



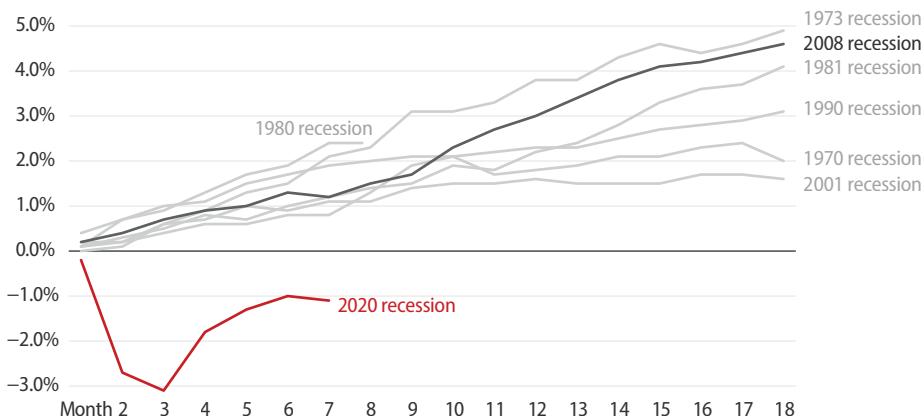
# The Shambolic Response to the Public Health and Economic Crisis Has Women on the Brink as the Job Recovery Stalls

By Michael Madowitz and Diana Boesch October 22, 2020

The U.S. economy has been dismal across the board in 2020, but it has been particularly dismal for American women. For the first time since 1964—the advent of modern U.S. employment statistics for women—this economic downturn, which began in February, has seen women lose jobs at a higher rate than men.<sup>1</sup> Women’s employment and labor force participation rates have both fallen to levels not seen since 1986.<sup>2</sup> When Dr. C. Nicole Mason, CEO of the Institute of Women’s Policy Research, said that “[w]e should go ahead and call this a ‘shecession,’” the term stuck.<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 1**  
**For the first time on record, this recession is costing women more jobs than men**

The percentage change in women’s employment minus the percentage change in men’s employment during the last eight recessions, by month



Source: Authors’ calculations based on U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Current Employment Statistics, Table B-5, Series Codes: CES0000000010, CES0000000001,” available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab5.htm> (last accessed October 2020).

The outsized impact of this recession on women is almost obvious in hindsight. Working women are at the intersection of the two largest economic shocks of 2020. Women are overrepresented in the occupations that have suffered the most job losses: care work and the face-to-face service sector.<sup>4</sup> Many of these jobs are held disproportionately by women of color, which is one reason they have experienced disproportionate jumps in unemployment, and employment gaps for Black workers and other workers of color have grown over time.<sup>5</sup> Women also shoulder disproportionate care

responsibilities away from work, a disparity that has only been exacerbated by the added pressures and care burdens brought on by the coronavirus.<sup>6</sup> Whether it's the push of job loss, the pull of care at home, or both, U.S. policy failures in 2020 risk a lost generation of women's careers.

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### Women have experienced the greatest job losses and have seen a slower recovery during this "she-cession"

The contrast of this recession with the recessions of at least the past 40 years is striking; this is truly the first service sector-led recession. It has flipped typical job loss dynamics: Layoffs have been unusually broad-based as 5 out of every 6 private sector jobs are in the service sector.<sup>7</sup> Typically, volatility in the economy originates in either financial markets or goods-producing sectors, where investment spending is large and volatile. Shocks in these sectors are more common. A recent example is the 2016 downturn in oil production dubbed "The Invisible Recession" by *New York Times* economics reporter Neil Irwin,<sup>8</sup> and these jobs tend to be more volatile and skew male, owing in part to occupational segregation, long-standing gender biases about which jobs are appropriate for women,<sup>9</sup> and inflexibility around the unpaid care obligations that are overwhelmingly borne by women.

