



WOMEN'S BUREAU
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

ISSUE BRIEF

Working Mothers Issue Brief

Women, including 25.1 million working mothers with children under age 18, are a major force in our economy. Over the years, many mothers have joined the labor force, and their role as economic providers for their families¹ has increased. In 2015, 69.9 percent of mothers with children under age 18 were in the labor force, representing over a third (34.2 percent) of working women.ⁱ Moreover, mother-only families made up nearly a quarter of families with children.ⁱⁱ While their role in the paid labor force has changed, mothers continue to carry a disproportionate share of the unpaid household and caregiving responsibilities. At the same time, they still face a lack of adequate workplace supports and encounter barriers that prevent them from achieving economic security for themselves and their families.

This issue brief presents statistics and information on working mothers, highlighting their employment characteristics, the changing structure of families, the poverty status of working mothers and their families, mothers as sole or primary earners, and unpaid caregiving and household responsibilities. The final section of the issue brief highlights some policies and workplace supports for working parents and their families.



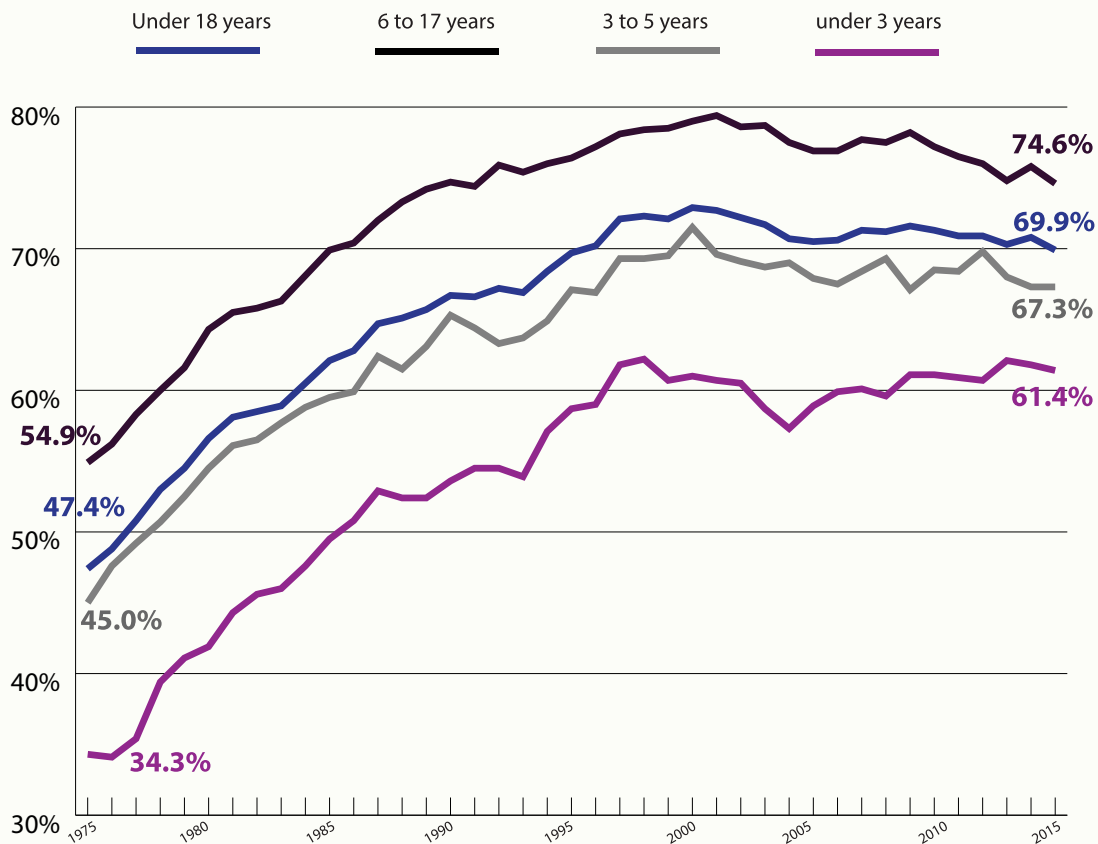
EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Women, especially mothers with children under age 18, are much more likely to participate in the labor force than in the past. In 2015, women's overall labor force participation rate (56.7 percent) was about ten percentage points higher than 40 years ago.ⁱⁱⁱ For mothers, the increase was much steeper. In March 2015, 69.9 percent of mothers with children under age 18 were in the labor force, up from 47.4 percent in 1975. The increase in the labor force participation has been even more pronounced for mothers with young children. Between 1975 and 2015, the labor force participation rate of mothers with children under age 3 increased by 27.1 percentage points (see Figure 1).^{iv}

¹ In this publication, family refers to family households as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau—a group of two or more people (one of whom is the householder) residing together and related by birth, marriage, or adoption. In this publication, families include children under age 18.



Figure 1. Labor force participation rate of mothers by age of youngest child, March 1975-2015



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, March 1975-2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Mothers' labor force participation rates vary with the age of their youngest child and with their marital status.

