

SINGLE MOTHERS SINCE 2000: FALLING FARTHER DOWN¹

For the one in four U.S. families who are single mother families, the ‘Great Recession’ of 2008-2009 exacerbated a period of losing ground that had started around 2000. From 2000 to 2009, joblessness increased for single mothers at the same time that “welfare reform” was making welfare less accessible to single mother families in need. In 2009, over a quarter of single mothers were jobless the entire year, a third were jobless in an average month, and less than half were employed full-time year-round.

Increased joblessness and decreased access to welfare combined to increase poverty and hardship. Between 2000 and 2009, the percentage of single mothers with an income less than the poverty level rose from 33% to 38.5%, the percentage with an income less than half the poverty level rose from 14% to 19%, the percentage counted as “food insecure” rose from 31% to 37%, and the percentage turning to food pantries to feed their families rose from 8.6% to 13.7%. One fifth of single mother families now live doubled up in someone else’s home. Family homelessness has increased and the vast majority of homeless families are single mother families.

EMPLOYMENT RATES HAVE FALLEN

The percentage of single mothers employed in an average month fell from 76% in 2000 to 73% in 2007, and to 68% in 2009.²

The percentage of single mothers employed full-time year-round fell from 51% in 2002 to 49% in 2007, and to 45% in 2009.³

¹ This report supported in part by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

² The rates cited in the text are the rates reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) for mothers in families maintained by women with own children under 18 in the annual publication “Employment Characteristics of Families – (year),” most recent edition available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>.

³ The rates cited in the text are the rates for household heads in female-headed primary families with no spouse present and with related children under 18 as calculated by Legal Momentum using the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey Table Creator (CPS Table Creator) available at

The percentage of single mothers never employed at any time in the year rose from 21% in 2002 to 23% in 2007, and to 27% in 2009.⁴

UNEMPLOYMENT RATES HAVE CLIMBED

The official statistics count non-employed persons as “unemployed” only if they are actively searching for employment. Most jobless single mothers are not counted as unemployed because they are not actively seeking employment due to lack of child care, ill health, or other reasons.

The official unemployment rate is calculated by dividing the number unemployed by the sum of the number employed and the number unemployed. For single mothers, the average monthly unemployment rate rose from 7.5% in 2000 to 8.0% in 2007, and to 13.6% in 2009.⁵

MEDIAN INCOME HAS DECLINED

Median annual income (in 2009 dollars) for single mother families fell from \$27,296 in 2000 to \$25,809 in 2007, and to \$25,172 in 2009.⁶

POVERTY RATES HAVE INCREASED

The official poverty rate for single mother families rose from 33% in 2000 to 37% in 2007, and to 38.5% in 2009.⁷

http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpssc/cps_table_creator.html. 2002 is the earliest year covered by the CPS Table Creator.

⁴ Id.

⁵ The rates cited in the text are the rates reported by BLS for women in families with own children under 18 and with no spouse present in the annual publication “Employment Characteristics of Families – (year),” most recent edition available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>.

⁶ The amounts cited in the text are the amounts reported by the Census Bureau for families with a female householder with related children under 18 and no spouse present in “Table F-10. Presence of Children Under 18 Years Old by Median and Mean Income: 1974 to 2009,” available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/families/index.html>.

⁷ The rates cited in the text are the rates reported by the Census Bureau for families with a female householder with related children under 18 and no spouse present in “Table 4. Poverty Status of Families, by Type of Family, Presence of Related Children, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 2009,” available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/families.html>.

Families with an income less than half the poverty level are commonly considered to be in “extreme poverty.” The percentage of single mother families in extreme poverty rose from 14% in 2000 to 18% in 2007, and to 19% in 2009.⁸

WELFARE RECEIPT HAS FALLEN DESPITE INCREASED JOBLESSNESS AND POVERTY

The 1996 federal “welfare reform” law ended “welfare as we know it” by replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children or “AFDC” with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or “TANF” as the national welfare program for families with children. TANF created strong financial incentives for states to reduce their welfare caseloads and benefit amounts. As a result, welfare receipt declined from 62% of the number of poor children in 1995 to 21% in 2009, and TANF benefits plummeted far below the official poverty level.⁹ For a family of three, the daily benefit per person is now less than \$8.00 in all but two states, less than \$5.00 in thirty states, and as low as \$1.86 in one state.

