

The Economic Security of Single Mothers

Single mothers represent an especially vulnerable population of working women. The care giving responsibilities and inequitable professional circumstances faced by working single mothers often create significant barriers to achieving economic security for them and their families.

The overwhelming majority of single-parent households are lead by women.

- In the spring of 2006, an estimated 13.6 million single parents had custody of 21.2 million children under 21 years of age.¹
- The 21.2 million children living with a single parent represented 26 percent of all 81.6 million children under 21 years old living in families.²
- In 2006, five of every six single parents were mothers (83.8 percent) and one in six were fathers.³

The population of single mothers in the U.S. is steadily increasing.

- In 2006, 38.5 percent of all births in the U.S. were to unmarried women.⁴
- In 2006, 44 percent of babies were born to unmarried women in their twenties.⁵
- The birthrate for unmarried women in 2006 jumped 16 percent since 2002.⁶

Earning disparity poses further challenge to single mothers.

- Women earn on average 77 cents to the white male dollar. However, this number is far worse for women of color. African American women earn just 66 cents to the male dollar, and Latino women earn just 54 cents.⁷
- Women with children earn 10 to 15 percent less than women without children - a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the “mommy tax.” There is not a comparable tax on men’s wages when they become parents.⁸
- More than three out of four single mothers are in the workforce, and three quarters of that group works full time. Like the female population at large, single mothers earn less than their male counterparts.⁹
- The typical single mother working full-time, year-round, earns \$25,000, compared to \$38,000 for the typical worker.¹⁰
- Forty percent of poor, single, working mothers who paid for child care in 2001 paid at least half of their cash income for it.¹¹

Many single mothers and their children live in poverty.

- A large portion of single mothers are low-income. Having a child is the number one indicator that a person will live in poverty, and not surprisingly, 37 percent of single mothers and their families do.¹² The percentage of African-American and Hispanic single-mother families living in poverty is even higher (43.6 percent and 42.5 percent, respectively).¹³
- In 2007, more than 7.5 million children born to single-mothers lived under the poverty line, which the Census Bureau defined as \$16,537 for a family of three in 2007.¹⁴ 43 percent of children born to female-headed households are poor. This compares to the 919,000 children born to single-fathers living under



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the poverty line. 21.3 percent of children born to male-headed households are poor.¹⁵

- This is despite the fact that many of these women are employed. In 2003, nearly seventy percent of single mothers were employed.¹⁶

Sources

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Women Work! The National Network for Women's Employment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that advances economic justice and equality for women. Since 1978, the Network has assisted millions of women to successfully enter, re-enter and advance in the workforce. Through supporting, advocating and increasing women's economic self-sufficiency, Women Work! members strengthen families and communities.