Even when these shocks have spilled over enough to create recessions in the past, job losses in goods-producing sectors such as manufacturing and construction have typically been larger than losses in the service sector. This is one reason men's employment has declined by a larger percentage than women's employment in previous recessions.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, this stability is not exclusively a win for women; persistent occupational segregation<sup>11</sup> along racial and gender lines<sup>12</sup> is one reason women are overrepresented in service work with lower pay, benefits, and opportunities for advancement.<sup>13</sup>

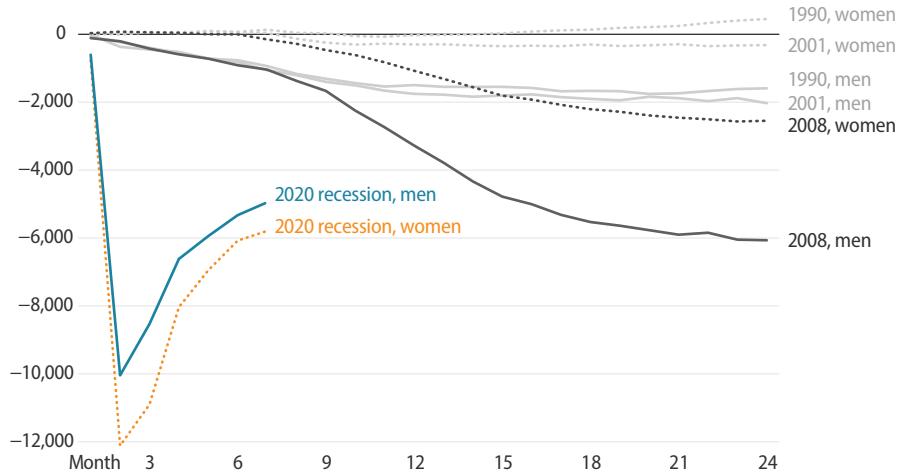
This recession is different: Women have lost the most jobs from the beginning. (see Figure 2) Between February and April, women lost more than 12.1 million jobs while men lost just more than 10 million.<sup>14</sup> The gender gap in employment loss peaked in May, when women lost 1.28 jobs for every male job loss. In every previous recession on record, women lost less than one job for every job that men lost. (see Figure 1)

Hopes for a rapid recovery, which would have required unprecedented job growth in the service sector, are dimming as job growth has slowed overall—especially for women and especially in the past two months. The latest data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' jobs report showed that not only are millions of women still unemployed, but 865,000 dropped out of the labor force in September. This total is more than four times the number of men who left the labor force in the same month and three times women's payroll employment gains in September.<sup>15</sup> Women's labor force participation had been essentially flat for the previous three months of the recovery before falling considerably in September.

**FIGURE 2**

**Women have lost more jobs than men during this recession, and this gap persists as the economy regains jobs**

Number of jobs lost each month after the employment peak in each of the last four recessions by gender, in thousands of persons



Source: Authors' calculations based on U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Current Employment Statistics, Table B-5, Series Codes: CES0000000010, CES0000000001," available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cestab5.htm> (last accessed October 2020).

Unfortunately, this looks increasingly like the early stages of a slow, lengthy jobs recovery: The Federal Reserve does not expect to raise interest rates above zero until at least 2023.<sup>16</sup> The growing signs are that women will face a variety of pressures—and likely will for some time to come.

In economic terms, the failure to suppress the coronavirus is creating both supply-side and demand-side pressures against women in the labor market. On the demand side, an inability to safely perform face-to-face jobs reduces demand for workers who have experience in these occupations. Given the number of businesses that have closed and significant budget cuts on the table from state and local governments—entities that employ women in large numbers of good jobs—these demand-side pressures will likely persist for some time even after the public health crisis is addressed.

The supply-side pressure—that is, pressure that makes it harder for women, especially mothers and those with caregiving responsibilities, to be in the labor market—comes from the collapse of many pieces of the care networks these women have had to individually construct. With COVID-19 case counts still well above safe levels; the elevated importance of monitoring parents and older relatives; and many children either learning from home or no longer able to go to shuttered child care centers, families have had to both provide more day-to-day care work and insource even more care work within their households.

