

Single Parenthood in the United States – A Snapshot (2014 edition)

Prevalence. Single parenthood is very common in the United States.¹ At a given time in 2013, 28% of children were living with a single parent.² Half or more of today's children will likely spend at least part of their childhood in a single parent family.³

Gender. Most single parents are single mothers. In 2013, 77% of single parents were single mothers,⁴ and 85% of the children living with a single parent were living with their mother.⁵

Marital Status. The majority of single parents have been married or are married. In 2013, 55% of the children in single parent families were living with a parent who was separated, divorced, or widowed, 45% with a never-married parent.⁶

Number of Children. Most single parents have no more than two children. In 2013, 56% of single parents had one child, 30% two children.⁷

Race & Ethnicity. In 2013, 3% of single parents were Asian, 23% were Hispanic, 28% were Black, and 46% were non-Hispanic White.⁸

Educational Attainment. Most single parents have graduated high school, and a majority have attended college. In 2013, 85% of single parents had graduated high school, 54% had attended college, and 18% had at least a Bachelor's degree.⁹

Employment. At a given time in 2013, 69% of single parents were employed, compared to 85% of fathers in two married parent families, and 62% of mothers in two married parent families.¹⁰ In 2012, 48% of single parents worked full-time all year long, and 24% were not employed at any time in the year.¹¹

Low wages are very common for U.S. single parents, and much more common for single parents than for other U.S. workers.¹² In 2009, 39% of employed single mothers were in low-wage employment, with low wage defined as an hourly wage less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage.



Average Income. In 2012, median income for single mother families was \$25,493, 31% of the \$81,455 median income for two parent families; median income for single father families was \$36,471, 45% of the median for two parent families.¹³

Poverty. The poverty rate for children in single parent families is triple the rate for children in two parent families. In 2012, 42% of children in single parent families were poor, compared to 13% of children in two parent families.¹⁴

Most poor children live with parents who are married, or who have been married, or who are cohabiting. In 2012, 41% of poor children lived with two married (32%) or two unmarried (9%) parents, 28% with a never-married single parent, 22% with a divorced or separated single parent, and 8% with no parent.¹⁵

Child poverty is linked to poor health and school dropout; to negative adult outcomes including joblessness; and to reduced economic output estimated to be about 4% of Gross Domestic Product.¹⁶

Hardship – Hunger, Homelessness, No Health Care Coverage, Unmet Essential Needs. In 2013, 33% of single parent families were “food insecure,” and 13% used a food pantry.¹⁷ In 2012, 11% of children in single parent families, and 27% of single parents, had no health care coverage.¹⁸ Over 70% of the families in homeless shelters in 2013 were single parent families.¹⁹

In 2011, 42% of single parent households experienced at least one of nine hardships measured by the Census Bureau, compared to 22% for the population as a whole; 26% of single parent households experienced at least two of these hardships, compared to 12% for the population as a whole.²⁰ 32% of single parent households had at least one unpaid essential need, 18% had unpaid rent or mortgage, 11% had a phone disconnect and 5% a utility disconnect, 16% had an unmet need for a dentist and 12% an unmet need for a doctor.²¹

Social Assistance (“Welfare” or TANF) & Food Stamp (SNAP) Receipt. In 2012, 42% of the children in single parent families received Food Stamps, but only 9% received TANF.²² Under the 1996 federal welfare reform law creating TANF to replace AFDC, the percentage of poor families receiving welfare assistance has dropped from 72% to 26%, and the median state welfare benefit has fallen to only 27% of the poverty line.²³

Compared to Single Parent Families in Peer Countries. The employment rate for U.S. single parents is above the average single parent employment rate in comparison high income countries.²⁴ Despite the above average employment rate, the poverty rate for single parent families in the U.S. is far above the average poverty rate for single parent families in comparison high income countries.²⁵

Less generous income support programs, and the greater prevalence of low wages in the U.S., help explain the exceptionally high poverty rate for single parent families in the U.S.²⁶

Legal Momentum promotes gender equity, personal and economic security for women and girls, an adequate safety net, and an end to poverty through targeted litigation, public policy advocacy, research, and education. To subscribe to Legal Momentum's Women & Poverty listserv, send an email to tcasey@legalmomentum.org with "subscribe" in the subject line.

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NOTES

¹ In this report, unless otherwise indicated, a "single parent" means a parent with a child(ren) below age 18 who is not living with a spouse or with the child's other parent.

² U.S. Census Bureau, *Table C2. Household Relationship and Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years, by Age and Sex: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013C.html>.

