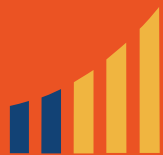


# State of Working West Virginia

Women's Paid  
and Unpaid Labor



WEST VIRGINIA CENTER ON  
**BUDGET & POLICY**



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### SECTION 1

## **Introduction** 3

---

### SECTION 2

## **Unemployment and Labor Force Participation** 4

---

### SECTION 3

## **Where Do Women Work?** 6

---

### SECTION 4

## **Wages** 8

---

### SECTION 5

## **Income** 10

---

### SECTION 6

## **Poverty** 11

---

### SECTION 7

## **Educational Attainment** 12

---

### SECTION 8

## **Women Outside the Formal Labor Force** 13

---

### SECTION 9

## **Policy Recommendations** 15

## SECTION I

# Introduction

This report is the 17th edition of the State of Working West Virginia,

an annual series that examines West Virginia's economy through the lens of its workers—the people who power our state and our economy. Previous editions have examined data on employment, income, racial disparities, job quality, and economic performance. While each year's report has a slightly different focus, one consistent theme is the need to ask this simple question: How are the people who do the work faring? This year's edition will focus on the state of women in and around West Virginia's workforce.

**Over the past few decades, declining unemployment and rising labor force participation have improved the outlook for women in West Virginia's workforce.**

**In their 2023 report, Oxfam ranked West Virginia as the seventh worst state for working women.**

But many disparities exist today—lower wages, higher poverty rates, and caregiving responsibilities still burden women disproportionately. While many of these issues are common throughout the United States, they are particularly taxing in West Virginia. In their 2023 report, Oxfam ranked West Virginia as the seventh worst state for working women.<sup>1</sup>

Unemployment is near historic lows in West Virginia and nationally, but some groups don't fare as well as others due to longstanding structural barriers and inequities in access to opportunity. Despite changes over the decades, a gap between men and women persists regarding labor force participation, wages, poverty, and overall economic security. Notably, women earn less than men at all wage levels.

SECTION 2

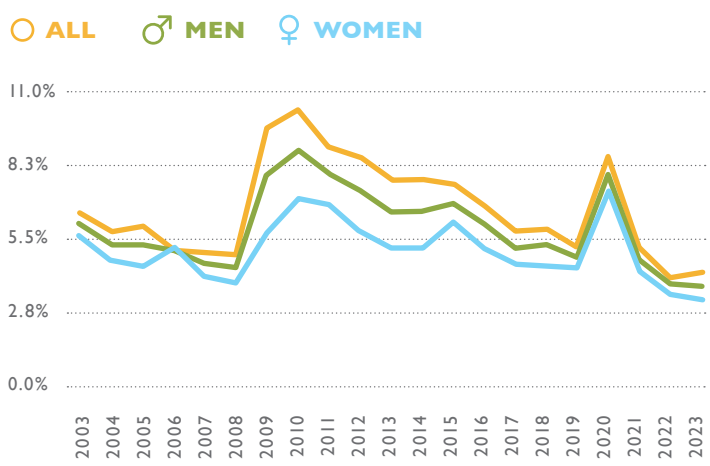
# Unemployment and Labor Force Participation

There are just under 347,000 women workers in West Virginia, accounting for 44.3 percent of the state’s labor force.

Typical statistical indicators of the labor force differ for men and women, and many of those differences are deepened by race. West Virginia’s unemployment rate reached historic lows following recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. As of May 2024, the state’s unemployment rate stood at 4.2 percent.<sup>2</sup> Across all months of 2023, the unemployment rate averaged 3.7 percent.

Unemployment rates for women in West Virginia are typically slightly lower than for men. In 2023, the unemployment rate for women averaged 3.2 percent, compared to 4.2 percent for men. Over the last two decades, the unemployment rate has been lower for women than for men (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**  
**UNEMPLOYMENT RATES LOWER FOR WOMEN THAN FOR MEN**  
**ANNUAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATE BY GENDER, WEST VIRGINIA, 2003-2023**



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

While the unemployment rate is an important indicator of long-term economic growth and productivity, another key indicator is a high labor force participation rate. West Virginia has historically had the lowest labor force participation rate in the country, across demographic groups. In 2023, West Virginia’s labor force participation rate was 53.8 percent, with significant variation by gender and race.

The labor force participation rate is the measure of people 16 years or older who are either working or seeking work, expressed as a share of the adult population. The labor force participation rate is a complementary measure of labor market conditions to the conventional unemployment rate, capturing the share of the adult population that is available to work, while the unemployment rate captures the share of the labor force that is unable to obtain employment at a given point in time.

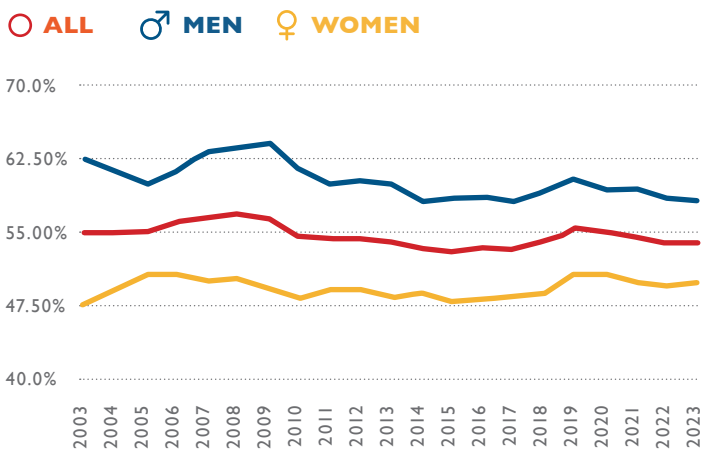
Nationally, women’s labor force participation rate increased over the last half of the 20th century. Since the turn of the century, the labor force participation rate of both men and women has fallen, mostly due to the aging of the Baby Boomer generation and other structural and cyclical factors.<sup>3</sup>

West Virginia’s data also reflects this trend. Over the past two decades, West Virginia’s overall labor force participation rate has fallen from a high of 56.7 percent to 53.8 percent. For men, the rate has fallen from a high of 63.9 percent to 58.0 percent, while for women, it has decreased from a high of 50.8 percent to 49.7 percent (Figure 2).