It shouldn't be difficult to guess which gender is shouldering more of these responsibilities. Women have always performed the majority of unpaid caregiving and household labor, and the pandemic is likely to increase that gap, which further devalues the

work of women not only figuratively but literally in gross domestic product (GDP) accounting.<sup>17</sup> If an individual is hired to spend Mondays doing laundry, preparing dinner, providing child care, and making repairs around someone's house, 100 percent of that individual's income raises GDP. However, if that same person performs all those exact same tasks on Tuesdays, but does them in their own home and is not paid for that work, 0 percent of that labor is accounted for in GDP. To the extent that the pandemic forces more of that work to be done by individuals without compensation, it will not only mechanically slow economic growth but also reduce the autonomy of the people doing that labor—overwhelmingly women. The burden is especially acute for mothers with younger children and caregivers.

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Women of color have been disproportionately harmed during the "she-cession"

Applying a racial lens to this woman-centric recession shows that the trends are both universal and that they are disproportionately felt by many women of color, yet their experiences are distinct, and the data suggest a different, more nuanced narrative.

Job losses among women have been considerable across the board, with white women losing more than 9 million jobs between February and April and Black women losing nearly 2 million jobs over the same span.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, those numbers could have been far worse if millions of those women hadn't been deemed essential workers, forestalling job loss but also placing them at immense health risk—both to themselves and to their communities.<sup>19</sup> On top of these risks, many women of color deemed essential also earn considerably lower-than-average wages, so even these essential workers are still struggling to make ends meet.<sup>20</sup>

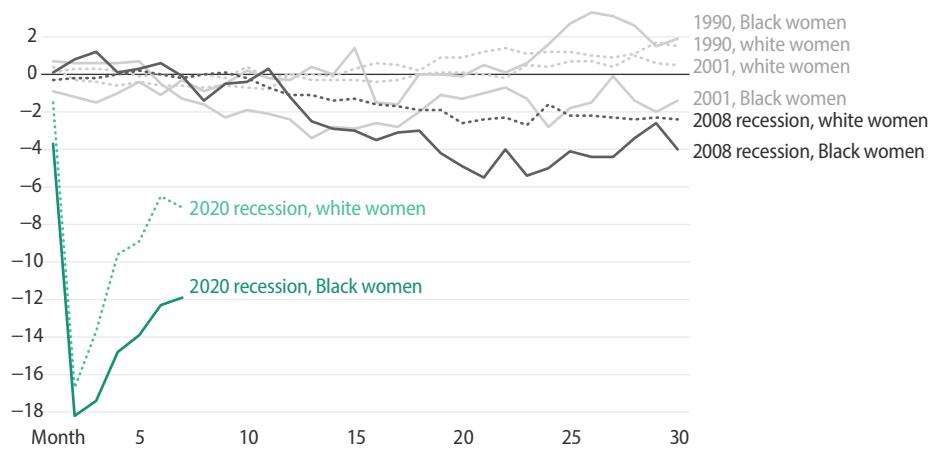
However, the essential workers narrative should not overtake the understanding of exactly where the burden of job loss has fallen. Black workers have always been the last hired and first fired. And, as Center for American Progress senior economist Olugbenga Ajilore documents,<sup>21</sup> initial job losses for Black and white workers during this recession were so large that they briefly closed the persistent gap between Black and white unemployment rates. However, the first-fired, last-hired relationship has been disturbingly accurate as the recession has ground on. Black women's employment fell 18.2 percent from its peak compared with 16.7 percent for white women, but white women have also recovered much more rapidly in percentage terms. In September, white women held 7.1 percent fewer jobs than in February, while Black women's employment was still down by 11.9 percent. (see Figure 3) Latina women have also experienced dramatic employment and labor force declines, with job losses out of phase with the rest of the recovery.

