

Poverty Rates Among Single-Mother Households and Single-Father Households in the U.S.

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SOC W 501 B: Poverty and Inequality

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Across the U.S., single-mother households experience poverty at significantly higher rates than single-father households (U.S. Census Bureau “Current Population”). Living with a single mother is the second most common living arrangement in the U.S. behind living in a married-couple household. In fact, 21 percent of U.S. children under age 18 live with their mother only, as opposed to a mere 4.5 percent of U.S. children under age 18 living with their father only (Hemez & Washington, 2021). Despite the growing number of families gravitating towards single-parent households, single-mother households experience poverty at disproportionately higher rates than single-father households (Chamie, 2021). As such, the aim of this paper is to examine patterns in poverty rates among single-mother households as compared to single-father households and married couple families from 2010 to 2020.

In the first section of this paper, I will provide definitions of important concepts as well as relevant data from the U.S. Census Bureau. I will then discuss the causes underlying the disparity in poverty rates among single-mother households and single-father households, as well as limitations of the data. In the second section, I will discuss underlying social justice dimensions and propose correlating policy solutions.

## **SECTION I**

### **Definitions and Operationalizations**

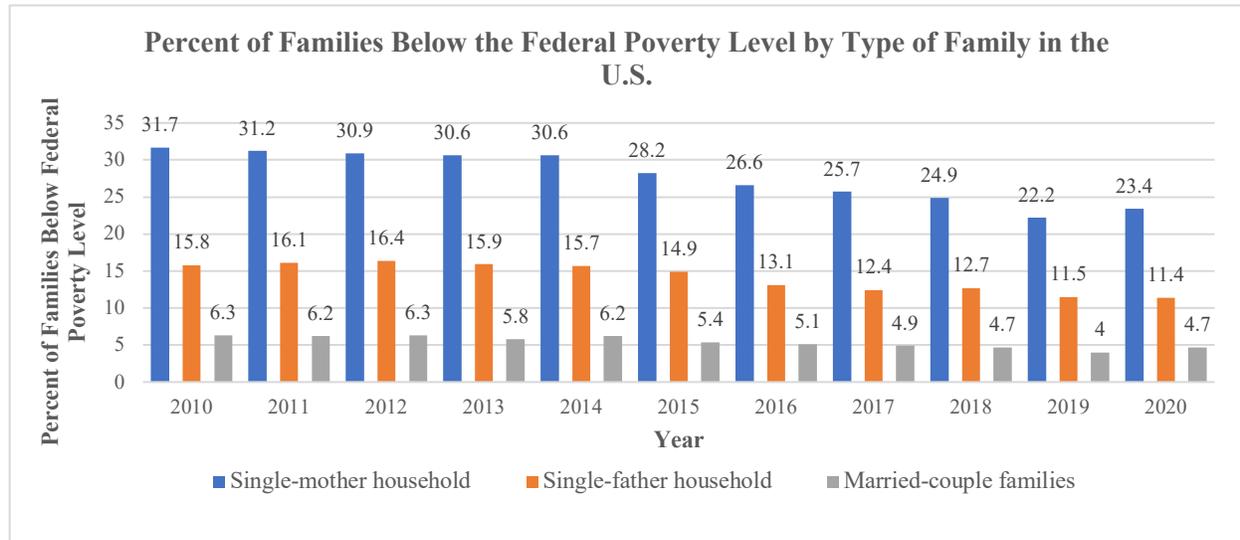
In this paper, the term ‘householder’ refers to the person whose name is associated with the ownership or rental of the housing unit; in this case, the single father or single mother in whose name the housing unit is either owned or rented (“Definitions and Explanations”). For the sake of brevity, this paper will use the phrase ‘single-father household’ to refer to ‘male householder, no spouse present’ and ‘single-mother household’ to refer to ‘female householder, no spouse present’. Thus, the terms ‘single-father household’ and ‘male householder, no spouse present’ both refer to households with a male householder who is married with at least one other relative in the household, but absent a spouse due either to separation or other reason causing husband and spouse to maintain separate residences (“Definitions and Explanations”). The definition also includes male householders who are widowed, divorced, or single, with at least one other relative in the household (“Definitions and Explanations”). The terms ‘single-mother household’ and ‘female householder, no spouse present’ both carry the same definition as ‘male householder, no spouse present’, but altered to correlate to the appropriate gender.