Mothers with children age 6 to 17 are more likely to be in the labor force than those with younger children. The labor force participation rate for fathers sees very little variation, with over 9 in 10 fathers participating in the labor force regardless of the age of their youngest child (see Figure 2).^v Among mothers with children under age 18, unmarried mothers² were more likely to be in the labor force (75.1 percent) compared to married mothers with a spouse present (67.6 percent).^{vi}

² Includes mothers who are never married, widowed, divorced, separated, or married but living apart from their spouse. A cohabitating partner may be present.



Race and Ethnicity

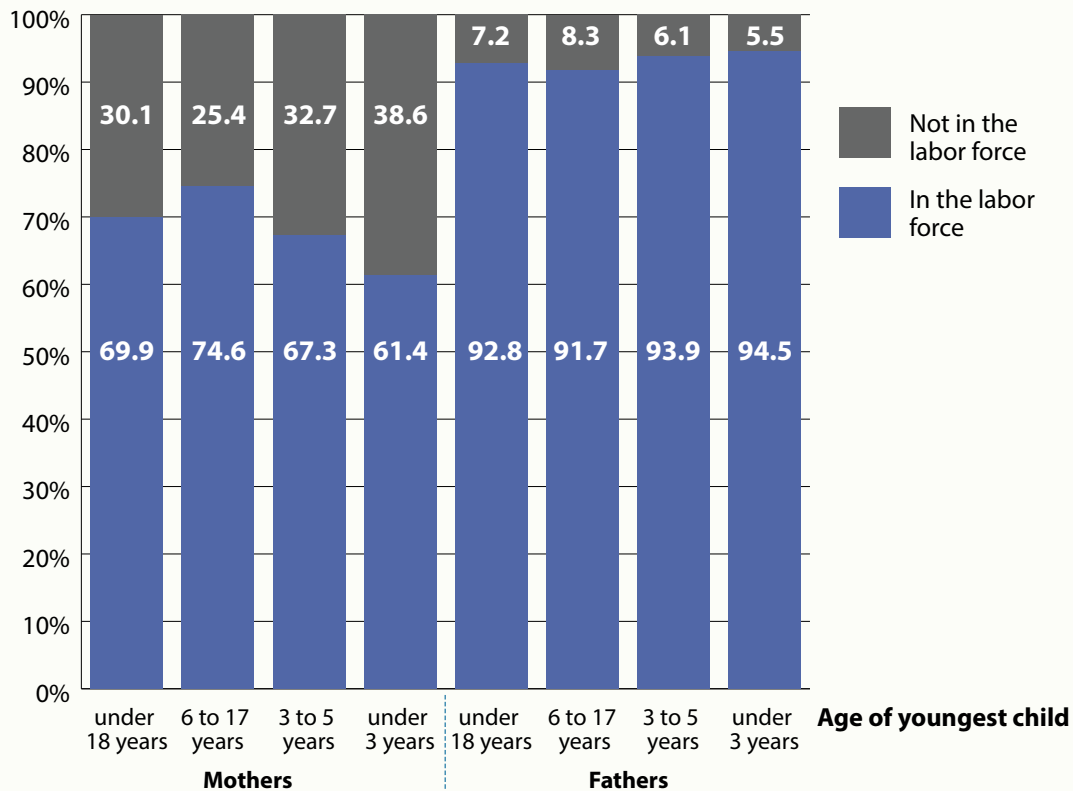
Historically, Black mothers have had the highest labor force participation rates. In March 2015, the labor force participation rates of mothers with children under age 18 were:

- 76.3 percent for Black mothers
- 69.6 percent for White mothers
- 62.0 percent for Asian mothers
- 61.6 percent for Hispanic mothers

Note: People of two or more races are not included. Hispanics may be of any race.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, March 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. Unpublished Tabulations.

Figure 2. Labor force participation rates of mothers and fathers by age of youngest child, March 2015