Less discussed has been the plight of Asian women, which is easily lost by a lack of data. Monthly jobs reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics do not disaggregate

employment statistics by gender for Asian Americans, owing to a small sample size, let alone across the extremely diverse range of ethnicities collapsed into one ethnic group. However, research by economists Mina Kim and Diane Lim has shown that Asian American women have suffered a slower-moving, especially deep recession.<sup>22</sup> As of August, Lim shows that Asian American women have gone from having the lowest unemployment rate in February at 3 percent—tied with white women—to 15.9 percent at peak unemployment and remained at 11.5 percent in August—the slowest recovery of any ethnic group from February through August.<sup>23</sup>

**FIGURE 3**  
**Both Black and white women suffered unprecedented job losses in April, but Black women's jobs have come back even slower than white women's jobs**

Monthly percentage change from prerecession employment among women ages 20 years and older in each of the last four recessions, by race



Source: Authors' calculations based on Federal Reserve Economic Data, "Employment Level - 20 Yrs. And Over," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/graph/?g=wdj4> (last accessed October 2020).

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**Mothers have born the burden of caregiving during the “she-cession”**

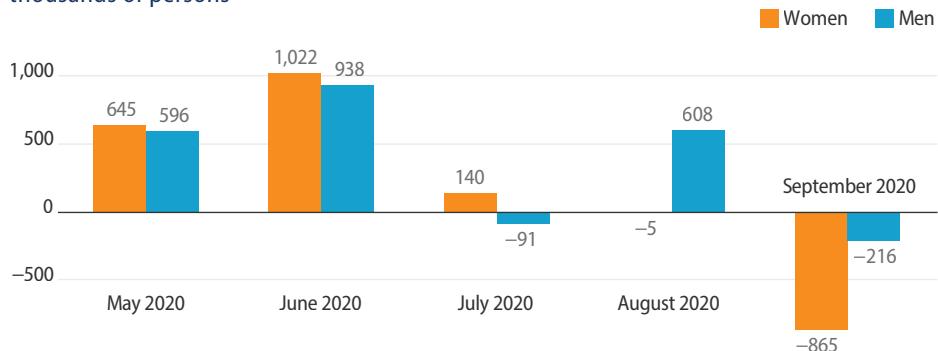
The care burden of this pandemic has fallen especially hard on unpaid caregivers, most prominently mothers with younger children, but unpaid caregivers more generally, including adults caring for parents. Across six months of data, the combination of job losses and these care burdens has disproportionately reduced employment among Black, Asian American, and Latina mothers.<sup>24</sup> Numerous surveys, from the usual U.S. Census time-use study to real-time research spun up from scratch—including one survey from economist Alicia Sasser Modestino—have confirmed common sense: The responsibility of supervising children and their remote schooling is falling most heavily on mothers.<sup>25</sup> This is not just true of the millions of elementary school students who need supervision and assistance while in virtual classrooms, but also of the millions of families with disrupted early childhood care, whether because centers have closed or because usual family caregivers are at high risk and cannot provide the care so many families rely on. The lack of child care before coronavirus was harming mothers’ labor force participation, and this problem has only worsened since the pandemic began.<sup>26</sup>

The August jobs report showed that job gains were solid and that the labor force grew considerably, but more than 100 percent of labor force growth came from men; in fact, the female labor force actually shrank slightly if teenagers are excluded. Then, in September, more women left the labor force than in all but one month on record—April, when the United States lost more than 20 million jobs.<sup>27</sup> (see Figure 4) But as bad as September’s data were, the start of the school year should not be treated as a one-off event, especially in the context of research showing that telecommuting mothers are losing work hours at much higher rates than fathers as the burden of child care increases.<sup>28</sup> The care strain didn’t start in September, and the pressure it is putting on women’s earnings will not disappear in October. That this strain is falling so heavily on women is unsurprising.

**FIGURE 4**

#### **Women left the labor force in staggering numbers as summer wound down**

Monthly labor force change among Americans ages 20 and older by gender, in thousands of persons



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," available at <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpssea03.htm> (last accessed October 2020).

The disruption of school and child care is by no means the only story here, as detailed below, but schooling is very much one of them. Microdata from the Current Population Survey illustrate how women are faring based on the age of their youngest child.

