

NATIONAL SNAPSHOT: POVERTY AMONG WOMEN & FAMILIES

By Shengwei Sun

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated devastating losses in employment and earnings; in the economic recovery since those initial losses, pandemic relief programs prevented millions from falling into poverty. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), passed in March 2021 in response to the pandemic, provided additional resources to individuals and families in the forms of stimulus checks, emergency rental assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) increases, and expansions in unemployment insurance, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Child Tax Credit, among other policies.¹ Families with children have largely benefited from these additional support systems, with child poverty rates dropping to a record low in 2021.²

Nevertheless, women and especially women of color still faced disproportionate poverty and hardship. In 2021, over one in nine women—or nearly 15.3 million—lived in poverty.³ Poverty rates using the official poverty measure (OPM) were much higher for disabled women, Black, Latinx, and Native women, those born outside of the United States, and families with children headed by a single woman.⁴ Unlike people ages 18–64 and children,⁵ women ages 65 and older experienced deepened poverty in 2021.

This fact sheet presents poverty estimates using both the official poverty measure (OPM) and the supplemental poverty measure (SPM). The 2021 SPM rates reflect the impact of tax credits expanded under the ARPA, the third round of stimulus payments, and other antipoverty programs.

What Does the Federal Poverty Rate Measure?

The **official poverty measure (OPM)** reported by the Census Bureau measures the percentage of the U.S. population with total income below the federal poverty threshold for their family size (e.g., \$27,479 in 2021 for a family of four with two children).⁶ “Income” is calculated before taxes and includes only cash income, such as:

- Earnings
- Pension and retirement income
- Investment income (e.g., interest, dividends, royalties, estates, and trusts)
- Social Security
- Public assistance (non-cash benefits are not included in the measure—see below)
- Unemployment benefits, workers’ compensation, veterans’ payments
- Alimony and child support payments

What Does the Federal Poverty Rate Measure? *–continued–*

The **supplemental poverty measure (SPM)** extends the official poverty measure partly by incorporating the value of several federal and state benefits that help support low-income families but are not counted as income under the official poverty measure, minus nondiscretionary expenses (e.g., taxes, work and medical expenses).⁷ In 2021, these included:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly known as Food Stamps)
- Tax benefits (e.g., Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Child and Dependent Care Credit)
- Long-term housing subsidies⁸
- The third round of economic impact payments

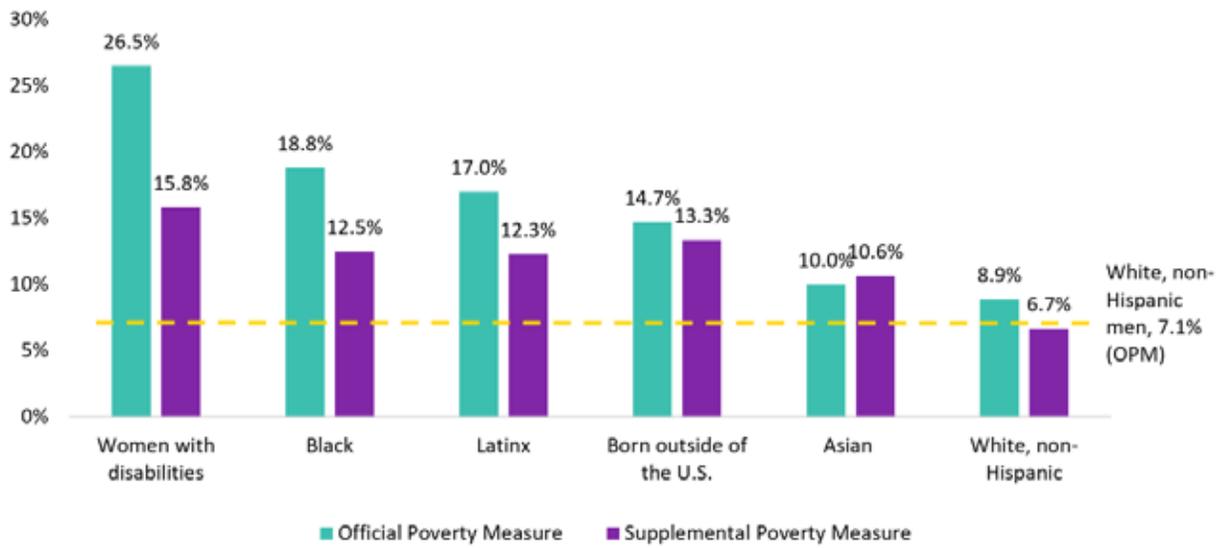
Women were more likely to live in poverty than men in 2021.