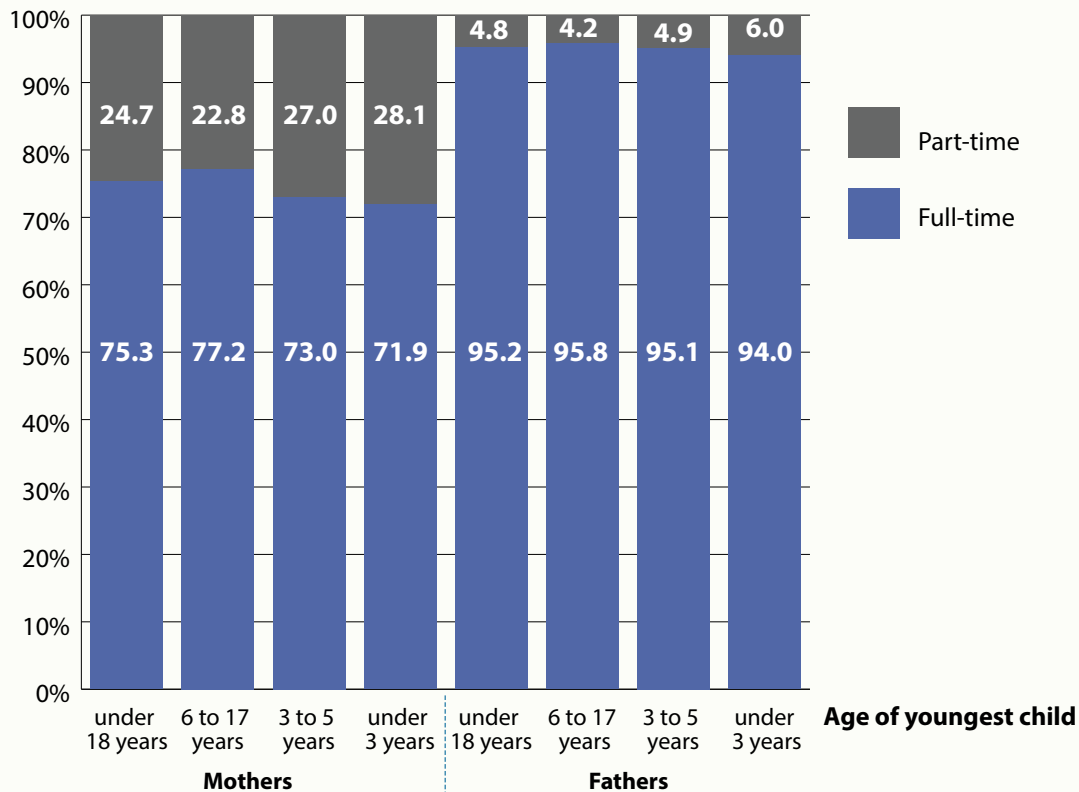
Notes: Based on the civilian noninstitutional population age 16 years and older.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, March 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.



While the majority of employed mothers work full-time, they are much more likely than employed fathers to work part-time. In March 2015, 75.3 percent of mothers with children under age 18 worked full-time. However, they were five times more likely than employed fathers to work part-time (24.7 percent vs 4.8 percent, respectively). Moreover, mothers' full-time and part-time employment status varies with the age of their youngest child. Among employed mothers with children age 6 to 17, 77.2 percent worked full-time, compared to 71.9 percent of those with children under age 3. Regardless of the age of their youngest child, over nine in ten employed fathers worked full-time (see Figure 3).^{vii}

Figure 3. Employed parents by full-time and part-time status and age of youngest child, March 2015



Notes: Based on the employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population age 16 years and older. Full-time is 35 hours or more per week; part-time is less than 35 hours.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, March 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

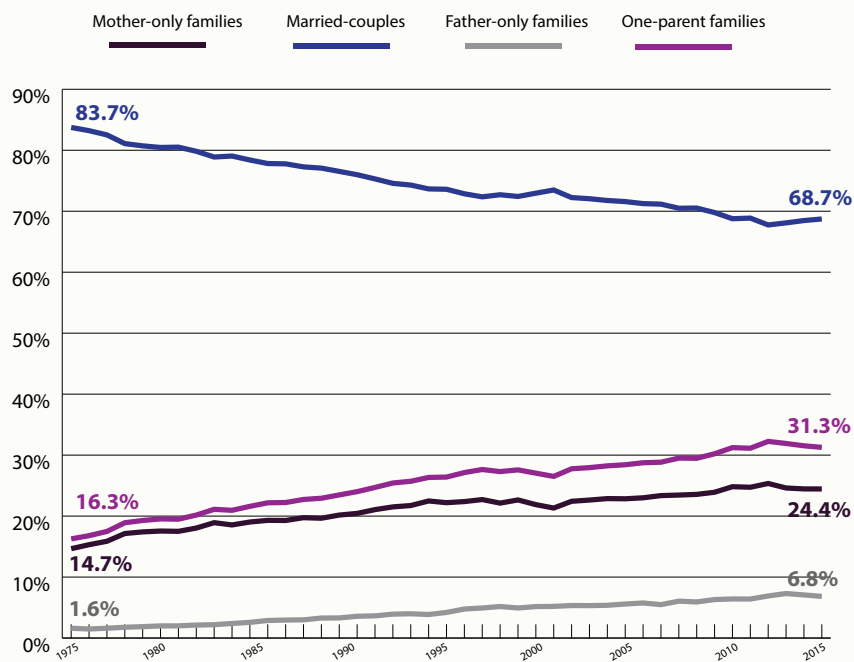


CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18

One notable change in American families has been the increase in the share of families that are one-parent, which has nearly doubled since 1975 (see Figure 4). In March 2015, 31.3 percent of families with children were one-parent families, up from only 16.3 percent in March 1975. In March 2015, mother-only families made up nearly 1 in 4 families with children and the vast majority (78.2 percent) of one-parent families. Moreover, mother-only families were more likely to have two or more children under age 18 (51.0 percent), compared to father-only families (40.0 percent).