Across gender and race, the labor force participation rate is highest among white men (57.1 percent) and lowest among Black men (40.4 percent). While white men have higher labor force participation rates than white women, Black women have higher labor force participation rates than Black men. The gap between Black women and white women is 6.1 percentage points (Figure 3).

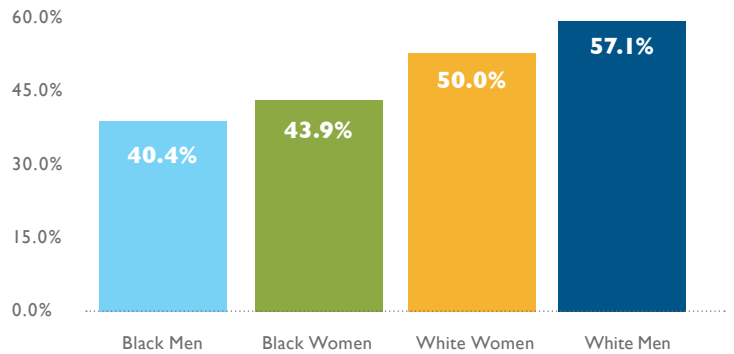
The gender and racial divides within unemployment rates are mixed. While white women are less likely to be in the labor force than white men, those who are in the labor force are less likely to be unemployed than white men. However, for Black men and women, unemployment rates are very similar (Table 1).

**FIGURE 2**  
**LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES LOWER FOR WOMEN THAN FOR MEN**  
**ANNUAL LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE BY GENDER, WEST VIRGINIA, 2003-2023**



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

**FIGURE 3**  
**LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES VARY ACROSS RACE AND GENDER**  
**ANNUAL LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE BY RACE AND GENDER, WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**



Source: WVCBP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata

**TABLE 1**  
**UNEMPLOYMENT AND LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES**  
**UNEMPLOYMENT AND LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES BY RACE AND GENDER, WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**

GROUP	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE
<b>ALL</b>	<b>4.5%</b>	<b>53.4%</b>
<b>WHITE MEN</b>	<b>4.9%</b>	<b>57.1%</b>
<b>WHITE WOMEN</b>	<b>4.2%</b>	<b>50.0%</b>
<b>BLACK MEN</b>	<b>3.9%</b>	<b>40.4%</b>
<b>BLACK WOMEN</b>	<b>3.7%</b>	<b>43.9%</b>

Source: WVCBP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata

## SECTION 3

# Where Do Women Work?

Across major industry groups, men and women concentrate in many different jobs.

On the following page, Figure 4.A shows 2018-2022 five-year average data on major industry groups, as well as the percent of the industry group made up of women.

Approximately 47,000 women in West Virginia worked in elementary or secondary schools, occupying 73 percent of these jobs. Percentage wise, women working in child day care services, home health care services, individual and family services, nursing care facilities, and offices of physicians made up 97 percent, 85 percent, 83 percent, 83 percent, and 80 percent of these sectors, respectively (Figure 4.B on the next page). In the next decade, health care service jobs are projected to be the largest growing industry in the state, adding an estimated 23,920 jobs.<sup>4</sup>



## 73 percent

of Elementary and Secondary School Jobs in West Virginia are occupied by women.



## 23,920 jobs

are estimated to be added to the Health Care Service industry over the next decade

FIGURE 4.A

**ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS INDUSTRY EMPLOYS THE MOST WOMEN IN WEST VIRGINIA  
EMPLOYMENT LEVELS BY INDUSTRY, TOTAL WOMEN AND MEN, WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**