In order to explore the disparity in poverty rates among single-mother households as compared to single-father households, I collected data from the U.S. Census Bureau on both the overall poverty status and the income levels of single-mother households and single-father households, with married-couple families used as a basis of comparison for the poverty status data. The U.S. Census Bureau reported income level data from only the years 2010 through 2019. Thus, in an effort to keep poverty status data and income level data uniform, I will only report data from 2010 through 2020. Despite the ten-year limitation to the data reported, patterns of poverty status among different family types remain consistent as far back as 1973, before

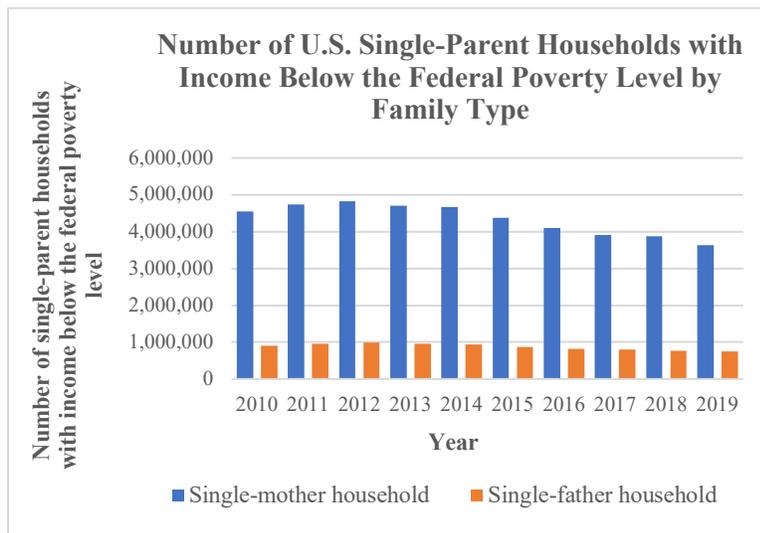
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which data regarding the poverty rates of married-couple families and single-father households was not specified (U.S. Census Bureau “Current Population”).

### Magnitude of poverty disparity among different types of households



**Figure 1.** U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960 to 2021 Annual Social and Economic Supplements (CPS ASEC). Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-people.html>



**Figure 2.** U.S. Census Bureau (2010-2019). Poverty Status in The Past 12 Months of Families by Family Type by Presence of Related Children Under 18 Years by Age of Related Children. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=poverty&tid=ACSDT1Y2019.B17010>

### Discussion of Data

Figure 1 shows the percent of families below the federal poverty level according to family type from 2010 through 2020. The percent measured is calculated based on the total number of reported households of that particular family type (rather than the total number of households of any family type). I utilized percent-based data rather than a numerical report because there are significantly less single-father households than single-mother households; thus, percent-based data more adequately displays the disproportionate rate at

which single-mother households experience poverty. Per Figure 1, 23.4 percent of single-mother households were below the federal poverty level in 2020, as compared to 11.4 percent of single-father households and 4.7 percent of married-couple families during the same year. Close examination of Figure 1 reveals that single-mother households experience poverty at approximately five times the rate of married-couple families and about twice the rate of single-

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father households. All three groups experienced an overall drop from 2015 through 2020 in the percent of families of each type below the federal poverty level, but the proportion at which each group experienced poverty in relation to each other remains the same.

Figure 2 shows the number of single-mother households with income below the federal poverty level as compared to single-father households. The data in Figure 2 reveals a pattern similar to that revealed in Figure 1: single-mother households experience income below the federal poverty level at consistently higher rates than single-father households. The data from Figure 1 and Figure 2 combined suggest that disparate income levels between men and women contributes to the higher rates at which single-mother households experience poverty.

### **Causes Underlying the Disparity**

Multiple factors contribute to these disparate poverty rates, with some of the most pressing factors being the gender wage and wealth gaps. As Figure 1 and Figure 2 suggest, one significant cause underlying the disparate rates at which single-mother households experience poverty as compared to single-father households is a difference in income levels. White, non-Hispanic women are paid just 79 cents for every dollar that a white, non-Hispanic man makes, and women of color experience even greater wage disparities (“Quantifying America’s,” 2022). Thus, the gender wage and wealth gaps serve as significant barriers to single mothers obtaining a wage equal to that of single fathers (Bleweis et al., 2020). This unequal earning power between genders means that single mothers have more significant barriers to overcoming poverty than their male counterparts.