Because of their high jobless rates, the contraction of welfare aid has had an especially harsh impact on single mother families, and is probably the most important cause of the increase in extreme poverty that single mothers experienced in the 2000’s. Despite rising joblessness and poverty, the percentage of single mother families receiving welfare benefits fell from 16% in 2001 to 11% in 2007, and to 10% in 2010.¹⁰

⁸ The rates cited in the text are the rates for families with a female householder with related children under 18 and no spouse present calculated by Legal Momentum from the data reported by the Census Bureau in “Pov 27: Source of Income by Ratio of Poverty Threshold for Families and Unrelated Individuals: (year)” for 2009 and 2007, and in “Table 18. Source of Income by Ratio of Poverty Threshold for Families and Unrelated Individuals in 2000” for 2000.

⁹ See Legal Momentum, *The Bitter Fruit Of Welfare Reform: A Sharp Drop In The Percentage Of Eligible Women And Children Receiving Welfare* (2009), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/assets/pdfs/lm-tanf-bitter-fruit.pdf>; and Legal Momentum, *Meager And Diminishing Welfare Benefits Perpetuate Widespread Material Hardship For Poor Women And Children* (2009), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/assets/pdfs/tanf-meager-benefits.pdf>.

¹⁰ The rates cited in the text are the rates of receipt for children living with their mother only calculated by Legal Momentum from the data reported by the Census Bureau in the annual report “Table C8. Poverty Status, Food Stamp Receipt, and Public Assistance for Children Under 18 Years by Selected Characteristics (year),” most recent edition available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html>.

FOOD STAMP RECEIPT HAS INCREASED

Food Stamp receipt, like welfare receipt, plunged in the second half of the 1990's as a result of "welfare reform." Unlike with welfare, however, in the early 2000's the federal government responded to this plunge by adopting new Food Stamp policies aimed at increasing participation among eligible families. The subsequent Food Stamp participation expansion was particularly beneficial to single mother families for the same reason that the welfare contraction was particularly harmful. The percentage of single mother families receiving Food Stamp benefits increased from 29% in 2001 to 33% in 2007 and to 41% in 2010.¹¹

HOMELESSNESS AND DOUBLE-UPS HAVE INCREASED

For the past three years the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has counted the number of homeless persons in emergency shelters at any time in the year and the number of persons homeless (both sheltered and unsheltered) on one given day. The number of families using emergency shelters rose from 130,968 in 2007 to 159,142 in 2008, and to 170,129 in 2009, with single mother families accounting each year for between 75% and 80% of the total number of homeless families.¹² Single mother families probably also accounted for most of the 17,675 homeless families without shelter on a given day in 2009.

Economic necessity forces many low income families to double up in another person's or family's household. Doubling up is often a precursor to homelessness. The percentage of single mother families doubled up in another person's household declined from 18.4% in 2001 to 18.2% in 2007, but rose to 20.3% in 2010.¹³

¹¹ Id.

¹² U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress* (2010), at p. 43 & 51, available at <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/5thHomelessAssessmentReport.pdf>.

¹³ The rates cited in the text are the rates for children living with their mother but not their father in a household in which the mother is not the householder calculated by Legal Momentum from the data reported by the Census Bureau in the annual report "Table C2. Household Relationship and Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years, by Age and Sex (year)," most recent edition available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html>.

FOOD INSECURITY AND FOOD PANTRY USE HAVE INCREASED

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issues annual studies on household food security and food insecurity, with “food insecurity” described by USDA as meaning that “access to adequate food is limited by lack of money and other resources.” The food insecurity rate for single mother families declined from 31% in 2000 to 30% in 2007, but then jumped to 37% in 2009.¹⁴

These same USDA studies also report on the numbers of persons who turn to food pantries for emergency food assistance. The percentage of single mothers using a food pantry rose from 8.6% in 2000 to 10.6% in 2007, and to 13.7% in 2009.¹⁵

BLACK AND HISPANIC SINGLE MOTHERS TRAIL WHITE SINGLE MOTHERS

About half of single mothers are either Hispanic (21%) or Black Non-Hispanic (31%).¹⁶ White single mothers have higher employment rates, higher incomes, higher levels of college attendance, and lower poverty rates than Black or Hispanic mothers. Black and Hispanic single mothers have similar poverty rates, employment rates and median incomes, but Black single mothers have higher rates of college attendance than Hispanic single mothers.