While mothers make important contributions to their family's income in married-couple families, the percentage of mother-only families underscores mothers' critical role as economic providers.

Figure 4. Share of families with children under age 18 by family structure, March 1975-2015



Notes: Prior to 1980 the counts of families include unrelated subfamilies. Data for 1970 and 1980 are revised based on the 1980 decennial census. Data from 2014 onwards reflect redesigned questions.

Mother-Only Family Groups by Race and Ethnicity

In March 2015, mother-only families represented the following shares of family groups with children under age 18:

- 54.3 percent of Black family groups
- 28.9 percent of Hispanic family groups
- 18.9 percent of White, non-Hispanic family groups
- 12.1 percent of Asian family groups

Note: Family groups include all parent-child situations (two-parent and one-parent): those that maintain their own household; those that live in the home of a relative; and those that live in the home of a non-relative. People of two or more races are not included. Hispanics may be of any race.

Notes: Data refers to families with own children—they are the biological, step, or adopted children of the householder or family reference person (in the case of subfamilies). Own children are also limited to children who have never been married, are under the age of 18 (unless otherwise specified), and are not themselves a family reference person. In one-parent families, the parent may have a cohabiting partner, but none of their children are also identified as the child of their cohabiting partner.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1975-2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplements.



FAMILIES IN POVERTY WITH WORKING MOTHERS

In 2014, 2.7 million families with a working mother and children under age 18 were living in poverty,³ 2.1 million of which were mother-only families.⁴ viii The poverty rate for families with a working mother and children under age 18 was 3.4 percent for married-couple families, and 28.4 percent for mother-only families.⁵ ix Families with a working mother and children under age 6 had even higher poverty rates (4.4 percent for married-couple families and 39.5 percent for mother-only families).^x

Poverty Threshold

The U.S. Census Bureau uses a set of income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is living in poverty. If a family's total income before taxes is less than the poverty threshold, then that family is considered to be in poverty (the measure excludes noncash benefits and capital gains). For example, in 2014 the poverty threshold for a parent living with two children under the age of 18 was \$19,073 and for a parent with three children, it was \$24,091.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement

Race and Ethnicity

In 2014, the poverty rates for families with children under age 18 headed by a working mother with no spouse present were:

- 34.4 percent of Hispanic families
- 33.8 percent of Black families
- 23.2 percent of Asian families
- 21.0 percent of White, non-Hispanic families.

Note: People of two or more races are not included. Hispanics may be of any race. Another worker may be present.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

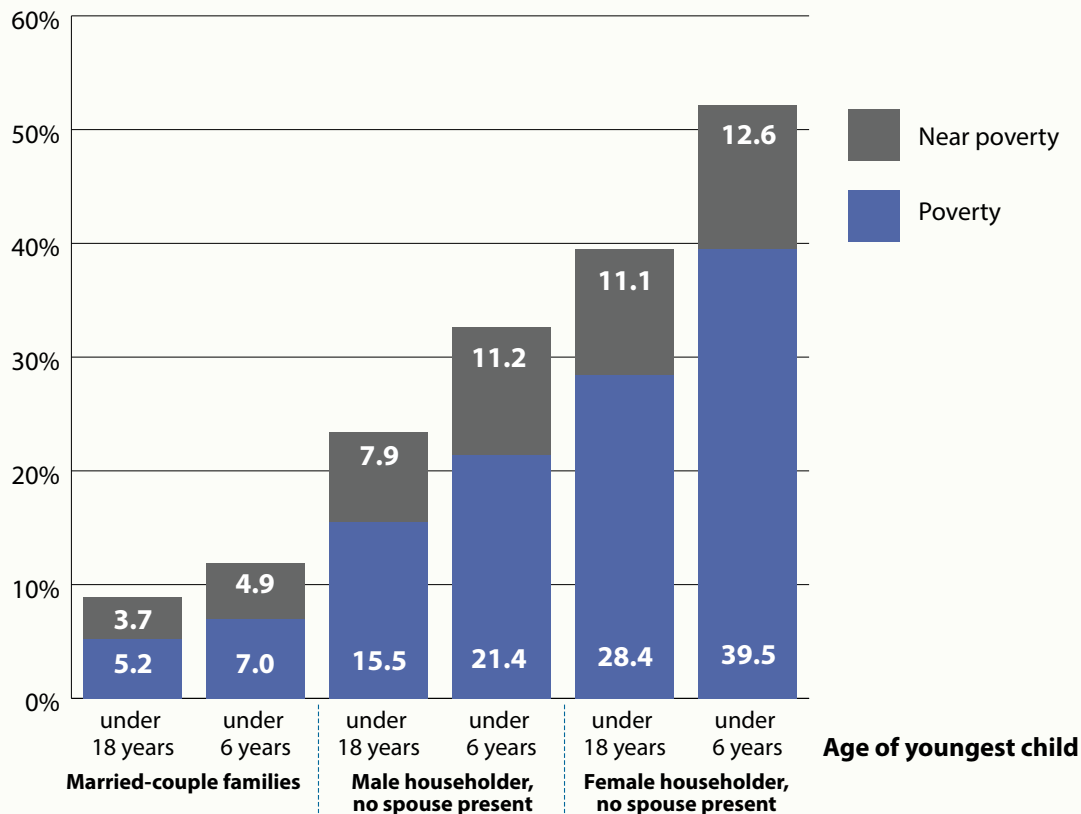
³ Includes opposite-sex married-couple families with related children under age 18 in which both spouses worked, and those in which the wife worked but the husband did not; and mother-only families with a working householder.