The effects of the gender wage gap become especially apparent when one considers the costs of childcare. A single working mother is likely to earn less than a single working father—meaning that a single working father is more likely to have the means to afford childcare than a single working mother (“Quantifying America’s,” 2022). This can become a vicious cycle for single mothers: a single mother’s inability to afford childcare may impede her ability to work, furthering the cycle of poverty that single mothers are more prone to experience (Schochet, 2019). Furthering this point, as of 2017, 74.3 percent of single custodial fathers worked full-time, year-round, whereas only 51.4 percent of single custodial mothers worked full-time, year-round – indicating that single custodial mothers face different barriers to full-time, year-round employment than single custodial fathers (Statista Research Department, 2021a; Statista Research Department, 2021b).

### **Limitations of the Data**

A clear limitation of the data is revealed when one considers the close tie between childcare and poverty rates: the data does not specify the ages of children in the household. School-aged children do not require childcare in the same way that very young children do because they are able to attend school while their single parent is at work. Thus, obtaining childcare is much more burdensome to single parents with very young children as opposed to those with school-aged children.

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It is also worth noting that the income data fails to account for whether the income source is based in part-time versus full-time work. While this is not a full limitation of the data, specifying the income source would be helpful in looking to factors such as the impact of childcare on a single parent's ability to work full-time. Additionally, neither the income nor the poverty status data account for single parents who receive an additional income source from a dating or cohabitating partner.

## **SECTION II**

### **Policy Solutions**

At the root of this poverty crisis among single-mother households is the significant disparity in income levels among genders, as well as the inaccessibility and unaffordability of childcare that single mothers disproportionately face (Statista Research Department, 2021a; Statista Research Department, 2021b; U.S. Census Bureau "Poverty Status"). Recent attempts at addressing the high cost of raising children have largely been temporary improvements in response to Covid-19 (Paschall, 2022; Shivaram, 2021). Moreover, although pay discrimination based on gender is illegal, women continue to experience lower income levels than men (Bleiweis, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau "Current Population"). Thus, an ongoing solution to the income and childcare barriers that women – and particularly single mothers – face is still needed.

The gender wage and wealth gaps contribute significantly to the disparity in poverty rates among single mothers versus single fathers. Closing these gaps entails changes at the federal level. Raising the federal minimum wage – for all workers, not just federal employees – would benefit single mothers, as women and mothers make up a significant concentration of workers in low-income occupations (Boesch et al., 2021). Raising the federal minimum wage would not only address the income disparity resulting from women's concentration in low-income occupations, but it would also address the gender wealth gap: higher income levels will enable single mothers to make ends meet in the short term and potentially begin accumulating wealth for the long-term (Boesch et al., 2021).

Access and affordability of childcare is another significant barrier to single mothers in poverty. According to 2018 data, 51 percent of people in the U.S. are living in areas with little or no access to high quality childcare – also called a childcare desert (Center for American Progress). Of note, a correlation has been found between childcare deserts and fewer mothers participating in the workforce – further indicating that access to childcare is a significant barrier to single mothers maintaining meaningful employment (Center for American Progress).

Problems of childcare accessibility and affordability can both be addressed through implementation of universal childcare – an endeavor that Senator Warren and Representative Jones proposed in 2021 through H.R.2886, the Universal Child Care and Early Learning Act (Warren, 2021). The Act would simultaneously address problems of both accessibility and affordability of childcare by creating a network of high-quality childcare facilities that are accessible to every family, regardless of income (Warren, 2021). The Act would allow families below 200 percent of the federal poverty level to access childcare through the network for free, with higher income families utilizing a sliding scale to determine cost (Warren, 2021). Not only

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would the passage of H.R.2886 allow families to access more affordable childcare, but childcare would become more accessible in areas of childcare deserts as well (Warren, 2021). With affordability and accessibility of childcare presenting as significant barriers to single mothers gaining and maintaining meaningful employment, passage of H.R.2886 would be a clear win for single mothers across the U.S., as the Act attempts to address both of those barriers at once.

### **Conclusion**

Single-mother households in the U.S. are in a poverty crisis, experiencing poverty at significantly higher rates than U.S. single-father households. The poverty crisis among single-mother households is partly the result of policies and practices that unfairly target women and mothers. Long-standing solutions to the challenges that only women face have yet to be implemented, but addressing the gender wage and wealth gaps as well as the burden that childcare presents to women and single mothers is a start. By creating fair minimum wage and expanding access to childcare, women and single mothers across the U.S. can begin to achieve gender equity.

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