Table One¹⁷			
White, Black, and Hispanic Single Mothers in 2009			
	White	Black	Hispanic
Poverty Rate	32%	44%	46%
Employment Rate	69%	62%	63%
Median Family Income	\$29,311	\$22,167	\$22,033
Any College Attendance	59%	49%	33%

¹⁴ The rates cited in the text are the rates 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 (year),” most recent edition available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR108/ERR108.pdf>.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ The figures cited in the text are the figures for 2010 for female-headed primary families with related children under 18 and no spouse present as calculated by Legal Momentum using the CPS Table Creator.

¹⁷ Table One sources: employment rates, poverty rates, and college attendance rates are the rates for household heads in female-headed primary families with related children under 18 and no spouse present as calculated by Legal Momentum using the CPS Table Creator; median income figures are from the source cited in footnote 6.

SINGLE MOTHERS TRAIL SINGLE FATHERS

In 2010, 23.1% of children were living with their mother only and 3.4% with their father only.¹⁸ Of the total 26.5% of children living with one parent only, about six sevenths were living with their mother and about one seventh with their father.

Table Two¹⁹		
Single Mothers and Single Fathers in 2009		
	Single Mothers	Single Fathers
Poverty Rate	39%	24%
Employment Rate	68%	77%
Median Weekly Earnings Full-time Employment	\$546	\$702
Median Family Income	\$25,172	\$36,085
Any College Attendance	51%	44%

Single mothers are more likely than single fathers to have attended college. However, single mothers have higher poverty rates, lower incomes, lower employment rates, and lower wage rates. The 39% poverty rate for single mother families in 2009 was almost twice the 24% rate for single father families. In 2009, median weekly earnings for single mothers working full-time (\$546) were only 78% of the median for single fathers (\$702) working full-time, and median annual income for single mother families (\$25,172) was only 70% of the median annual income for single father families (\$36,085).

SINGLE MOTHER FAMILIES TRAIL FAR BEHIND TWO PARENT FAMILIES

There is a wide gulf in economic well-being between single mother and two parent families. In 2009, two parents families had a median income (\$76,649) triple that of single

¹⁸ The rates cited in the text are the rates calculated by Legal Momentum from the data reported by the Census Bureau in the report “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>.

¹⁹ Table Two sources: poverty rates are from the source cited in footnote 7; employment rates are from the source cited in footnote 5; college attendance rates are the rates for household heads with related children under 18 as calculated by Legal Momentum using the CPS Table Creator; median income figures are from the source cited in footnote 6; median earnings figures are from Table 8 at page 41 in the U.S. Department of Labor report “Highlights of Women’s Earnings in 2009,” available at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpswom2009.pdf>.

mother families (\$25,172), and a poverty rate (8%) one fifth that of single mother families (39%).

Table Three²⁰			
Single Mothers Compared With Married Mothers and Fathers in 2009			
	Single Mothers	Married Mothers	Married Fathers
Poverty Rate	39%	8%	8%
Employment Rate	68%	66%	88%
Employed Full-time Full-year	45%	42%	75%
Median Weekly Earnings Full-time Employment	\$546	\$705	\$939
Median Family Income	\$25,172	\$76,649	\$76,649
Any College Attendance	50%	65%	61%
Bachelors Degree or more	16%	37%	35%

Employment rates for single mothers are about the same as for married mothers but far below those for married fathers. In an average month in 2009, there was no employed parent in 32% of single mother families but in only 4%²¹ of two parent families (not shown in table). The percentage of two parent families with both parents employed (59%)²² (not shown in table) was almost as large at the percentage (68%) of single mother families with an employed mother.

Wage rates for single mothers are far below those for married mothers and even farther below those for married fathers. In 2009, median weekly earnings for single mothers working full-time (\$546) were only 77% of the median for married mothers (\$705) working full-time, and only 58% of the median for married fathers (\$939) working full-time.

