

Holding Up Half the Sky

**Mothers as Workers,
Primary Caregivers,
& Breadwinners
During COVID-19**

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In the United States, women now make up more than 50 percent of the workforce, reflecting growth in health care, education, and service sectors over the last decade. The decline of the wages and real earnings of all workers over time coupled with the rise in cost of living expenses, such as housing, means that the income and earnings of women are critical to the overall economic security and well-being of families.

COVID-19 and its impact has exposed the fragility of the U.S. economy and the healthcare system. It has also highlighted the vulnerability of many working families, particularly those headed by women. Since the start of the pandemic, the number of jobless or unemployment claims have reached 30 million, and will continue to grow. Women, because of their over-representation in the service sector, have been disproportionately impacted, shouldering nearly 60 percent of job loss.¹

The loss of jobs in sectors dominated by women will have a devastating impact of families, especially those headed by single mothers or where women are the primary or co-breadwinner. One in two of more than 30 million families in the U.S. with children under the age of 18 have a breadwinner mother, who contributes at least 40 percent of the earnings to the household.²



WOMEN TAKING ON DUAL ROLES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Although many women are considered essential workers and bring home a significant portion of household income in families, they still [spend 37 percent more time](#) on household and care work than their male counterparts. Black and Latina women spend nearly twice as much time on unpaid household and care work as their male counterparts.

With schools out, childcare centers closed and stay-home-orders in effect across the country, the caretaking demands placed upon mothers have increased significantly during the pandemic, forcing many working mothers into a near impossible position: [take care of their children or risk losing their job](#).

This brief focuses on breadwinner mothers: single, married or head of households—that contribute at least 40 percent of the household’s income and earnings. These women are more likely to be employed in lower-wage jobs with few benefits and work protections. They are also more likely to shoulder most of the caretaking responsibilities at home, including providing childcare when schools and daycares are closed.

Research Highlights

- 4 out of 5 Black mothers (79 percent) are breadwinners, with a majority of Black mothers (56 percent) raising families on their own.
- 2 out of 3 Native American Women mothers are breadwinners (64 percent), the majority of whom are single mothers.
- Among White and Asian women, a little more than 40 percent are single mother breadwinners, while majority of White and Asian breadwinner mothers are married.
- Across all states, Black mothers are more likely to be breadwinners, or contribute the lion’s share of the household income.
- Among White mothers, the share of women that are breadwinners range from a low of 31 percent in Utah to a high of 58 percent in Vermont and the District of Columbia.
- Women in the United States [spend 37 percent more time](#)³ on household and care work than their male counterparts, limiting career choices and economic mobility, and affecting their overall health and well-being.
- Black and Latina women spend nearly twice as much time on unpaid household and care work as their male counterparts.

The loss of jobs in sectors dominated by women will have a devastating impact of families, especially those headed by single mothers or where women are the primary or co-breadwinner.