⁴ In this section, the parent in mother-only or father-only families may have a cohabiting partner; the children may or may not be identified as the child of his or her cohabiting partner. In addition to a working householder, other workers might be present.

⁵ The overall poverty rate for families with children under age 18 with a working householder was 11.6 percent and 15.6 percent for families with children under age 6 in 2014.



Figure 5. Families in poverty or near poverty with a working householder, by family type and age of child, 2014



Notes: This publication defines families in near poverty as those with a family income between 100 and 130 percent of the official poverty thresholds. In married-couple families the householder may be either spouse. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Among families with a working householder and children under age 18, mother-only families were over five times more likely to be in poverty than married-couple families,⁶ and nearly twice as likely to be in poverty as father-only families (see Figure 5).^{xi} In married-couple families with children under age 18, the poverty rate was higher for those in which the mother worked but the father did not (19.6 percent), compared to those in which the father worked but the mother did not (15.3 percent).^{xii} Therefore, families in which the mother is the only parent working are more likely to be in poverty.

In addition to families that live below the official poverty threshold, many others live near the poverty line.⁷ Families in near-poverty face similar barriers to economic security as those under the official poverty line.^{xiii} Among mother-only families with a working householder, the majority of those with children under age 6 lived in or near poverty, as well as 39.5 percent of those with children under age 18 (see Figure 5).^{xiv}

⁶ In married-couple families, the householder may be either spouse.

⁷ This publication defines families in near-poverty as those with a family income between 100 and 130 percent of the poverty thresholds. For example, a family of three, including two children, with a family income between \$19,073 and \$24,795 would be considered to be in near-poverty based on 2014 poverty thresholds.



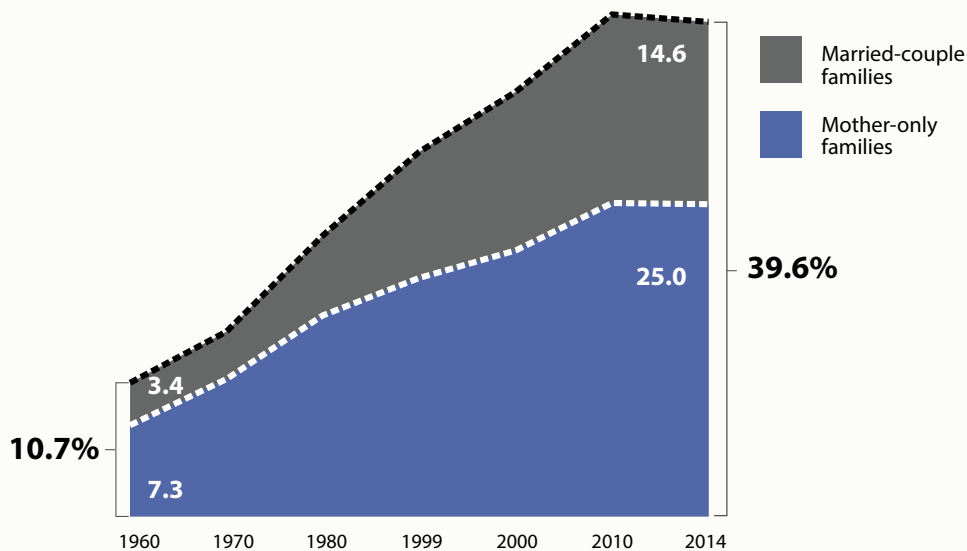
Even when the mother worked full-time and year-round, 14.0 percent of mother-only families with children under age 18 were living in poverty. Another ten percent of those families lived in near-poverty. This means that even when the mother works 35 hours or more per week and 50 or more weeks per year, over one million mother-only families are in or near-poverty.^{xv}

MOTHERS AS PRIMARY AND SOLE EARNERS

As more mothers have joined the labor force, the number of mothers who are the primary or sole earner in their families has also increased over the decades. In 2014, 39.6 percent of family households with children under age 18 had mothers who were either the sole or primary source of income for the family, up from 10.7 percent in 1960 (see Figure 6).⁸ Mother-only families represent the greatest share of families with a mother as the sole or primary earner. Of all family households with children under age 18, 25.0 percent are mother-only families, compared to 14.6 percent of married-couple families that have a married mother who out-earns her spouse.^{xvi}

Figure 6. Mothers as the primary or sole earners, 1960-2014

Percent of households with children under age 18 in which mothers are the primary or sole earner



Notes: See footnote 8.