Source: WVCPB analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata

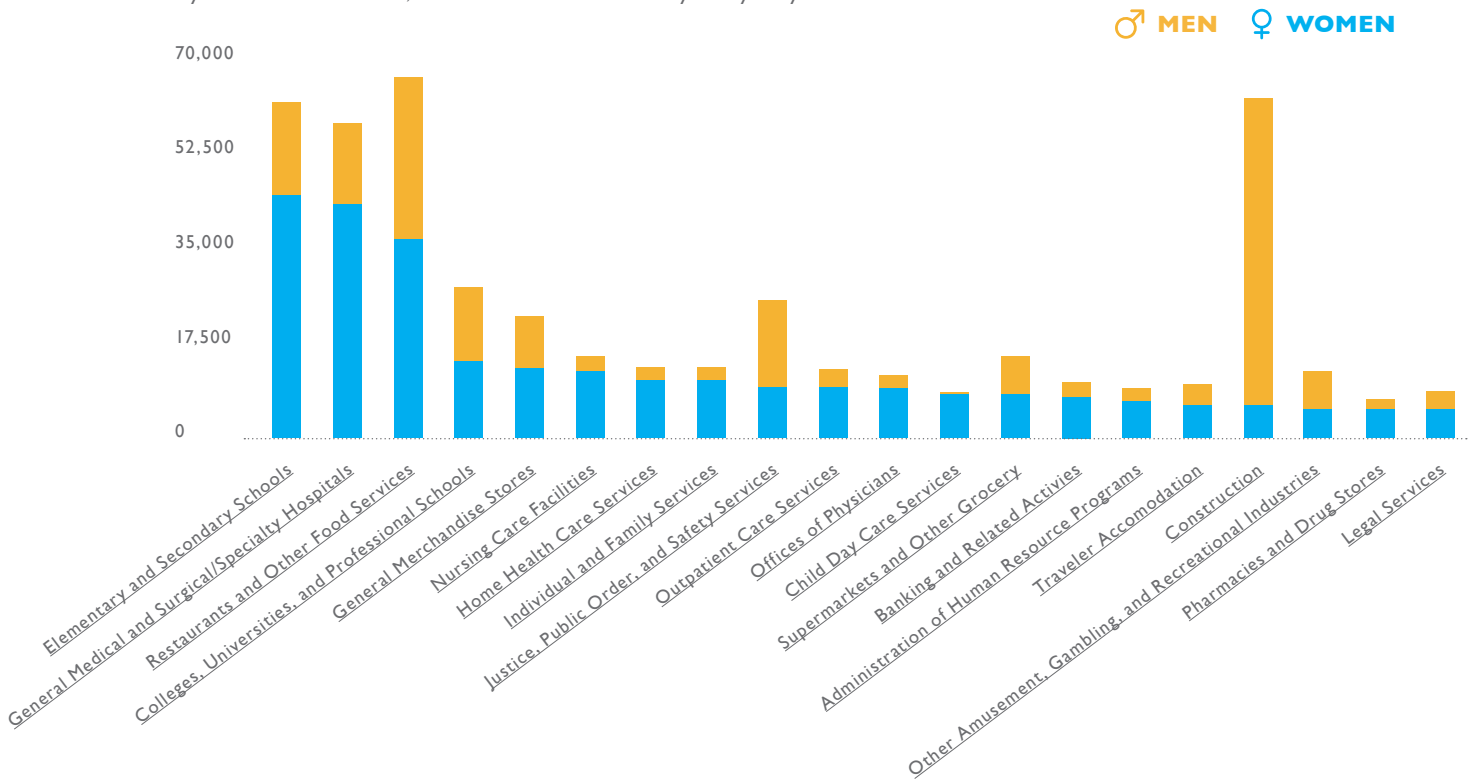
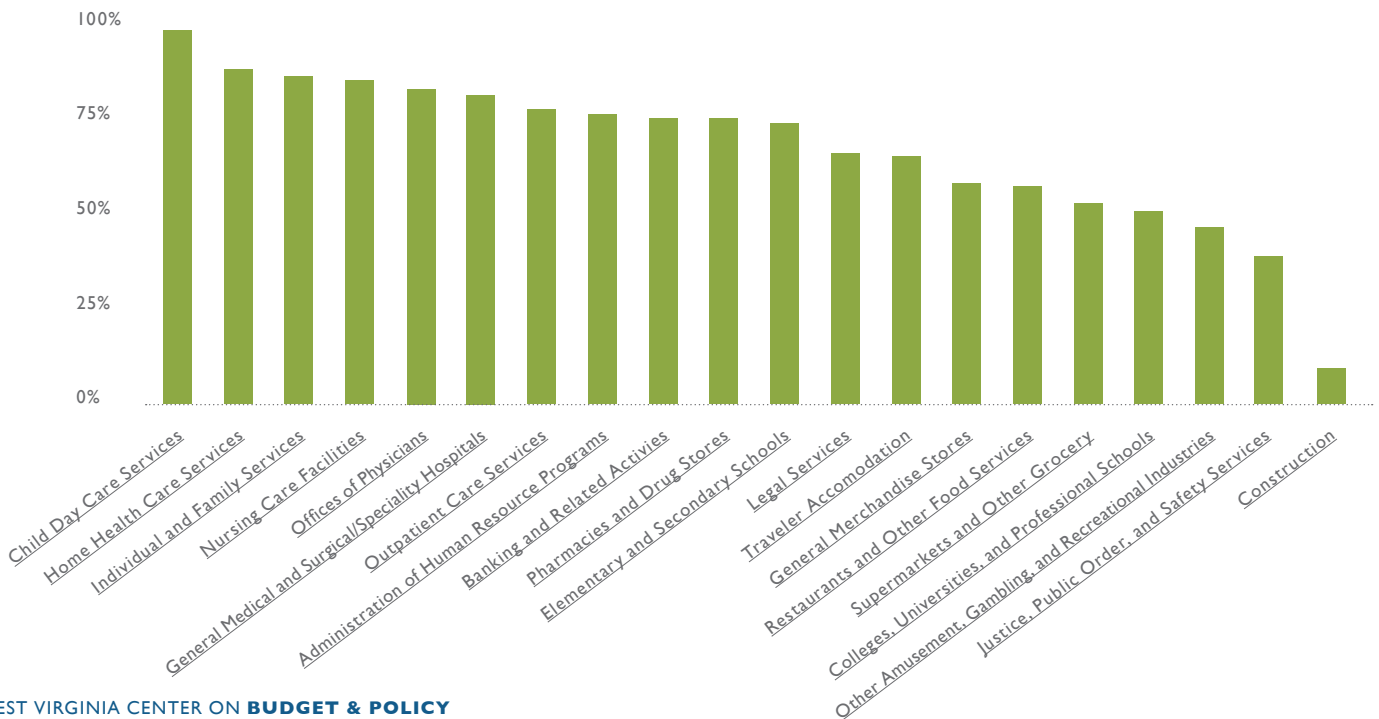