Typically, it is mothers with the youngest children who are most likely to be out of the labor force<sup>29</sup>—and this is still the case. However, since March, both the largest decreases in employment and the largest increases in those who are not in the labor force are mothers with children between the ages of 6 and 12.<sup>30</sup> One explanation is that the disruption to child care for the youngest children has been severe and shows up less in labor market data. Fewer of these parents were working before the crisis than those with older children, and employment of mothers of the youngest children fell less in response to the shock of COVID-19 because it was already so affected by a lack of child care that it didn’t have as far to fall. Because the overwhelming majority of children ages 6 to 12 attend school outside the home, the shock of not being able to find child care due to elementary school closures has affected mothers of this group of children more.

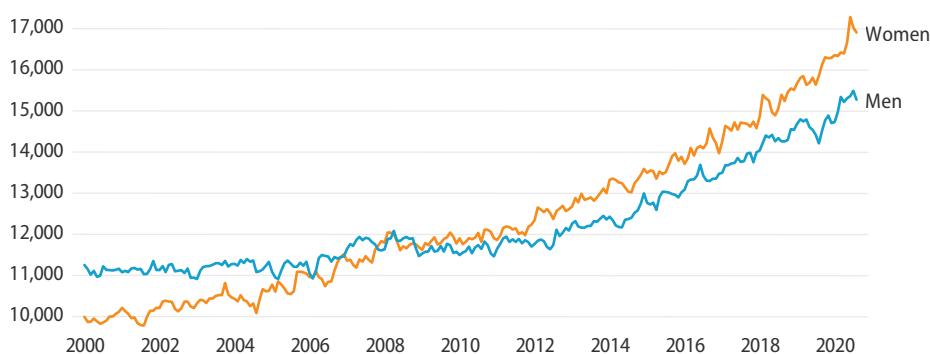
A recession that is disproportionately hurting women and other caregivers, brought on by America’s failure to halt the initial wave of the coronavirus, and a recovery that is mainly benefiting men—an outcome amplified by the failure to make in-person

schooling safe—means that the long-term consequences of both are likely to be severe. Caregiving burdens disproportionately fall on women, even among younger and more progressive parents.<sup>31</sup> Yet, among the cohorts of the labor force likely to have young children—in this case, individuals ages 25 to 44, although the trend is starker among the 25- to 34-year-old cohort—women have constituted the majority of the college-educated labor force for a decade.<sup>32</sup> (see Figure 5)

**FIGURE 5**

**Young women have outpaced young men as the most highly educated demographic cohort in the United States**

Year-by-year size of the U.S. civilian labor force among men and women with a college degree ages 25 to 44, in thousands of persons



Source: Authors' calculations based on Federal Reserve Economic Data, "Civilian Labor Force - Bachelor's Degree or Higher," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/graph/?g=wU9S> (last accessed October 2020).

Researchers have pointed out for years that even the most egalitarian intentions are no match for a society and political system that pushes parents away from equality. Many mixed-gender parents are forced into no-win situations in which gender pay discrimination creates financial pressure for mothers to sacrifice work to manage child care, regardless of any preferences for equality a couple may hold. In households that have already received a fatherhood bonus<sup>33</sup> and motherhood penalty<sup>34</sup> in which fathers may both earn more and face stronger stigma around work flexibility,<sup>35</sup> the financially rational decision for each individual family can be financially counterproductive to gender equality and a stronger economy. Furthermore, the lack of supportive work-family policies such as paid family and medical leave to help manage caregiving responsibilities can leave women with the stark choice of opting out of the workforce entirely or reducing their work hours, income, and job security.

Dramatically reduced child care availability is a huge burden for two-earner families. Whether it is curtailed early childhood education, K-12 schooling, aftercare programs, or other activities, it is extremely difficult for these families to hold on. But as hard as it is for two parents to do three jobs, it is much more difficult for one parent to do two jobs. Whereas partnered women—even the many who are household breadwinners—are pressured to leave jobs, solo-parent breadwinners face the opposite pressure. With millions of people searching for work and companies looking for hundreds of thousands to lay off, solo parents are being forced to provide more hours of care while also dealing

with the challenges of hiding this burden from current or prospective employers who may count care work against them.

What is more frustrating about the failure to meet the economic, public health, and caregiving challenge that the country faces is what is at stake for the long term in the U.S. economy. The first generation of women to surpass men in education attainment risks losing the career ladders that will lead them to making the economy more productive and ensuring the financial security of their families. In addition, there is the very real risk of a second wave of student debt problems if the women who invested in their education and have completed college in record numbers cannot stay in the labor market to earn the fruits of their investments and hard work.