Source: 1960 - 2000 Decennial Census and 2010 - 2014 American Community Surveys (ACS) Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) files.

⁸ A mother is considered the primary earner if she meets one of the following criteria: 1.) She is in a married opposite-sex family household with children under 18 and earns more than her husband or 2.) She heads a mother-only family with children under age 18. Married-couple families in which neither spouse is the householder are excluded. Mother-only families refer to those in which the householder is a mother who is never married, widowed, divorced, separated, or married but living apart from her spouse. A cohabitating partner may be present. Data are limited to the head of the household ages 15 and older. Earnings are based on total pre-tax personal income or losses from all income sources for the previous year. This definition and methodology is similar to and adopted from Pew's definition of female breadwinner (see <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/breadwinner-moms/>).



Race and Ethnicity

In 2014, 73.6 percent of Black mothers with at least one child under age 18 were the primary or sole earner in the household. The corresponding proportion of mothers that were the primary or sole earner among other racial and ethnic groups was smaller:

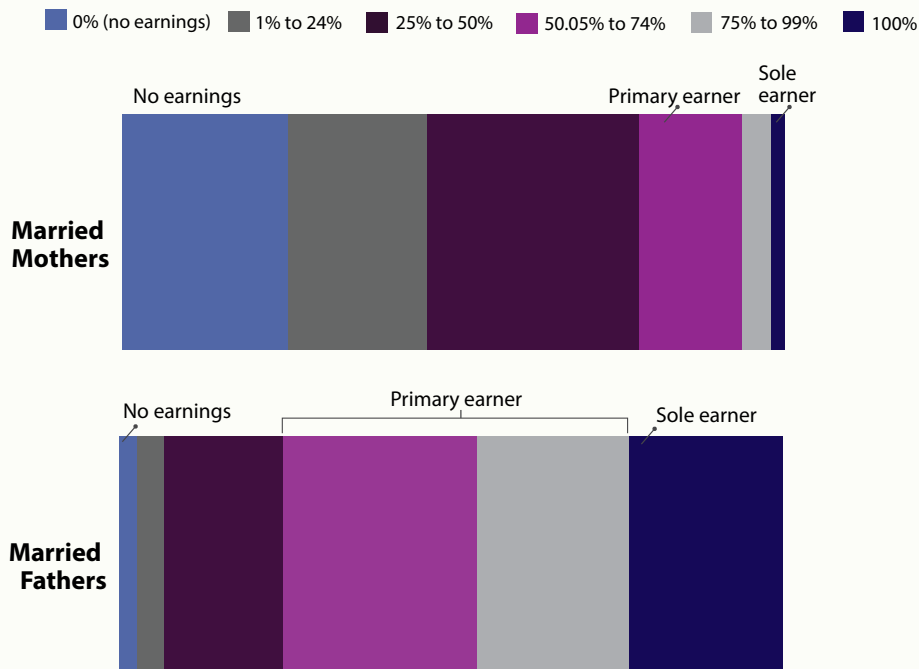
- 43.0 percent of Hispanic mothers
- 38.3 percent of White, non-Hispanic mothers
- 31.4 percent of Asian mothers

Note: People of two or more races are not included. Hispanics may be of any race.

Source: Women's Bureau analysis of 2014 American Community Survey (ACS) Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) file.

Married mothers bring in at least some income in 75 percent of all married couple families with children under age 18. Around a third of married mothers contribute between 25 and 50 percent of the total family income. However, it is less common for married mothers to earn all the family income or to be the primary earners than for married fathers. A small percentage of married mothers (2.2 percent) earn all the family income compared to 23.3 percent of married fathers (see Figure 7). Regardless of primary earner status, the majority of married mothers contribute to their families' economic security.^{xvii}

Figure 7. Married couples share of family income, 2014



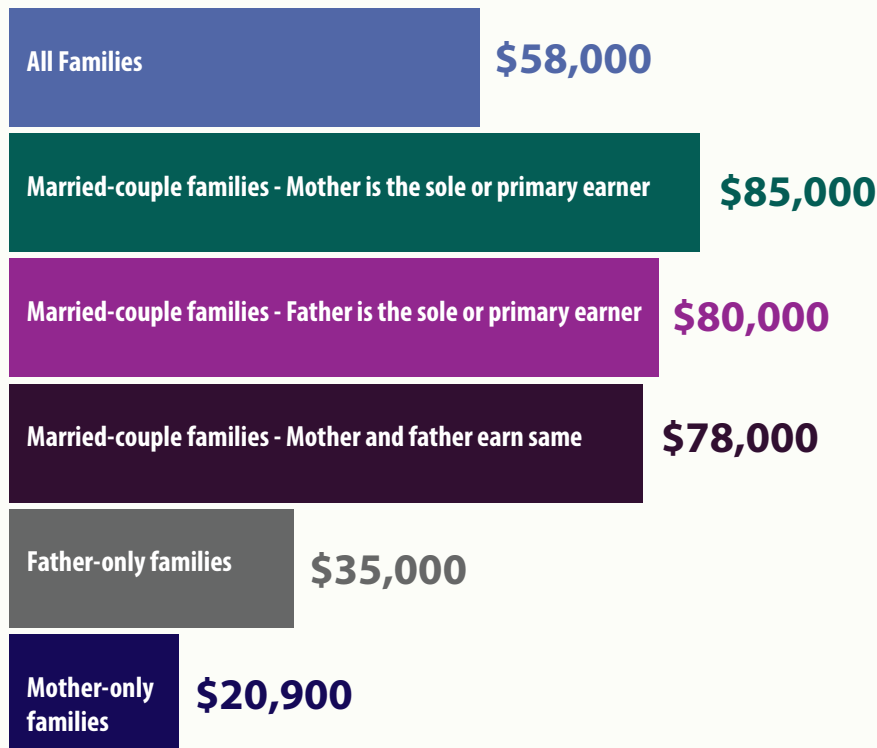
Note: Percent based on opposite-sex married couple family households with own child(ren) under age 18. Family income refers to the sum of the wife's and husband's income.

