

The Reality of the Workforce: Mothers Are Working Outside the Home

It is an undeniable fact of American life today that a large majority of women with children—married and single, with children of all ages from infants to teens—are working outside the home. As more mothers join the paid labor force, families must look to child care to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children during working hours.

A Large Majority of Women with Children Work Outside the Home

- Seventy-one percent of American women with children under age 18—77 percent of women with children ages 6 to 17, 64 percent of women with children under age 6, and 56 percent of women with infants (under age 1)—are in the labor force.¹
- As women have moved into the labor force in greater numbers, they have increasingly taken jobs that are both full time and year round. In 2006, 76 percent of all employed women with children under age 18—78 percent of those with children ages 6 to 17, 72 percent of those with children under age 6, and 69 percent of those with infants—were working full time.²

Both Single and Married Mothers Have Joined the Workforce Out of Economic Necessity and for Other Important Reasons

Single Mothers

- Seventy-six percent of single mothers with children under age 18—81 percent of those with children ages 6 to 17 and 71 percent of those with children under age 6—are in the labor force.³ Fifty-nine percent of single mothers with infants are in the labor force.⁴
- Employment rates for low-income single mothers with children under age 6 increased substantially in the late 1990s, from 44 percent in 1996 to 59 percent in 2000, before declining somewhat to 54 percent in 2003.⁵ Significant factors that contributed to this trend were the growing economy during the 1990s, increases in the Earned Income Tax Credit, which effectively boosted wages for low-income working parents, and the 1996 welfare legislation, which included new work requirements for mothers receiving welfare.⁶
- Of those single mothers with children under age 18 who are employed, 82 percent work full time.⁷ Of those single mothers with infants who are employed, 67 percent work full time.⁸
- Single mothers must earn a living in order to feed, clothe, house and otherwise sustain themselves and the children who are in their care. The average amount of child support, for custodial parents who receive it, is \$4,700 annually,⁹ a boost to family income. But 39 percent of custodial mothers do not have a child support award, and 23 percent of custodial mothers owed child support receive nothing.¹⁰

- Families with children headed by single women who do not work outside their home are more likely to live in poverty. Seventy-one percent of families headed by single women with children under age 18 who do not work outside the home live in poverty, while just 13 percent of families headed by single women with children under age 18 who work full time live in poverty.¹¹ Similarly, four out of five (80 percent) families headed by single women with children under age 6 who are not in the paid labor force live below the poverty line while less than one out of five (19 percent) families headed by single women with children under age 6 who work full time live in poverty.¹²

Married Mothers

- Sixty-eight percent of married women with children under age 18—60 percent of those with children ages 6 to 17 and 75 percent of those with children under age 6—are in the labor force.¹³ A majority of married mothers with infants—55 percent in 2006—are also in the labor force.¹⁴
- Of those married mothers with children under age 18 who are employed, 73 percent work full time.¹⁵ Of those married mothers with infants who are employed, 70 percent work full time.¹⁶
- Only 30 percent of married-couple families with children under age 18—24 percent with children ages 6 to 17 and 38 percent with children under age 6—fit the traditional model of husband as sole breadwinner.¹⁷
- The income of a married mother can mean the difference between whether her family lives below the poverty line or above it. Fifteen percent of married-couple families with children under age 18 where the mother does not work live in poverty, while just 3 percent of families where the mother works live in poverty.¹⁸ Similarly, 17 percent of married-couple families with children under age 6 where the mother does not work live in poverty, while only 4 percent of families with children under age 6 where the mother works live in poverty.¹⁹
- Families depend on working women's income to keep from falling behind. Median family income grew slowly between 1974 and 2004 — 0.3 percent per year for men in their thirties and their families. The fact that there was any growth at all was because the increase in women's earnings compensated for the lack of increase in men's earnings. After adjusting for inflation, median personal income for women in their thirties rose from about \$5,700 to \$20,000 a year between 1974 and 2004, but median personal income for men in their thirties fell from \$40,000 to about \$35,000 a year during this time period.²⁰

Sources:

¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Tables 5 and 6, *available at* <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf> (last visited Jan. 16, 2008). These percentages understate how many women raising children are in the paid labor force because they reflect only women raising their *own* children, and do not include the many women who are raising grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, or other related children. Note that the labor force includes those who are working and those who are looking for work.

² National Women's Law Center calculations based on data from Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Tables 5 and 6. Of *all* mothers of children under age 18, 51 percent work full time; of all mothers of children ages 6 to 17, 57 percent work full time; of all mothers of children under 6, 43 percent work full time; of all mothers of children under 1, 36 percent work full time.

³ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Women in the Labor Force: A Databook (2007 Edition), Table 6, *available at* <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-table6-2007.pdf> (last visited Jan. 16, 2008). Single mothers include those never married, divorced, separated, and widowed.

⁴ Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Table 6.

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): Seventh Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006), A-283, *available at* http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/annualreport7/Appendix/TANF_7th_Report_Appendix.pdf (last visited Jan. 16, 2008).

⁶ Gary Burtless, "Can the Labor Market Absorb Three Million Welfare Recipients?" in Kelleen Kaye and Demetra Smith Nightingale (eds.), *The Low-Wage Labor Market: Challenges and Opportunities for Economic Self-Sufficiency* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2000), 65-83.

⁷ National Women's Law Center calculations based on data from Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Table 5.

⁸ National Women's Law Center calculations based on data from Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Table 6.

⁹ Timothy Grall, Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2005 (P60-234) (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007), 9, *available at* <http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/p60-234.pdf> (last visited Feb. 1, 2008).

¹⁰ Grall, 6.

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2007 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2006 Detailed Poverty Tables, POV15, *available at* http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032007/pov/new15_100_01.htm (last visited Jan. 18, 2008).

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 Detailed Poverty Tables, POV16, *available at* http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032007/pov/new16_100_01.htm (last visited Jan. 18, 2008).

¹³ Women in the Labor Force: A Databook, Table 6.

¹⁴ Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Table 6.

¹⁵ National Women's Law Center calculations based on data from Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Table 5.

¹⁶ National Women's Law Center calculations based on data from Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Table 6.

¹⁷ Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Table 4.

¹⁸ National Women's Law Center calculations based on data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 Detailed Poverty Tables, POV15.

¹⁹ National Women's Law Center calculations based on data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 Detailed Poverty Tables, POV16.

²⁰ Julia B. Isaacs, *Economic Mobility of Men and Women* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2007), Executive Summary, 1-2, *available at* http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/11_menwomen_isaacs.aspx (last visited Jan. 31, 2008).