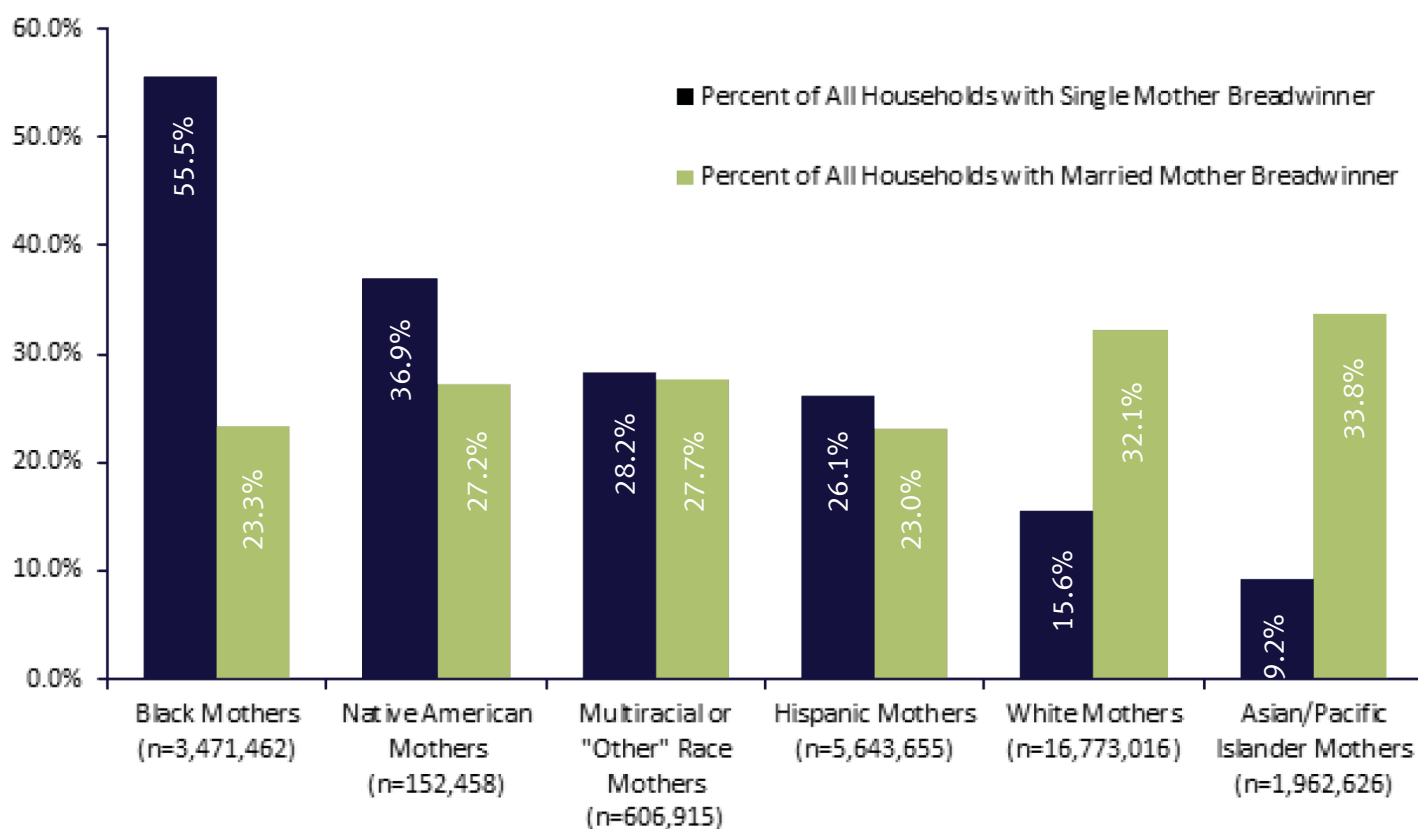


SHARE OF BREADWINNER MOTHERS BY RACE, ETHNICITY & FAMILIAL STATUS

In the U.S., there are approximately 15 million breadwinner mothers whose income account for at least 40 percent of their household income. Among married breadwinner mothers, White (32.1%) and Asian (33.8%) women are more likely to be primary or co-wage earners, compared to Black, Native American, and Latina married breadwinner mothers. This can be explained by noting the wage gap among women—White and Asian women are likely to out earn Black, Latina, and Native American women in most sectors and occupations, contributing more to their households.

Next, although Black and Native American single mothers are more likely to be the primary wage earner in their families compared to other groups of women, 55 percent and 37 percent respectively, they are also more likely live in poverty. In 2018, the poverty rate for female-headed households was 24.9 percent, compared to just 4.7 percent for married-couple households. Black and Latina female-headed households comprise 38.8 percent of female-headed households living in poverty.