- Using the Census Bureau's official poverty measure (OPM), over one in nine women 18 and older, nearly 15.3 million, lived in poverty in 2021.
- Nearly half (47.9%) of women in poverty last year lived in extreme poverty, defined as income at or below 50% of the federal poverty level. This means more than one in 18 (5.6%) women lived in extreme poverty last year.
- Women (11.7%) were more likely than men (9.2%) to live in poverty in 2021 using the Census Bureau's official poverty measure. Women were also more likely than men to be in extreme poverty under the OPM: 5.6% of women versus 4.5% of men lived in extreme poverty in 2021.
- The gender difference in the Census Bureau's supplemental poverty measure (SPM) rates was smaller and not statistically significant (8.7% of women lived in poverty under SPM compared to 8.4% of men).

Poverty remains even higher for certain groups of women.

- Using the official poverty measure, nearly one in 11 (8.9%) white, non-Hispanic women lived in poverty in 2021, compared to 7.1% of white, non-Hispanic men. However, many women of color were even more likely to live in poverty.⁹
 - **Black women:** 18.8% of Black women lived in poverty.
 - **Latinx women:** 17.0% of Latinx women lived in poverty.
 - **Asian women:** 10.0% of Asian women lived in poverty.
 - **Native women:** 21.0% of Native women lived in poverty.¹⁰
- More than one in seven (14.7%) women born outside of the United States lived in poverty using the OPM in 2021.
- The OPM poverty rate for disabled women ages 18 to 64 was higher than it was for nondisabled women, 26.5% and 10.4%, respectively. The poverty rate among their male counterparts was lower: 23.3% of disabled men lived in poverty, and 8.1% of non-disabled men lived in poverty in 2021.

Poverty Rates for Adult Women Using the Official Poverty Measure and the Supplemental Poverty Measure, 2021



Source: NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements microdata. Figures for disabled women are for ages 18–64. Figures for all other groups are for ages 18 and over.

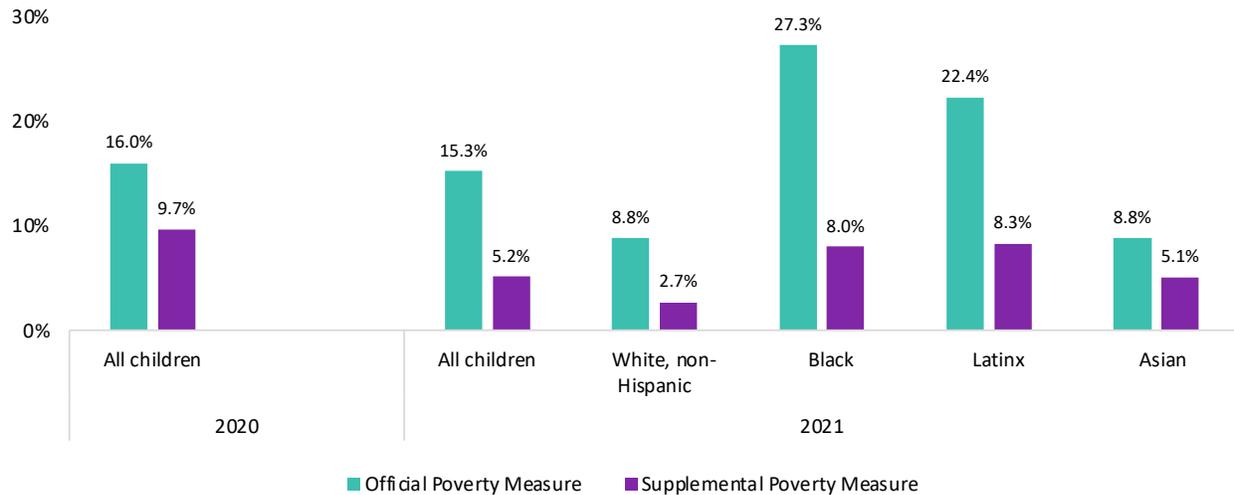
- Disparities in poverty rates under the SPM were smaller than those under the OPM:
 - 12.5% of Black women, 12.3% of Latinx women, and 10.6% of Asian women lived in poverty using the SPM, compared with 6.7% of white, non-Hispanic women.¹¹
 - 15.8% of disabled women ages 18 to 64 lived in poverty using the SPM, compared with 7.0% of nondisabled women of the same age.
- The larger differences between OPM and SPM rates among disabled women, Black women, and Latinx women suggest they especially benefited from the COVID-19 relief programs that are counted in the Supplemental Poverty Measure but not the Official Poverty Measure.

