases in domestic labor during the early days of the pandemic (Chung et al. 2020; Craig and Churchill 2020; Farré et al. 2020; Shafer et al. 2020; Yerkes et al. 2020a).

Among parents who forged egalitarian divisions of domestic labor during the pandemic, most noted increases in fathers' time in domestic labor, but a sizeable portion also noted an increase in mothers' time, indicating that domestic burdens often increased for both parents. Although results also show that the majority of parents reported no average change in their own or their partners' time in housework and childcare, supplemental analyses (not shown) indicate that for many parents, a lack of change in overall domestic performance was not the result of stasis, but rather an increase in some tasks offsetting decreases in time spent in other tasks that became moot during the pandemic (e.g., picking up/dropping off children). Indeed, decreases in the necessity of managerial domestic tasks—largely the domain of mothers—and increases in interactive childcare tasks—which fathers are more likely to do—may have contributed to the rise in egalitarianism. Thus, consistent with international evidence, we find support for two potentially incompatible predictions regarding the impact of the pandemic on parents' time in, and division of, domestic labor. Specifically, many mothers increased their time spent in domestic tasks, resulting in greater domestic burdens placed on mothers. At the same time, a general shift toward a more egalitarian division of domestic labor occurred among US parents.

Though fathers were more likely to report an equal sharing of domestic responsibilities than mothers, both mothers and fathers reported significant shifts away from conventional divisions of labor and toward more egalitarian domestic arrangements. In many instances, mothers reported larger relative changes than fathers. The uniformity in parents' reports of change is noteworthy given documented gender discrepancies in men's and women's reports of domestic labor in surveys. Consistent with past work (Kamo 2000; Lee and

Waite 2005), and research from Canada on domestic labor during the early days of the pandemic (Shafer et al. 2020), parents disagreed on changes in men's time in domestic work during the pandemic, whereas they largely agreed on changes in women's time. When limited to just those couples who became egalitarian during the pandemic, however, no significant gender differences in time spent in domestic tasks were observed, indicating that disagreement regarding men's contributions during the pandemic were limited largely to respondents whose divisions of labor did not become egalitarian.

Some research in the United States shows that married mothers were more likely than married fathers to become unemployed or reduce their work hours in the early days of the pandemic (Collins et al. 2020; Landivar et al. 2020), though other studies suggest that changes in paid labor have been rather similar for mothers and fathers (Kochhar 2020). The assumption has been that gender discrepancies in labor market outcomes during the pandemic are the result of increased domestic burdens for mothers. Indeed, we find evidence that a sizeable percentage of mothers retained responsibility for domestic work and increased their time spent in domestic tasks during the pandemic, including in areas where domestic supports were eliminated—such as helping older children with schoolwork and playing with and monitoring younger children.

Still, this increase tells only one part of the story. Although many mothers may be spending more time in domestic tasks, fathers spent greater time in these tasks as well—and for some families, this shift has somewhat lessened mothers' (dis)proportionate responsibilities for domestic labor during the early pandemic period. Thus, these findings reinforce the multidimensionality of gender inequality and support research showing that gender equality outcomes in the marketplace and family realms are often uneven (England 2010).

Explaining why the division of domestic labor became more equal during the pandemic is beyond the scope this study, though theory suggests a few possibilities. From a time availability perspective, the pandemic increased men's available time at home due to unemployment, paid leave, and telecommuting (Collins et al. 2020; Guyot and Sawhill 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020a, 2020b). The majority of US men espouse beliefs in gender egalitarianism (Scarborough et al. 2019), yet ideal worker culture and constraints on job flexibility have historically inhibited men's engagement at home (Boston College Center for Work and Family 2019; Lenhart et al. 2019). The pandemic lifted many of these constraints, perhaps enabling men to align their behaviors with their beliefs. In addition, time at home may expose men to domestic realities to which they may have been previously unaware or which they underappreciated. From a socialization/exposure perspective, men's greater time at home may have led to a greater appreciation for housework and childcare demands during the early days of the pandemic (Bünning 2015; Carlson, Petts,

and Pepin 2021; Kroska and Elman 2009; Petts and Knoester 2018; Shafer et al. 2020). Future qualitative work should, nonetheless, seek to better understand the explanations for increases in fathers' domestic contributions as well as both parents' perceptions of whether domestic arrangements during the pandemic were considered fair or equitable.

These findings have important implications for understanding the impact of the pandemic on families, and for identifying strategies to help parents manage work-family stress as the pandemic persists and eventually ends. Exposure to domestic needs and responsibilities can have long-lasting effects on men's performance of housework and childcare beyond immediate increases in time at home (Bünning 2015; Carlson et al. 2021; Kotsadam and Finseraas 2011; Petts and Knoester 2018; Tamm 2019). Therefore, the shift toward more egalitarian sharing of domestic work in the early days of the pandemic may continue post-pandemic, as fathers' perceptions of domestic needs and their own role in addressing them shifted.