FIGURE 4.B

**CHILD DAY CARE SERVICES INDUSTRY HAS THE HIGHEST CONCENTRATION OF WOMEN IN WEST VIRGINIA  
TOTAL EMPLOYMENT LEVELS BY INDUSTRY, SHARE OF WOMEN, WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**

Source: WVCPB analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata



SECTION 4

# Wages

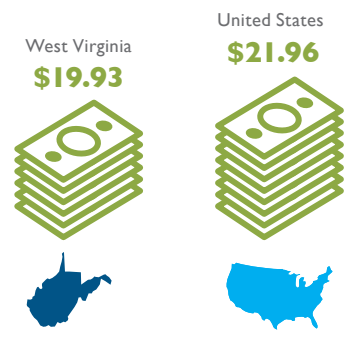
## West Virginia has some of the lowest wages in the country.

The state’s median hourly wage of \$21.65 ranks 45th among the 50 states and D.C. and is \$2.33 below the national average. Meanwhile, the median hourly wage for women specifically in West Virginia is \$19.93, also ranking 45th in the country and \$2.03 below the national average (Figure 5). For a full-time, year-round worker, that is the equivalent of a \$4,222 annual wage gap.

The wage gap between men and women in West Virginia is even larger. Men earn a median hourly wage of \$23.09, compared to \$19.93 for women, creating a difference of \$3.16 per hour—or \$6,573 less per year—for a full-time working woman (Figure 6). At the median hourly wage, West Virginia women earn \$0.86 for every \$1.00 men earn. The wage gap has closed in recent years, up from \$0.79 in 2019. While

**FIGURE 5**  
**WEST VIRGINIA WOMEN’S WAGES ARE BELOW THE NATIONAL AVERAGE WOMEN’S MEDIAN WAGE, U.S. AND WEST VIRGINIA, 2023**

Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau



**FIGURE 6**  
**WOMEN EARN LESS THAN MEN IN WEST VIRGINIA MEDIAN WAGE BY GENDER, WEST VIRGINIA, 2023**

Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau



wages increased overall during the pandemic, they rose faster for women than for men, up 32.5 percent from 2019 to 2023, compared to just 20.9 percent for men.

Notably, men earn more than women at every wage level. At the top 10 percent of wage earners, men out-earn women \$51.18 to \$41.17; at the bottom 10 percent of wage earners, men out-earn women \$13.14 to \$11.62. At no wage level do women out-earn men (Table 2 on the next page).

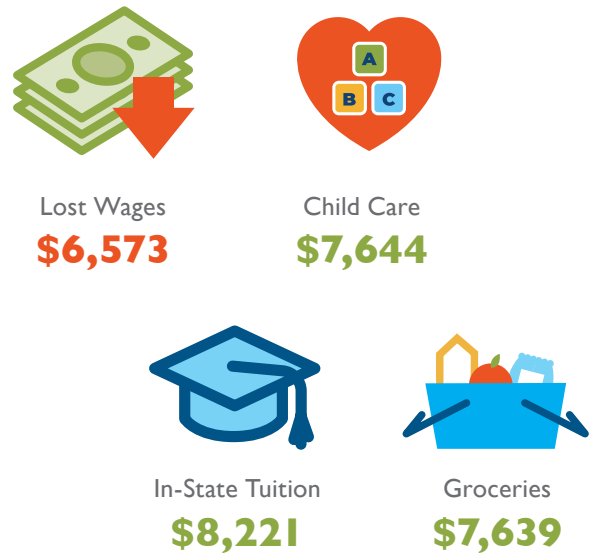
**West Virginia ranks 45th in the country in women’s median hourly wages.**



Because of the annual loss in pay women experience in West Virginia, many necessities are often financially out of reach. With the \$6,573 in earnings that a woman loses compared to men, she could have nearly afforded approximately 10 months of childcare,<sup>5</sup> 80 percent of tuition at an in-state four-year college,<sup>6</sup> or roughly 10 months of groceries for her and her family<sup>7</sup> (Figure 7).

The disparity in wages can partially be explained by the industries in which women often work. The industry that employs the most women, elementary and secondary schools, paid an average weekly wage of \$584 in 2023, while the industry with the greatest concentration of women, child day care services, paid an average weekly wage of \$462 in 2023. In comparison, the average weekly wage for all industries was \$1,069 in 2023 (Figure 8).

**FIGURE 7**  
**WOMEN'S LOST WAGES MAKE NECESSITIES MORE DIFFICULT TO AFFORD**  
**MEDIAN ANNUAL LOST WAGES OF WOMEN RELATIVE TO MEN AND COST OF EXAMPLE NECESSITIES, WEST VIRGINIA, 2023**



