

# Academic Long COVID-19: Post-Pandemic Research Recovery for Academic Parents

Gemma Derrick et al.

June 2026

## Context

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) intensified existing inequalities in academic labour, with particularly acute consequences for parents—especially mothers. As schools and childcare systems closed, those in roles perceived as “flexible” disproportionately absorbed increased caregiving responsibilities, reinforcing longstanding gendered divisions of labour. In response, universities and research funders rapidly introduced policies to acknowledge and mitigate these disparities. Yet while the initial disruption to research activity represented a short-term “shock” that many institutions and individuals could adapt to, it also exposed a deeper and more enduring “trauma.”

This longer-term impact is reflected in delayed publications, disrupted career trajectories, and reduced professional visibility on the individual researcher level. These effects are not distributed evenly but concentrated among those with significant caring responsibilities during the pandemic years (2020–2022). These patterns reveal structural gender and caring inequities that not only predate COVID-19 but were amplified by it, with consequences likely to shape academic careers for years to come.

Despite growing recognition of these issues, there remains limited evidence on whether pandemic-induced shifts in the division of labour have persisted, and how researchers, particularly academic parents, have recovered their productivity and visibility. This brief provides evidence for, and recommendations to combat the uneven pathways of recovery for women and parents following the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Research questions

This research sought to explore the effect of the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on the productivity and visibility of academics experiencing different models of parenting (Derrick et al 2023), during and following the pandemic lockdown years (2020–2022).

## What we did

We ran a global survey of academic parents (n=23,697) which included n=7876 qualitative statements relating to parenting during the pandemic years (2020–2022), and n=6274 about parenting post-pandemic (2024). The survey was modelled on a previous survey on academic parenting run in 2018 by the same research team (Derrick et al, 2023).

## Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) reshaped patterns of parenting and research productivity across countries, with lasting consequences for academic careers. While both men and women experienced an increase in dual-parenting arrangements during lockdown periods, most returned to their pre-pandemic parenting roles (Lead, Dual, or Satellite) once restrictions eased. This was seen in all countries, regardless of the severity of the lockdown experienced.

However, the effects on research productivity have persisted. Although all academics experienced declines in output during the pandemic, academic-parents, particularly those with greater caregiving responsibilities during the COVID-19 lockdown years (Lead and Dual roles in 2020–2022) faced more

sustained losses. Specifically, those in Lead and Dual parenting roles during the lockdown years (2020-2022) experienced a “flattening” of productivity beginning in 2021, with little evidence of recovery in the subsequent years since the pandemic (2022-current).

In contrast, those parenting with lower caregiving demands during the pandemic (Satellite parenting) demonstrated stronger recovery trajectories. Women who assumed a Satellite parenting role during the pandemic years, seemingly because they were involved in the medical response to COVID-19 and/or were from the biomedical sciences, experienced a sustained recovery post-pandemic compared to similar men, regardless of the parenting role they assumed post-pandemic (2022-Current).

Despite this, overall gender disparities in research-recovery trajectories are pronounced. Men consistently recovered productivity faster than women, particularly when transitioning into lower-responsibility parenting roles post-pandemic. Women who returned to, or remained in, high-responsibility (Lead) parenting roles show the slowest recovery rates.

*“During covid my husband was at home, so he contributed more to the childcare (about 20 for my husband). But when work resumed, my parenting level came back to usual (about 5% for my husband).” (1362, Female, Academic, France)*  
*“It [COVID-19 lockdowns] broke me, mentally and emotionally. Still don’t feel fully recovered from that time.” (4505, Male, Academic, UK).*  
*“I couldn’t cope with all my responsibilities, so I decided to change jobs, which was a major professional event for me.” (9959, Female, Academic, Serbia)*

*My wife pushed for her academic career and I was left with kids and household. I am still in research but gave up. My project ends next year and I will not continue in academic research. Also I think that I don’t have a chance anymore because I missed networking opportunities and couldn’t publish as much as needed.” (1005, Male, Academic, Taiwan)*

## Recommendations

### Reframe COVID-19 disruption as a long-term structural issue, not a past shock.

Research systems should move beyond treating the pandemic as a temporary disruption that has now passed. Our research indicates that its effects on research productivity and career progression are ongoing and unevenly distributed, particularly affecting women and academic parents. Policymakers, funders, and university promotion committees should instead conceptualise COVID-19 as a sustained disruption to career trajectories. This requires continuing to embed flexibility into assessment, promotion, and funding decisions to account for prolonged and differentiated impacts post-pandemic. Short-term mitigation measures and considering the effect as short-term are not enough.

### Target recovery support to avoid compounding inequalities among academic parents

Recovery interventions must be carefully designed to prevent the further entrenchment of existing inequalities, particularly for academic parents who experienced intensified pressures during lockdowns. Policies should prioritise providing protected time, reduced workloads, and structured support to enable a meaningful return to research activity. Existing “returning carers” models, such as those used following maternity leave, offer a useful template and should be expanded to include pandemic-related disruptions. Without such targeted measures, there is a risk that recovery efforts will inadvertently reinforce cumulative disadvantage for women and academic-parents.

### References

Derrick, G. E., Chen, P. Y., van Leeuwen, T., Larivière, V., & Sugimoto, C. R. (2022). The relationship between parenting engagement and academic performance. *Scientific Reports*, 12(1), 22300.

## Authors

- » Professor Gemma Derrick, University of Bristol
- » Dr Pei-Ying Chen, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- » Ms Marlene Hauseux, University of Bristol
- » Professor Thed van Leeuwen, Leiden University
- » Professor Cassidy Sugimoto, Carnegie Mellon University
- » Dr Jens-Peter Andersen, Aarhus University

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant ES/X010759/1 to the Innovation and Research Caucus (IRC). The interpretations and opinions within this report are those of the authors and may not reflect the policy positions of ESRC.

## About the Innovation and Research Caucus

The IRC supports the use of robust evidence and insights in UKRI's strategies and investments, as well as undertaking a co-produced programme of research. Our members are leading academics from across the social sciences, other disciplines and sectors, who are engaged in different aspects of innovation and research system. We connect academic experts, UKRI, IUK and the ESRC, by providing research insights to inform policy and practice. Professor Tim Vorley and Professor Stephen Roper are Co-Directors. The IRC is funded by UKRI via the ESRC and IUK, grant number ES/X010759/1. The support of the funders is acknowledged. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the funders.

## Find out more

**Contact:** [info@ircaucus.ac.uk](mailto:info@ircaucus.ac.uk)

**Website:** <https://ircaucus.ac.uk/>