Child poverty rates declined to historic lows.

Over 11.1 million children lived in poverty in 2021 under the OPM, nearly half of whom (46.9%) lived in extreme poverty. This means that more than one in 14 (7.2%) children were in extreme poverty last year.

- Poverty rates under the OPM were even higher for certain groups of children:
 - **Black children:** Over one in four (27.3%) Black children lived in poverty.
 - **Latinx children:** Nearly one in four (22.4%) Latinx children lived in poverty.
 - **Asian children:** Over one in 12 (8.8%) Asian children lived in poverty.
 - **Native children:** Over one in four (27.7%) Native children lived in poverty.¹²
 - **White, non-Hispanic children:** Over one in 12 (8.8%) white, non-Hispanic children lived in poverty.
 - **Children born outside of the United States:** More than one in four (26.2%) children born outside of the United States lived in poverty.
- The decline in SPM rates from 9.7% in 2020 to 5.2% in 2021, especially when compared with the official poverty rates, suggests a substantial reduction of poverty for children as a result of pandemic relief, likely driven by the stimulus payments and the expansion of the Child Tax Credit and the Child and Dependent Care Credit. Black and Latinx children have benefited substantially, although their SPM rates remain much higher than their white, non-Hispanic peers.

Poverty Rates for Children Using the Official Poverty Measure and the Supplemental Poverty Measure



Source: NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements microdata.

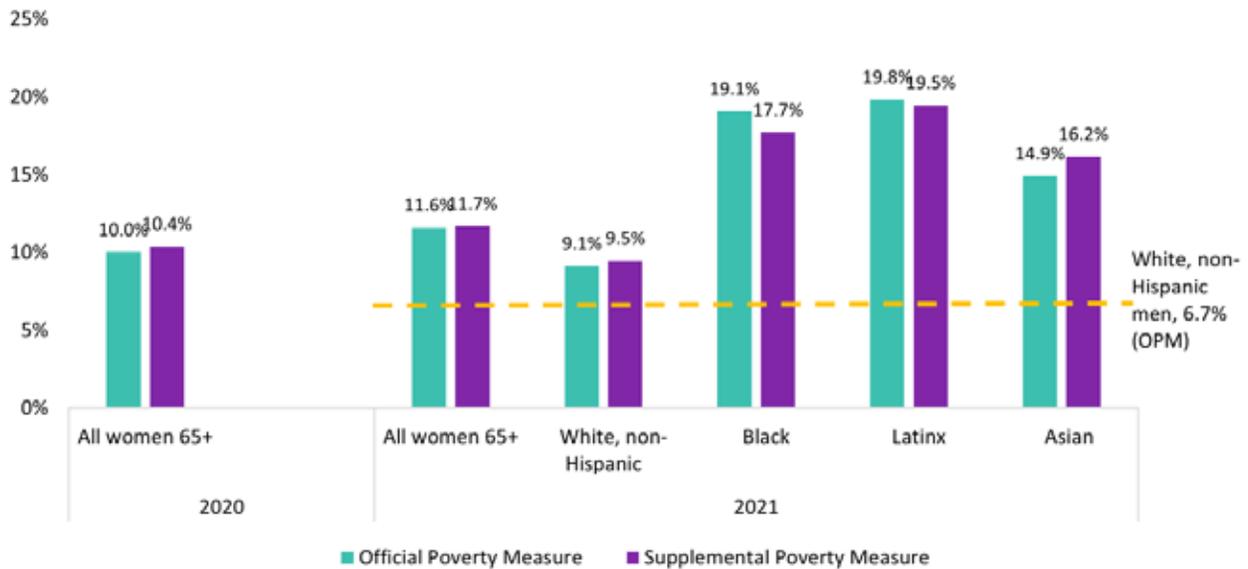
A large share of families with children headed by a single woman remains in poverty.