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### Remote schooling and the child care crisis are costing women's careers

Now that school has started—or some version of it—it is clear that women are shouldering most of the burden of facilitating learning at home. While this can be compatible with teleworking for some older children, the need for constant monitoring of young children and additional facilitation for children with special needs is poised to exact a huge toll on women's careers.

Moreover, the crisis facing the child care industry threatens to leave lasting scars. Fully 20 percent of child care jobs have been lost thus far, and most of those job losses have hit women workers.<sup>36</sup> Centers that have reopened at lower capacities are just scraping by in an industry where profitability is extremely challenging in the best environments, while child-care workers—largely women of color whose work is undervalued in the best of times—are forced to take on additional health risks without additional compensation. Even before the pandemic, far too many Americans could not access child care, whether due to living in child care deserts, the crushing financial costs new parents are forced to bear to afford care, or because of the long waiting lists child care centers have to maintain to ensure that they stay near maximum capacity—a de facto requirement for centers to stay in business.<sup>37</sup>

Some couples have relocated to put the care burden on grandparents—particularly grandmothers. Although little good data exist to show that this is the case, it is generally understood that grandparents were already a huge source of child care even before the pandemic. In many cases, with few to no in-person school or child care options, working parents have relied heavily on grandparents. This is not without financial risk, as these obligations can push grandmothers to work less or even retire early, with potentially dramatic impacts on social security benefits. This is especially true for widowed, divorced, and unmarried grandmothers, whose benefits are heavily driven by their own earnings.

Ironically, the remote work celebrated by some as unshackling workers from locating near their employers could amplify gender inequality if couples and families move farther from cities to take advantage of this new flexibility. Indeed, economists Dora

Costa and Matthew Kahn show one key driver of rising housing costs in urban areas is the choice of dual-earner couples to live in cities that offer career opportunities for both partners.<sup>38</sup> There is little guarantee that these same career opportunities will last if couples move to less-dense areas, many of which are already child care deserts, or that mothers will recover from the caregiving hit their careers are taking when they can only search for new opportunities that guarantee remote work. The likelihood of families prioritizing a single job is high; the likelihood of that job being a mother's is not.

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## Conclusion

The impacts of this recession and partial recovery on women are still unclear and not set in stone, but the nation's lack of progress thus far makes for an alarming picture. April was the worst month for job losses on record, but the stalling labor market, which has produced slow progress for women since June, should be galvanizing bold action that centers women in efforts for a recovery. Even improvements over the next few months would be no reason to exhale: The last time women's employment-to-population ratio was this low was in 1986, and it took 9.5 years to get from that point to prerecession levels.<sup>39</sup> As anyone with school-aged children can confirm, no one should assume that September was a one-off crisis. With pediatricians warning that it may be a full school year before children can be vaccinated,<sup>40</sup> families will continue to do their best to hang on another day, another week, another month. Yet, many will not, and America's economic policies must catch up to this reality.

The economic conditions the country faces call for large, lasting economic stimulus and aid to protect families immediately. But inaction from Congress and the White House means that women and their families will continue to face a precarious economic situation, barely hanging onto their careers and housing while facing food insecurity and increased family responsibilities. Only by containing and controlling the spread of the coronavirus—as China has done, which has allowed them to project economic growth of 3 percent in 2020<sup>41</sup>—can America recover from the worst economy since the Great Depression. Expanded unemployment benefits, more spending on food security and housing assistance, aid to state and local governments—and particularly to schools—are all crucial steps to get the U.S. economy back on its feet. But with women's employment and labor force participation rates back at 1980s levels, bolder, longer-term policies that center good jobs for women that build supports for caregiving—such as paid leave and dramatically more access to affordable child care, among others—need to be at the top of the agenda.

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*The authors would like to thank Jocelyn Frye, Sarah Jane Glynn, Shipla Phadke, and many others for invaluable comments, discussion, and feedback on this brief.*

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