Conversely, whether changes in the division of domestic labor persist beyond the pandemic is likely to depend on sustained changes in fathers' time availability. Although rates of remote work remain elevated, many workers returned to in-person work throughout 2020 (Brenan 2020). Moreover, though their employment rates remain somewhat depressed compared to before the pandemic, fathers' labor force participation has largely rebounded (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020b). This suggests that fathers' domestic contributions may have reverted toward pre-pandemic levels toward the end of 2020 and into the spring of 2021, even if slightly elevated compared to pre-pandemic times. For example, research from the Netherlands shows following initial lockdowns in April, parents' shares of housework returned to pre-pandemic levels by June (Yerkes et al. 2020b).

Though it is unclear if changes to domestic arrangements among US partnered parents have persisted, these results provide possible insights into policy interventions. Egalitarian divisions of domestic labor have substantial impacts on men's and women's well-being in that equal partnerships facilitate stronger, more satisfying, and more stable parental relationships (Carlson et al. 2016, 2018; Frisco and Williams 2003), in addition to promoting gender equality in paid work (Petts, Carlson, and Pepin 2021). Thus, policies that enable fathers to spend more time at home, such as workplace flexibility and paid family leave accessible to all, may enhance gender egalitarianism among American parents moving forward.

This study is one of the first to provide a window into changes in US parents' divisions of domestic labor during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet it is not without limitations. First, data for this study come from an online non-probability sample. The sample over represents US parents with a college

education and parents who are non-religious, though the demographic profile of the sample is consistent with other nationally representative samples across numerous dimensions. To further address sample bias, analyses were weighted to be representative of the US population of married/cohabiting parents by age, race, and gender. Sensitivity tests indicate no differences across education or religion regarding change in the division of labor, suggesting that the possibility of bias in our conclusions is likely minimal. Adding to our confidence in these results, findings are similar to those found in one other national US survey, as well as surveys from other countries (Chung et al. 2020; Craig and Churchill 2020; Farré et al. 2020; Miller 2020; Shafer et al. 2020; Yerkes et al. 2020a).

Second, due to discrepancies in parents' reports and use of stylized questions, it is not possible to provide precise estimates of the proportion of US parents who were sharing domestic labor before or during the pandemic, nor precise estimates of parents' time use. Despite this limitation, this study contains important information that is unavailable in other nationally representative datasets. For example, the CPS does not contain information on housework and childcare, and the American Time Use Survey does not allow for analyses on the division of domestic labor due to lack of data on partners' behavior. Thus, this novel dataset provides key information about how couples' divisions of domestic labor shifted during the pandemic.

Last, it should be noted that the analyses in this paper, like analyses from other countries (Craig and Churchill 2020; Farré et al. 2020; Shafer et al. 2020), are limited to typical domestic tasks that parents were completing both before and during the pandemic, and will likely continue to engage in after the pandemic ends. Consequently, we include measures about helping children with schoolwork but do not focus on virtual schooling per se, a pandemic-specific burden that has received much scrutiny (Miller 2020; Petts, Carlson, and Pepin 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic obliterated the invisible line separating work and family. With so many parents already overwhelmed by the weight of work and family demands, the pandemic placed an even greater burden at their feet. As is often the case in times of crisis, a substantial number of couples responded by banding together to more equally share the domestic load. A majority of mothers, nevertheless, continued to report that they shouldered the majority of domestic labor in families. As the pandemic progresses, the story of how families cope may change, however. Moreover, whether these changes persist beyond the pandemic and whether they have lasting impacts on the gendered division of labor in families remains to be seen.

### *Data Availability Statement*

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Compared to estimates from the Current Population Survey, our sample is similar in terms of the percentage who are married (89% vs. 92%), the average number of children (1.94 vs. 1.93), and the percentage of mothers (33% vs. 31%) and fathers (10% vs. 11%) out of the labor force prior to the pandemic. The percentage of individuals who identify as having conservative political ideologies is also comparable with national estimates in the GSS (32% vs. 33%), and our sample is similar to co-resident parents in the Survey of American Parents in regard to the percentage of individuals with household incomes under \$40,000 (18% vs. 19%) and over \$100,000 (35% in both). Even so, it is important to note that college-educated parents and parents with no religious affiliation are over-represented in this sample. We also compared key variables in our sample to equivalent items in national surveys. Descriptive statistics show our panelists were slightly less likely to report equal sharing of childcare tasks than respondents in the Survey of American Parents (Pew Research Center 2015). Consequently, any increases in equal sharing among our panelists are likely to be a conservative estimate of the prevalence of equal partnerships. The decline in work hours among parents was slightly higher (by about 0.5 hours per week) in our sample than in a recent CPS-based study (Collins et al. 2020), but this may be due to our focus on co-resident parents as opposed to married parents. Indeed, decline in work hours in our sample is comparable to a recent survey using a more diverse UK sample (Chung et al. 2020).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Table S1.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of Sample ( $N = 1,025$ ).

**Table S2.** Percentage of Respondents Reporting Sharing Domestic Labor, by Sociodemographic Characteristics.

**Figure S1.** Egalitarian Divisions of Housework and Childcare by Sociodemographic Characteristic.