Source: 2014 American Community Surveys (ACS) Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) files.



A mother's earnings can have a significant impact on a family's overall income. In 2014, the median family income was \$85,000 for married couples with children in which the wife was the primary earner, \$5,000 more than households in which the father was the primary earner, and more than four times as much as the median income for families led by an unmarried mother (\$20,900) (see Figure 8). While total family income is highest when a married mother is the primary provider, it is usually because both spouses contribute financially. In married-couple families where the father is the primary earner, he is more likely to be the sole earner.^{xviii}

Figure 8. Median annual income by family household type and primary earner status, 2014



Note: Married couple family households limited to opposite-sex couples. Values based on families with own child(ren) under age 18 in the household.

Source: 2014 American Community Surveys (ACS) Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) files.

UNPAID CAREGIVING AND HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES

Despite the increase in mothers' labor force participation, they continue to bear an unequal share of unpaid caregiving and household responsibilities. On an average day, employed mothers spend more time caring for and helping household children than employed fathers. This imbalance in unpaid responsibilities persists for full-time working mothers and regardless of the age of the youngest child.^{xix} Moreover, due to women having children at a later age, combined with the longer life-span of their own parents and the needs of an aging U.S. population, many of today's



women who provide eldercare⁹ (20.9 percent) are also parents of children under age 18.^{xx} During 2013 and 2014, over 3.3 million working mothers provided unpaid eldercare, two-thirds of whom were employed full-time.^{xxi}

In addition to unpaid caregiving responsibilities, working mothers are also more likely to perform household activities¹⁰ than working fathers. Although working fathers are spending more time on unpaid household and child care activities than in the past, this trend of working mothers spending more time than fathers on such activities holds true even when the mother is employed full-time and regardless of the age of the youngest child.^{xxii} These additional duties, combined with the lack of adequate workplace supports like paid family leave, may affect the number of hours women work in the paid labor force and the types of jobs they hold, which may in turn affect their earnings.

WORKPLACE SUPPORTS FOR MEETING WORK AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

Many working parents lack access to even the most basic workplace supports, such as job-protected paid parental leave, earned sick days, or quality and affordable child care. The lack of these supports, coupled with the increase in the role of mothers as economic providers for their families, impact the ability of parents to adequately meet work and family responsibilities. Moreover, mothers are much more likely than fathers to work in part-time or low-paying jobs, and those jobs are far less likely to provide access to paid leave, flexible workplaces, child care assistance and other quality of life benefits.^{xxiii}

Access to Family-Friendly Employee Benefits

- 13 percent of workers have access to paid family leave
- 88 percent of workers have access to unpaid family leave
- 11 percent are offered child care assistance
- 6 percent have access to flexible workplace benefits

Note: Data refer to civilian workers.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey, March 2015

CHILD CARE

The cost of child care poses a considerable burden for many families and comprises a significant portion of family income. In 2011, 31.9 percent of families with an employed mother and at least one child under age 15 made weekly child care payments, which represented about seven percent of family income per month.¹¹ Families with a monthly income of \$4,500 or more also spent about seven percent of their income on child care. However, for those with incomes below \$4,500, monthly child care expenditures represented a much higher share of family income—up to 39.6 percent for families with a monthly income below \$1,500.^{xxiv}

According to the 2015 National Compensation Survey, only 11.0 percent of all civilian workers in the United States have access to childcare assistance¹² through their employers. Full-time or part-time status, employer size, occupation, and other employer or employee characteristics can impact access to employer supported child care. For example, 13.0

⁹ Eldercare providers may care for a spouse or unmarried partner, a parent, a grandparent who did not live with them, another related person (including grandparents who lived with the eldercare provider), a friend or neighbor, or someone else.

¹⁰ Household activities include housework; cooking; lawn and garden care; pet care; vehicle maintenance and repair; home maintenance, repair, decoration, and renovation; and household management and organizational activities.