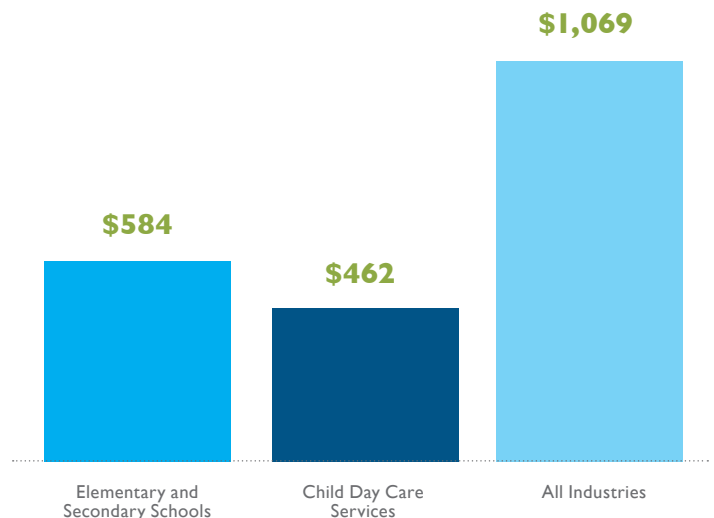
Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

**TABLE 2**  
**MEN OUT-EARN WOMEN AT EVERY WAGE LEVEL**  
**WAGES BY DECILE AND GENDER,**  
**WEST VIRGINIA, 2023**

DECILE	MEN	WOMEN
<b>BOTTOM 10 PERCENT</b>	\$13.14	\$11.62
20 <sup>TH</sup>	\$16.03	\$13.91
30 <sup>TH</sup>	\$18.69	\$15.43
40 <sup>TH</sup>	\$20.75	\$17.34
<b>MEDIAN</b>	\$23.09	\$19.93
60 <sup>TH</sup>	\$26.58	\$22.09
70 <sup>TH</sup>	\$31.21	\$25.42
80 <sup>TH</sup>	\$37.25	\$30.13
<b>TOP 10 PERCENT</b>	\$51.18	\$41.17

Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

**FIGURE 8**  
**WOMEN ARE CONCENTRATED IN LOW-WAGE INDUSTRIES**  
**AVERAGE WEEKLY WAGE BY SELECTED INDUSTRY,**  
**WEST VIRGINIA, 2023**



Source: WVCCBP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages data

SECTION 5

# Income

## The lower wages earned by women translate into lower incomes and less economic security over a lifetime.

Average personal income for women—which reflects all women, including those not working and not earning a wage—in West Virginia is \$29,017 per year, compared to \$45,258 per year for all men. This means that on an individual level, women average \$16,241 less per year than men in West Virginia (Figure 9).

**Women’s lower earnings do not just affect them individually—they also impact their families, including partners and children.**

Median household incomes vary greatly by household type. Median household income measures the income of the typical

**FIGURE 9**  
**WOMEN HAVE LESS PERSONAL INCOME THAN MEN IN WEST VIRGINIA**  
**AVERAGE PERSONAL INCOME BY GENDER, WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**

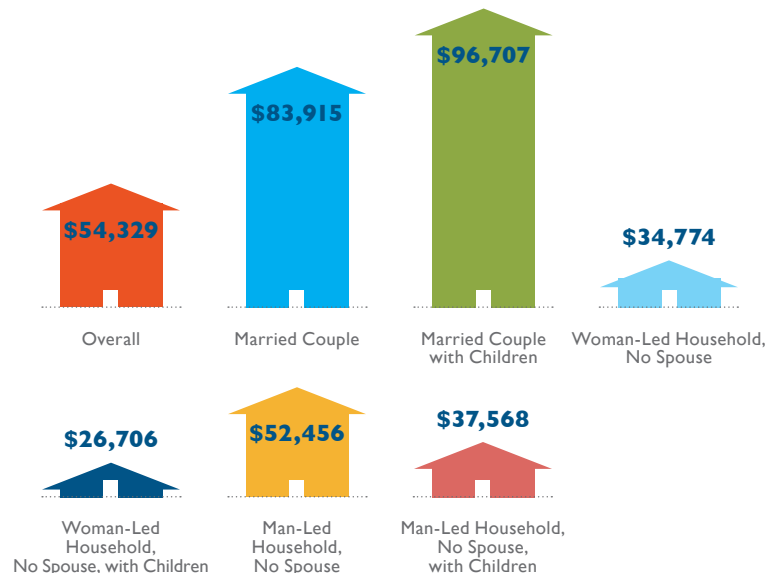


Source: WVCCBP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata

household—or the household in the middle of the income distribution—and serves as a good indicator for how the middle class is faring. In 2022, West Virginia had a median household income of \$54,329, the second lowest in the country.

In West Virginia, median household incomes are highest for married couples with children, at \$96,707. The median income for women-led households without a spouse or children present is \$34,774 and drops to \$26,706 if children are present. Meanwhile, for men-led households without a spouse or children present, median incomes are much higher, at \$52,456, with that income dropping to \$37,568 if children are present (Figure 10).

**FIGURE 10**  
**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME VARIES BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE**  
**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE, WEST VIRGINIA, 2022**



Source: WVCCBP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2022 one-year estimates

SECTION 6

# Poverty

West Virginia has historically had one of the highest poverty rates in the country.

In 2022, 308,825 West Virginians lived in poverty (17.9 percent of total residents), and the state had the third highest poverty rate nationwide.<sup>8</sup>

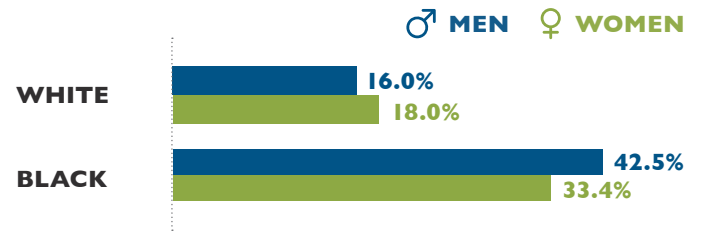
Regarding gender and race, poverty is generally higher for women than for men, with the exception of Black women, who have lower poverty rates than Black men, but higher poverty rates than any other demographic. The gender disparity in poverty across ages is greatest among the elderly. For those 65 years and older, the poverty rate for women is nearly four percentage points higher than for men. Black women face some of the highest poverty rates in the state at 33.4 percent, more than twice the rate of white men (Figures 11–13).