³ See Blau, David & Wilbert van der Klaauw, *What Determines Family Structure*, IZA DP No. 4912 (April 2010); Blau, David & Wilbert van der Klaauw, *A Demographic Analysis of the Family Structure Experiences of Children in the United States*, IZA DP No. 3001 (August 2007); Heuveline, Patrick, et. al, *Shifting Childrearing To Single Mothers: Results From 17 Western Countries*, 29 *Population and Development Review* 47-71 (2003); Andersson, Gunnar, *Children's Experience Of Family Disruption And Family Formation: Evidence From 16 FFS Countries*, 7 *Demographic Research* 343-364 (2002).

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Table F1. Family Households, by Type, Age of Own Children, Age of Family Members, and Age, Race and Hispanic Origin of Householder: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013F.html>.

⁵ Same source as in note 2.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, *Table C3. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years and Marital Status of Parents, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin and Selected Characteristics of the Child for All Children: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013C.html>.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Table FG5. One-Parent Unmarried Family Groups with Own Children Under 18, by Labor Force Status of the Reference Person: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013FG.html>.

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, *Table F1. Family Households, By Type, Age Of Own Children, Age Of Family Members, And Age, Race And Hispanic Origin Of Householder: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013F.html>.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Table F2. Family Households, By Type, Age Of Own Children, And Educational Attainment Of Householder: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013F.html>.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *Table FG5. One-Parent Unmarried Family Groups with Own Childre Under 18, by Labor Force Status of the Reference Person: 2013*, & *Table FG2. Married Couple Family Groups, by Family Income, and Labor Force Status of Both Spouses: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013FG.html>.

¹¹ Calculated by Legal Momentum based on household heads with related children under age 18, and using the U.S. Census Bureau CPS Table Creator at <http://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html>.

¹² Albelda, Randy, and Michael Carr, *Low-Wage And Low-Income Workers In The U.S., 1979-2009* (2012), Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts, Center for Social Policy, Working Paper 2012-1, available at http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1059&context=csp_pubs.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Table F-10. Presence of Children Under 18 Years Old All Families by Median and Mean Income: 1974 to 2012*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/families/>.

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Table C8. Poverty Status, Food Stamp Receipt, and Public Assistance for Children Under 18 Years by Selected Characteristics: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013C.html>.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Dreyer, Benard, *To Create a Better World for Children and Families: The Case for Ending Childhood Poverty*, 13 *Academic Pediatrics* 83-90 (2013), available at <http://download.journals.elsevierhealth.com/pdfs/journals/1876-2859/PIIS1876285913000065.pdf>; Center for American Progress, *The Economic Costs of Poverty in the United States – Subsequent Effects of Children Growing Up Poor* (2007), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/01/pdf/poverty_report.pdf.

¹⁷ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Household Food Security in the United States in 2012* (2013), available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err155.aspx>, and statistical supplement available at http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/ap-administrative-publication/ap061.aspx#.UiYFyj_8KSo.

¹⁸ Calculated by Legal Momentum based on household heads with related children under age 18, and using the U.S. Census Bureau CPS Table Creator at <http://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html>.

¹⁹ U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, *HUD's 2013 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Populations and Subpopulations -- All States, Territories, Puerto Rico and District of Columbia*, available at https://www.onecpd.info/reports/CoC_PopSub_NatlTerrDC_2013.pdf.

²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *Extended Measures of Well-Being: Living Conditions in the United States: 2011* (Sept. 2013), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p70-136.pdf>.

²¹ Id. See also, Legal Momentum, *Census Bureau Reports That Single Parent Households Have Exceptionally High Hardship Rates* (Dec. 2013), available at <https://www.legalmomentum.org/sites/default/files/reports/SingleParentHardship.pdf>.

²² U.S. Census Bureau, *Table C8. Poverty Status, Food Stamp Receipt, and Public Assistance for Children Under 18 Years by Selected Characteristics: 2013*, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013C.html>.

²³ Legal Momentum, *The TANF Misery Index Climbed To A Record National High In 2012* (Feb. 2014), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/resources/tanf-misery-index-2014-update>.

²⁴ See Legal Momentum, *Worst Off – Single-Parent Families In The United States - A Cross-National Comparison Of Single Parenthood In The U.S. And Sixteen Other High-Income Countries* (2012), available at <https://www.legalmomentum.org/sites/default/files/reports/worst-off-single-parent.pdf>.

²⁵ Id.

²⁶ Id.