¹¹ Percent is a ratio of average monthly child care payments (prorated from weekly averages) to average monthly family income. Excludes families with no reported of income in the last 4 months.

¹² Child care benefits are defined as a workplace program that provides for either the full or partial cost of caring for an employee's children in a nursery, day care center, or a baby sitter in facilities either on or off the employer's premises.



percent of full-time employees had access to child care through their employer compared with five percent of part-time employees, and businesses with 100 or more workers were more likely than smaller businesses to offer child care assistance to their employees (17.0 percent and 5.0 percent, respectively).^{xxv}

The federal government and states provide some child care supports in the form of subsidies, tax credits, publicly funded pre-kindergarten, and early childhood care programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start. In addition, a small number of localities offer publicly-funded, universal pre-kindergarten for residents. However, of the 14.2 million children eligible for child care subsidies under federal rules, only 15 percent received government assistance.^{xxvi} The absence of widely-available affordable, high-quality child care is a significant barrier to women's workplace equality, and has other significant costs to children and society.^{xxvii}

PAID FAMILY LEAVE

Most employees in the United States depend on voluntary paid leave benefits from their employers, which only partially meet workers' needs and underscore the importance of securing federal family-friendly workplace policies, including universal paid family leave.¹³ The only national labor policy in the United States that offers leave opportunities for women and men in the workforce with family caregiving responsibilities is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, which provides eligible employees up to 12 weeks of job-protected, unpaid leave.¹⁴ The United States is the only advanced economy that does not currently have some form of paid leave law in place at the federal level, though some states have passed or are exploring the feasibility of adopting paid family and medical leave laws. Paid leave is good for individuals, families, and our economy. For example, paid maternity leave has been shown to increase the likelihood a new mother stays in the labor force, and can help reduce employee turnover.^{xxviii}

CONCLUSION

The role of mothers as family economic providers has changed in recent decades; more mothers are in the paid labor force and serve as sole or primary breadwinners for their families, and the share of one-parent families has grown. Moreover, many working parents also provide unpaid eldercare in addition to caring for their own children. Mothers also continue to bear the brunt of unpaid caregiving and household responsibilities. While the landscape of America's labor force has changed, workplaces have been slow to adapt. Addressing gender inequality in the workforce and expanding workplace supports that address the needs of parents to meet work and family responsibilities are critical to ensure both our continued economic competitiveness as a nation and the economic security of today's families.

¹³ As of May 2016, the following states had paid family and medical leave laws: California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and New York. The New York paid family and medical leave law will take effect on 2018.

¹⁴ The FMLA provides eligible employees with up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave per year for (1) The birth of a son or daughter or placement of a son or daughter with the employee for adoption or foster care; (2) to care for a spouse, son, daughter, or parent who has a serious health condition; (3) for a serious health condition that makes the employee unable to perform the essential functions of his or her job; or (4) for any qualifying exigency arising out of the fact that a spouse, son, daughter, or parent is a military member on covered active duty or call to covered active duty status. An eligible employee may also take up to 26 work weeks of leave during a "single 12-month period" to care for a covered service member with a serious injury or illness, when the employee is the spouse, son, daughter, parent, or next of kin of the service member. Employees are eligible to take FMLA leave if they have worked for their employer for at least 12 months, and have worked for at least 1,250 hours over the previous 12 months, and work at a location where at least 50 employees are employed by the employer within 75 miles. In 2012, about 60% of employees met all criteria for coverage and eligibility under the FMLA.



ENDNOTES

- ⁱ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, March 2015. Unpublished Tabulations.
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- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. "POV15: Families With Related Children Under 18 by Householder's Work Experience and Family Structure." Accessed April 13, 2016. https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032015/pov/pov15_100.htm.
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- ^{xv} Ibid.
- ^{xvi} Women's Bureau analysis of 2014 American Community Survey (ACS) Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) file.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, 2014 Annual Averages. Unpublished Tables.
- ^{xx} Ibid. "Table 2. Eldercare Providers by Sex and Selected Characteristics Related to Care Provided, Averages for the Combined Years 2013-14." Accessed April 13, 2016. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/elcare.t02.htm>.
- ^{xxi} Ibid. "Table 9. Number and Percent of Eldercare Providers Who Were Parents of Household Children under Age 18 by Sex and Selected Characteristics, Averages for the Combined Years 2013-2014." Accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/elcare.t09.htm>.
- ^{xxii} U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, 2014 Annual Averages. Unpublished Tables.



- xxiii U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, March 2015. Unpublished Tabulations; and National Compensation Survey, March 2015. "Table 40. Quality of Life Benefits: Access, Civilian Workers." Access April 13, 2016. <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2015/ownership/civilian/table40a.htm>.
- xxiv U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participations, 2008 Panel Wave 8. "Table 6. Average Weekly Child Care Payments of Families With Mothers Present and Children Under 15 Years, by Selected Characteristics: 2011." Accessed April 25, 2016. <https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p70-135.pdf>.
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