**FIGURE 11**  
**WOMEN FACE HIGHER POVERTY RATES THAN MEN**  
**POVERTY RATES BY GENDER, WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**



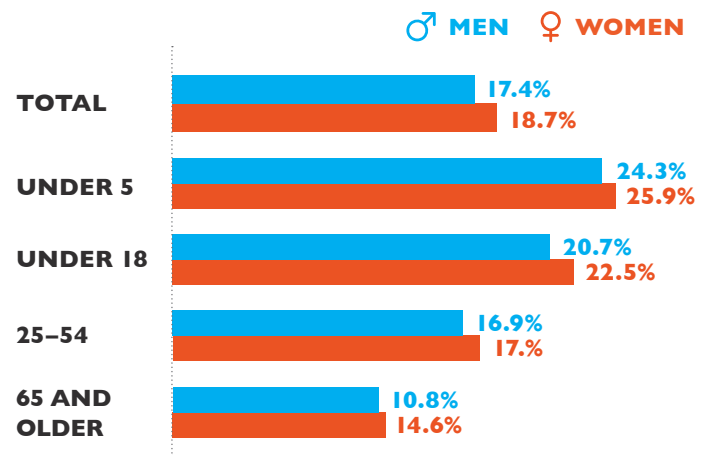
Source: WVCPB analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata

**FIGURE 12**  
**POVERTY RATES VARY BY GENDER AND RACE**  
**POVERTY RATES BY GENDER AND RACE, WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**



Source: WVCPB analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata

**FIGURE 13**  
**POVERTY RATES VARY BY GENDER AND AGE**  
**POVERTY RATES BY GENDER AND AGE, WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**



Source: WVCPB analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata

Many workers find themselves in poverty despite maintaining a job. Just under 26,000 women who are employed are also living in poverty, creating a poverty rate for employed women of 7.5 percent. In comparison, the poverty rate for employed men is 5.2 percent.<sup>9</sup> The high poverty rates among employed women are not surprising when considering women’s concentration in low-wage industries and those working outside the labor force in the unpaid care industry.

## SECTION 7

# Educational Attainment

Educational attainment plays a key role in influencing many other social and economic indicators.

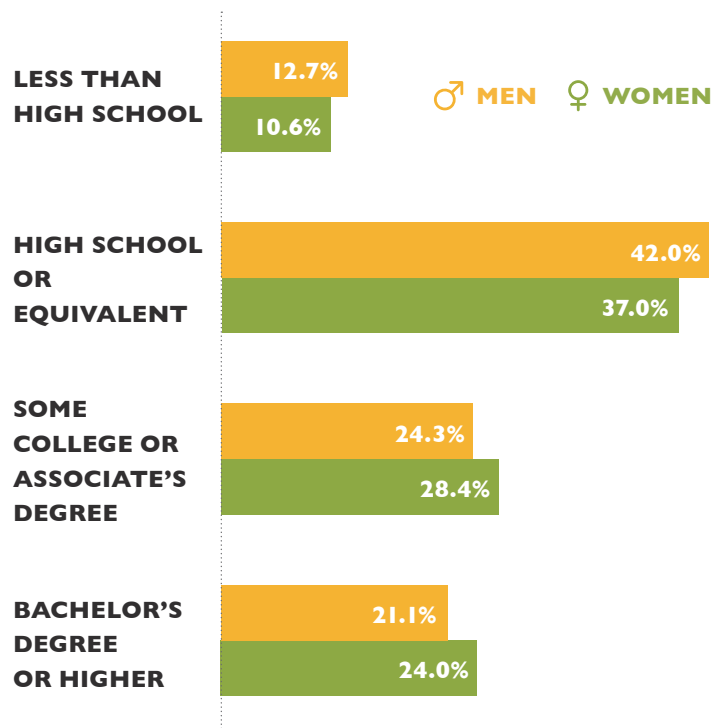
**Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with higher labor force participation rates, higher wages, lower poverty rates, and lower unemployment levels.**

West Virginia women fare well when it comes to levels of educational attainment. However, that educational attainment has not translated into higher wages or lower poverty, in large part due to the pay in industries that employ the most women. For example, as mentioned above, the industry that employs the most women, elementary and secondary schools, paid an average weekly wage of \$584 in 2023 compared to the average weekly wage for

all industries of \$1,069.<sup>10</sup> And despite paying a wage nearly half the average, the elementary and secondary schools industry would require an advanced degree for most occupations.

Women in West Virginia are more likely than men to have completed some college or attained a bachelor's degree or higher—28.4 percent of women have completed some college and 24.0 percent have attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 24.3 percent and 21.1 percent for men, respectively. A greater share of West Virginia men have completed high school or its equivalent (42.0 percent compared to 37.0 percent of women), while 12.7 percent of men have less than a high school education, compared to 10.6 percent of women (Figure 14).