- Using the OPM, nearly six in 10 poor children (59.9%) lived in families headed by a single woman in 2021.¹³
- The official poverty rate for families with children headed by a single woman was 31.3%, much higher than 15.5% of families with children headed by a single man and 5.4% of married couple families with children.
- Families with children headed by a single Native woman, a single Black woman, and a single Latinx woman fared even worse using the OPM:
 - More than one in three (37.4%) families with children headed by a **single Black woman** lived in poverty.
 - More than one in three (35.9%) families with children headed by a **single Latinx woman** lived in poverty.
 - Nearly one in five (19.7%) families with children headed by a **single Asian woman** lived in poverty.
 - More than two in five (42.6%) families with children headed by a **single Native woman** lived in poverty.¹⁴
 - One in four (25.0%) families with children headed by a **single white, non-Hispanic woman** lived in poverty.

Older women experienced an increase in poverty.

- Using the OPM, women made up more than six in 10 (61.1%) poor people ages 65 and older in 2021.
- The official poverty rate for women 65 and older was 11.6% in 2021, compared to 8.8% for older men.
- Poverty rates were particularly high for certain groups of older women in 2021 under the OPM:
 - **Black women:** Nearly one in five (19.1%) Black women 65+ lived in poverty.
 - **Latinx women:** About one in five (19.8%) Latinx women 65+ lived in poverty.
 - **Asian women:** More than one in seven (14.9%) Asian women 65+ lived in poverty.
 - **Native women:** Nearly one in five (18.5%) Native women 65+ lived in poverty.¹⁵
 - **White, non-Hispanic women:** About one in 11 (9.1%) white, non-Hispanic women 65+ lived in poverty.
- Both the OPM and SPM poverty rates for older women increased between 2020 and 2021.
- The small differences between the OPM and SPM poverty rates in 2021 suggest that older women did not benefit as much from the pandemic relief programs as children and younger adults did.

Poverty Rates for Women 65 and Older Using the Official Poverty Measure and the Supplemental Poverty Measure



Source: NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements microdata.

The 2021 poverty data showed that government relief programs were tremendously effective in reducing poverty. The expanded Child Tax Credit, for example, helped low-income families pay for necessities, like food, child care, rent, or mortgage,¹⁶ and, combined with other COVID relief, cut child poverty by nearly half in 2021.¹⁷ While temporary COVID-19 assistance provided much-needed support to women and their families, many of these programs have expired, undermining the financial security of those who have been struggling the most.¹⁸ We need robust policies and public investments that not only help women and their families navigate an ongoing pandemic and uneven recovery amid rising costs, but also address long-standing inequities in our economy.

