

Single Mother Poverty in the United States in 2010

Over one quarter of U.S. children under age 18 reside with only one of their parents,¹ and as many as half of U.S. children may reside in a single parent family at some point in their childhood.² The vast majority - over 85% - of single parents are single mothers.

Poverty is widespread and severe in single mother families. According to the recently released Census Bureau data on poverty in 2010, people in single mother families had a poverty rate of 42.2% and an extreme poverty rate of 21.6%.³ Poverty means an income less than the official poverty standard, \$14,570 for a family of two in 2010.⁴ Extreme poverty means an income less than half the poverty standard.

Poverty rates are much higher for single mother families than for other households. The 42.2% poverty rate for people in single mother families was almost three times the 15.1% rate for the population as a whole, and was more than four times the 10.1% rate for people in married couple families. The 42.2% single mother rate was also much higher than the 25.6% poverty rate for people in single father families.

Over half of family poverty is single mother poverty. In 2010, there were 14.2 million poor people in single mother families, 11.2 million in married couple families, and 2.3 million in single father families.

Poverty rates are higher for single mothers who are women of color. In 2010, the poverty rate was 50.3% for Hispanic single mothers, 47.1% for Black single mothers, and 32.7% for non-Hispanic White single mothers. Three fifths of poor single mothers were Black or Hispanic.

Over half (52%) of poor single mothers were employed in 2010 and 14% were employed full-time all year. A majority of those who were jobless the entire year had at least one child below age 6.

Two thirds (66.8%) of poor single mother families received Food Stamps in 2010 but only one quarter (27.1%) received cash welfare assistance.

Material hardship is quite common for single mother families. In 2009, the most recent year for which these data are available, 37% of single mother families were counted as "food insecure" under national federal standards, meaning that their "access to adequate food [was] limited by lack of money."⁵ In 2010, single mother families accounted for over 75% of the 171,000 families officially counted as homeless.⁶

Single mother poverty rates are much higher in the U.S. than in other high income countries. In the mid-2000s, the poverty rate for single mothers in the U.S. was the highest among 16 high income countries, and almost twice the average rate in the other 15 high income countries.⁷

A low minimum wage, scarce employment, occupational segregation into low-wage "women's work," unaffordable child care, child support delinquency, the absence of a family allowance program,

and a weak unemployment insurance system all contribute to the exceptionally high U.S. single mother poverty rate. Another important factor is our restrictive and stingy welfare program.⁸ Since the 1996 enactment of federal “welfare reform” legislation, welfare program enrollment has plummeted among poor families.⁹ Likewise, welfare benefit amounts are far below the average in other high income countries, and in virtually every state have fallen to less than 50% of the poverty standard.¹⁰

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ENDNOTES

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Table C2. Household Relationship and Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years, by Age and Sex 2010,” available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html>.

² See, Slade, Alexander & Andrea Beller, *The Importance Of Duration Of Family Structure In The Production of Health by Gender* (2011), available at <http://paa2011.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=111092>; Antecol, Heather & Kelly Bernard, *Does Single Parenthood Increase The Probability Of Teenage Promiscuity, Substance Use, And Crime?*, 20 *Journal of Population Economics* 55-71 (2007); Graefe, D.R. and D.T. Lichter, *Life Course Transitions of American Children: Parental Cohabitation, Marriage, and Single Motherhood*, 36 *Demography* 205–17 (1999); Moffitt, R.A. and M.S. Rendall, *Cohort Trends in the Lifetime Distribution of Female Family Headship in the United States, 1968–1985*, 32 *Demography* 32:407–24 (1995).

³ Except as otherwise indicated, the poverty figures cited in this report are taken from the detailed Census Bureau poverty data for 2010 available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032011/pov/toc.htm>.

⁴ Higher amounts apply to larger family sizes.

⁵ The rate cited in the text is the food insecurity rate for households with children under 18 years with a female head with no spouse present as reported by USDA in the annual publication “Household Food Security in the United States 2009,” available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR108/ERR108.pdf>.

⁶ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress* (2010), available at <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/2010HomelessAssessmentReport.pdf>.

⁷ Legal Momentum, *Poverty Rates for Single Mothers Are Higher in the U.S. than in Other High-Income Countries* (2011), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/our-work/women-and-poverty/resources--publications/single-mothers-poverty-higher-us.pdf>.

⁸ See Legal Momentum, *Welfare Reform at Age 15: A Vanishing Safety Net for Women and Children* (2011), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/our-work/women-and-poverty/resources--publications/welfare-reform-15.pdf>.

⁹ Legal Momentum, *Single Mothers Since 2000: Falling Farther Down* (2011), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/our-work/women-and-poverty/resources--publications/single-mothers-since-2000.pdf>.

¹⁰ Legal Momentum, *Welfare Benefits and Child Poverty: A Cross-Country Comparison* (2009), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/assets/pdfs/welfare-benefits-and-child.pdf>.