**FIGURE 14**  
**WOMEN HAVE HIGHER LEVELS OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT THAN MEN IN WEST VIRGINIA**  
**EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY GENDER,**  
**WEST VIRGINIA, 2018-2022 FIVE-YEAR AVERAGE**



Source: WVCBP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year microdata

## SECTION 8

# Women Outside the Formal Labor Force

In 2023, West Virginia women's labor force participation rate was 49.7 percent.

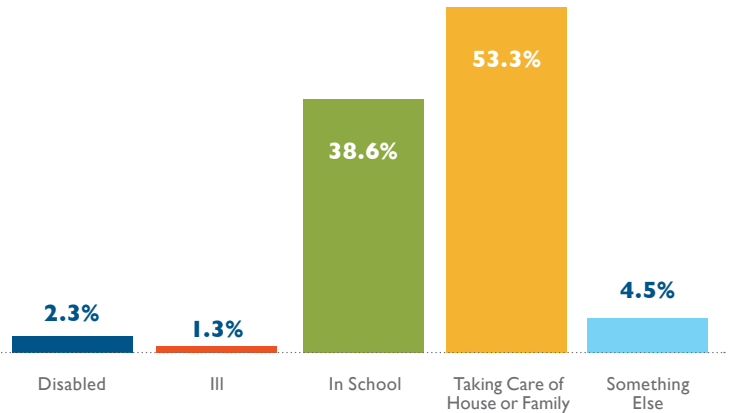
As such, just under half of West Virginian women are not participating in the labor force, meaning they are neither working nor seeking work.

**Of those not in the labor force, over 186,000 women—or just under 50 percent of those not in the labor force—are retired.**

It is essential to note that just because women aren't participating in the formal labor force does not mean they are not laboring or contributing to society and the economy. Of the West Virginian women not in the formal labor force, and who are not retired, over half report caring for home and family, while just under 40 percent are in school (Figure 15).

FIGURE 15

**MOST WOMEN WHO ARE NOT IN THE FORMAL LABOR FORCE ARE IN UNPAID CAREGIVING ROLES**  
**WOMEN NOT IN THE FORMAL LABOR FORCE AND NOT RETIRED, BY ACTIVITY, WEST VIRGINIA, 2023**



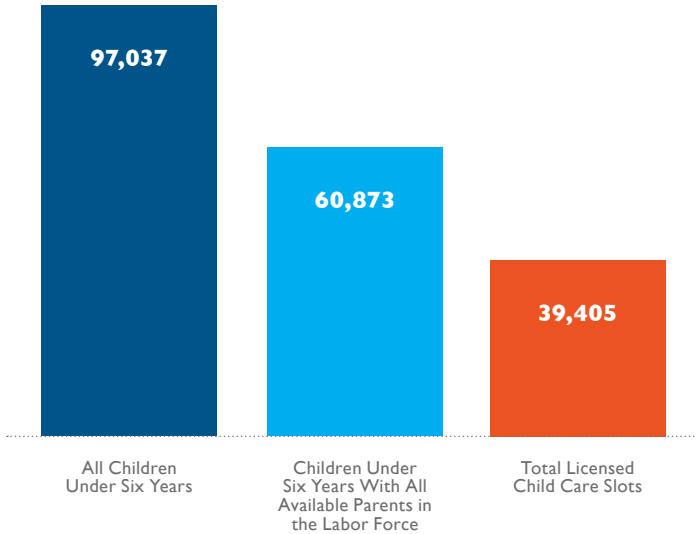
Source: WVCCBP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 Current Population Survey microdata

The financial implications of not being paid for caregiving work are significant. For example, the average child care worker in West Virginia earned the already far-too-low wage of \$462 per week in 2023.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of a year, that is equivalent to \$24,024. For the 66,500 women in West Virginia who do not participate in the formal labor force due to caring for home or family, this unpaid care work is worth just under \$1.6 billion annually.

In West Virginia, half of non-full-time working parents say they would go back to work if their child had access to quality child care at a reasonable cost.<sup>12</sup> The Economic Policy Institute published estimates in 2020 of the average annual cost of child care ranging from \$8,736 for infant care to \$7,644 for care for four-year-olds. That means infant care for just one child would take up nearly 20 percent of the median family's income in West Virginia, while a typical family with two children would have to spend one-third of their income on child care if not eligible for a subsidy.<sup>13</sup>

West Virginia's child care supply is also severely limited, meaning even families who can afford child care face accessibility challenges. Many live in a child care desert, defined as a place where there are no licensed child care providers or too few for the number of children who need care, though the

**FIGURE 16**  
**MORE THAN ONE-THIRD OF WEST VIRGINIA CHILDREN WHO COULD NEED CHILD CARE CANNOT ACCESS IT CHILDREN UNDER AGE SIX COMPARED WITH TOTAL LICENSED CHILD CARE SLOTS, WEST VIRGINIA, 2023**

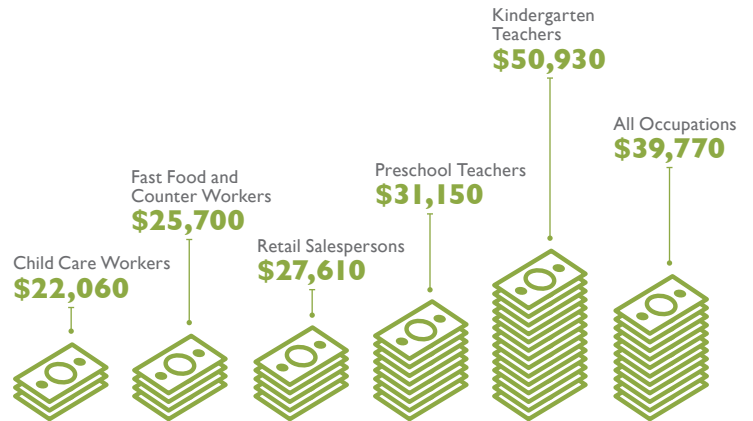


Source: U.S. Census Bureau and West Virginia Department of Human Services data

child care landscape varies widely in different parts of the state. While there are an estimated 60,873 children under age six with all available parents in the workforce, thus likely needing child care support, there are only 39,405 licensed slots statewide.<sup>14</sup> That leaves an estimated gap of more than 20,000 children under six who could need care but are unable to access it due to too few child care slots (Figure 16).