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- 1 The White House, “The American Rescue Plan” (Washington, DC: March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/American-Rescue-Plan-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.
- 2 John Creamer, Emily A. Shrider, Kalee Burns, and Frances Chen, “Poverty in the United States: 2021 Current Population Reports” (The Census Bureau, September 2022), <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2022/demo/p60-277.pdf>.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, all data in this analysis are NWLC calculations of U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2022 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, using Sarah Flood, Miriam King, Renae Rodgers, Steven Ruggles, J. Robert Warren, and Michael Westberry. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 9.0 [dataset], Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2022. www.ipums.org. Note that the CPS ASEC 2022 response rate remains lower than pre-pandemic levels. Notably, respondents from 2020 to 2022 had relatively higher income than nonrespondents. See <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/research-matters/2022/09/how-did-the-pandemic-affect-survey-response.html>.
- 4 All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing and are statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level. Comparisons based on race/ethnicity were made with reference to the white, non-Hispanic group. The only exception is for Native women and children due to data limitations.
- 5 Creamer et al., *supra* note 2.
- 6 The Census Bureau’s federal poverty thresholds can be found at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html>.
- 7 In addition to incorporating many of the government programs and tax credits that are designed to assist low-income families, the SPM also extends the OPM by adjusting poverty thresholds for geographical differences in housing costs, by using updated data derived from the Consumer Expenditure Survey on expenditures on food, clothing, shelter, and utilities in the calculation of poverty thresholds, and by defining family units as people living at the same address to share resources. See https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2018/09/what_is_the_suppleme.html.
- 8 Note that the SPM did not account for the expansion of housing subsidies through temporary programs such as Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA).
- 9 Men and women self-identify their sex in U.S. Census Bureau surveys as their male or female. They also self-identify their race and ethnicity. Asian women are those who self-identified as Asian alone. Black women are those who self-identified as Black alone. Native women are those who identified themselves as American Indian or Alaskan Native alone. White, non-Hispanic women and men are those who identified themselves as white alone, but who are not of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin. Latinx women are of any race who identified themselves to be of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin. Foreign-born women are those who have identified themselves as born outside of U.S territories and possessions (Note that the Current Population Survey does not extend to Puerto Rico or to the outlying areas of the United States, and thus those living there are excluded from this analysis). Disabled persons are those who have identified themselves as having any physical or cognitive difficulty, as measured by affirmative responses to any of the Current Population Survey’s six physical or cognitive difficulties.
- 10 Unlike for other groups, the 2021 OPM poverty rates for Native women and children are calculated using U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey, available at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>.
- 11 The 2021 SPM poverty rates are not available for Native women and children due to data limitations.
- 12 See note 10.
- 13 Over 11.1 million children lived in poverty in 2021, which includes 326,000 not living in families. Families with children headed by a single woman or man are defined as primary families with related children under 18, headed by a female or male householder, no spouse present. Due to the lack of family-level replicate weights from IPUMS, poverty rates for families with children—whether headed by a single woman, headed by a single man, or headed by married couples—were calculated based on Census Table POV-04, available at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pov/pov-04.html>.
- 14 NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey, table C17010C, available at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>.
- 15 See note 10.
- 16 Sarah Javaid and Jasmine Tucker, “Women of Color Use Their Advance Child Tax Credit to Cover Food Costs” (National Women’s Law Center, September 2021), <https://nwlc.org/resource/women-of-color-use-their-advance-child-tax-credit-to-cover-food-costs/>.
- 17 Kalee Burns, Liana Fox, and Danielle Wilson, “Expansions to Child Tax Credit Contributed to 46% Decline in Child Poverty Since 2020” (U.S. Census Bureau, September 2022), <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/09/record-drop-in-child-poverty.html>.
- 18 Brooke LePage and Sarah Javaid, “Amid Rising Household Costs, Black, Non-Hispanic Women and Latinas Continue to Face Economic Fallout from the Pandemic By” (National Women’s Law Center, August 2022), <https://nwlc.org/resource/amid-rising-household-costs-black-non-hispanic-women-and-latinas-continue-to-face-economic-fallout-from-the-pandemic/>.