SINGLE MOTHERS NEED CHILD CARE SUBSIDIES AND EQUAL WAGES

Single mothers need steady full-time employment to achieve even a modest level of economic well-being. Joblessness imperils their economic security and thrusts many into deep poverty.

²⁰ Table Three sources: employed full-time full-year rates calculated by Legal Momentum using the CPS Table Creator; for other variables, same sources as for Table Two.

²¹ The source for the 4% figure cited in the text is Table 4 in “Employment Characteristics of Families – 2009,” available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>

²² The source for the 59% figure cited in the text is the same source cited in footnote 21.

Single mothers need more than a low official unemployment rate to achieve high employment rates. In 2000, the monthly employment rate for single mothers was only 76% even though the monthly unemployment rate (for all persons) was just 4%, the lowest rate in at least the last forty years.

Single mothers must also have affordable child care to achieve high employment rates. The lack of affordable child care probably accounts for much if not most of the large gap in employment rates between single mothers and married fathers.

For many single mothers, potential earnings are too low to pay for child care. A recent study found that in 2009 the average cost for infant center care ranged from 26% to 67% of the state median income for single mother families.²³ The average child care cost for two children in care, one an infant and one four years old, ranged from 48% to 114% of the state median income for single mother families.²⁴

For many single mothers employment is therefore impossible unless child care cost is subsidized. A substantial number of single mothers do participate in child care subsidy programs and research has confirmed that these programs do raise employment rates for single mothers.²⁵ However, public subsidy funding is sufficient to reach only a small fraction of those eligible.²⁶

Raising wages for single mothers to the same level as for single fathers could also increase single mothers' employment rates. Research has shown that higher wages increase single mothers' employment rates probably at least in part by making child care more affordable.²⁷ Single fathers' higher wage rates contributes to their higher employment rates relative to single mothers.

²³ National Association of Child Care Resources & Referral Agencies, *Parents and the High Cost of Child Care 2010 Update*, available at http://www.naccrra.org/docs/Cost_Report_073010-final.pdf.

²⁴Id.

²⁵See, e.g., Chris Herbst, *The Labor Supply Effects of Child Care Costs and Wages in the Presence of Subsidies and the Earned Income Tax Credit*, 8 Rev. Econ. Household 199 – 230 (2010), available at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/m614275597461577/fulltext.pdf>.

²⁶ See Testimony of Helen Blank for the Subcommittee on Children and Families of the Senate Health, Education Labor and Pensions Committee Hearing On “The State of the American Child: Securing Our Children’s Future” (Nov. 18, 2010), available at <http://help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Blank1.pdf>.

²⁷ Herbst, footnote 25 supra.

SINGLE MOTHERS NEED A HUMANE SAFETY NET

The lack of jobs and the lack of affordable child care force many single mothers to turn to the national safety net system to meet their families' basic needs. While the Food Stamp program does reach a good fraction of single mother families, Food Stamps at most suffice for food and can not be used for rent, utilities, clothing or other important needs.

Jobless single mothers necessarily must turn to TANF for their other needs. However, as already explained, TANF now aids only a small fraction of poor single mothers and TANF benefits are disgracefully inadequate.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

New policies to improve the economic well-being of single mothers and their families are imperative but efforts to achieve them face many challenges. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office projects that unemployment rates will remain above pre-recession levels at least through 2014.²⁸ Progress in reducing the gender wage gap has halted in recent years.²⁹ To obtain new federal funds for child care and TANF, it will be necessary to address the deficit concerns expressed by both parties and the pledges by the new Republican House leadership to reduce federal domestic spending. Due to reduced revenue and other factors, many states are now considering and some have recently enacted new TANF cuts. While these are daunting challenges, nevertheless the growing awareness of single mothers' economic distress provides an opportunity to mobilize support for the new policies that are needed.

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²⁸ Congressional Budget Office, *The Budget and Economic Outlook: An Update* (August 2010), available at <http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=11705>.

²⁹ See Institute for Women's Policy Research, *The Gender Wage Gap: 2009* (updated September 2010), available at <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/C350.pdf>.