Limited public investment is a driver of too few child care subsidies, child care deserts, and poor wages for child care workers in the state. Child care workers, on average, receive salaries and benefits far lower than their similarly situated colleagues in other sectors or even in entry level positions in other industries. In West Virginia, the median annual wage for child care workers is 29 percent below that of preschool teachers and less than half of that of kindergarten teachers (Figure 17). Additionally, very few child care workers receive fringe benefits like health insurance or retirement benefits through work. According to national data, more than half of all workers have employer-sponsored health insurance, compared with just one-fifth of child care workers. Only one in ten child care workers have retirement

**FIGURE 17**  
**CHILD CARE WORKER WAGES FALL FAR BELOW THAT OF EARLY EDUCATORS AND ENTRY-LEVEL WORK MEDIAN ANNUAL SALARY FOR SELECTED INDUSTRIES, WEST VIRGINIA, MAY 2023**



Source: Bureau for Labor Services, State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates  
 Note: Preschool and Kindergarten median salary data refer to non-special education positions

benefits, compared with one in three workers overall. Few early childhood education workers have collective bargaining rights, while unionization rates are much higher among Pre-K-12 educators.

As highlighted earlier, child care workers and providers are primarily women and disproportionately women of color, which is a driving force in why care work has for so long been undervalued and underpaid.

Low wages contribute to high turnover in the child care industry. Prior to the pandemic, researchers estimated that 26 to 40 percent of the child care workforce leaves their job each year.<sup>15</sup> According to the 2023 West Virginia Association of Young Children survey of in-state child care providers, 91 percent experienced turnover in 2023, with an estimated 47 percent of staff leaving their job that year.<sup>16</sup>

Altogether, this data suggests that caregiving—despite being broadly recognized as some of the most important work there is—is deeply undervalued both for care workers in the formal labor force and those providing care without compensation.

## SECTION 9

# Policy Recommendations

Policies that promote public health; protect workers from discrimination; give laborers more power; and/or put more money in the pockets of working families so they can invest in their family's health, well-being, and future will benefit all West Virginians, especially women.

Here are some policy recommendations that could address the inequities women experience and improve the lives of families and workers more broadly.

## Strengthen Wages and Benefits So Workers Can Better Balance Family Needs

- ✓ **Raise the minimum wage** to at least \$15 per hour, with mechanisms to adjust automatically with the cost of living and do away with the two-tiered system of the tipped minimum wage. Women make up a higher percentage of low-wage jobs. Raising wages in these jobs will give thousands of working women a much-needed wage increase.

- ✓ **Ensure all West Virginia workers have access to paid family and medical leave and access to paid sick days.** Having access to earned paid sick days is crucial to reducing the spread of illness, keeping communities healthy, avoiding productivity loss, reducing workplace turnover, and supporting parents and caregivers so they can balance work and family. With so many working women needing to stay home periodically to take care of their families, paid medical leave and paid sick leave would ensure that they could do so without threatening their financial security.
- ✓ **Adopt a fair scheduling requirement** to ensure workers receive timely, clear information regarding their working hours, particularly women who work in service industries with irregular scheduling.

## Level the Playing Field Between Workers and Their Bosses

- ✓ **Repeal right-to-work** and ensure the rights of all private employees to engage in collective bargaining to improve workplaces and ensure women are treated equitably in the workplace.
- ✓ **Establish pay transparency** and equity by banning practices that forbid employees from talking about their pay, requiring employers to disclose salary ranges for publicly posted jobs, and prohibiting employers from requiring information about candidates' pay in prior jobs.

### Increase Public Investments in Services That Benefit Women and Families

- ✓ **Increase funding for child care subsidies**, expand access to child care, and raise the wages of providers.
- ✓ **Enact a refundable state Child Tax Credit** to lift children of low-income families out of poverty while boosting long-term earnings and improving health and educational outcomes.
- ✓ Ensure appropriate funding for agencies responsible for the implementation and enforcement of laws that require pregnant workers to be offered **reasonable accommodations** in order to continue working safely throughout pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, and lactation.
- ✓ **Repeal abortion restrictions** that result in increased risk of poverty, decreased likelihood that women can afford basic living expenses, increased debt,<sup>17</sup> and decreased job mobility.<sup>18</sup>

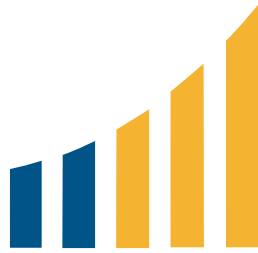
**Women face numerous challenges in West Virginia's workplaces. Making work safer, better compensated, more flexible, and more just is important to improving the lives of these workers.**

With women making up half of the state's population yet carrying a disproportionate burden of caring, domestic, and low-wage work, an equitable workplace for women means a better and stronger economy for all West Virginians.



# Endnotes

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