Figure 1. Share of Single and Married Breadwinner Mothers Varies by Race and Ethnicity, United States, 2018



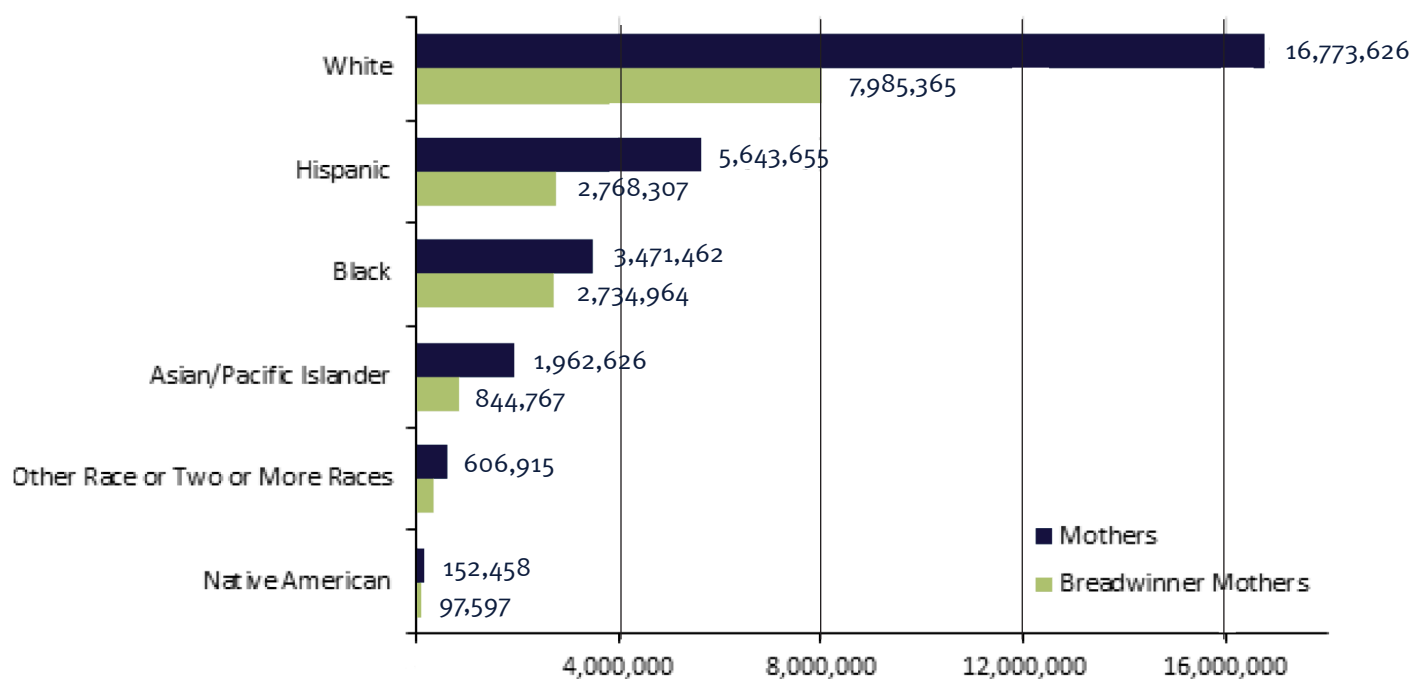
NUMBER OF MOTHERS AND BREADWINNER MOTHERS BY RACE & ETHNICITY

Among all women, White women are more likely to be breadwinner mothers. There are approximately 16.8 million White mothers in the United States and a little less than half of them (8.0 million) are breadwinners.

As a group, Black mothers are more likely to be breadwinners compared to other groups breadwinner mothers. Four out of 5 Black mothers (79 percent) are breadwinners, with a majority of Black mothers (56 percent) raising families on their own.

Approximately 64 percent of Native American mothers and 48 percent of Latina women are breadwinners. Asian/Pacific Islander mothers are the least likely to be breadwinners, at 43 percent.

Figure 2. Mothers & Breadwinner Mothers by Race/Ethnicity of Mother, United States, 2018



SHARE OF BREADWINNER MOTHERS BY STATE

Across the states, the District of Columbia has the largest share of breadwinner mothers at 71 percent, followed by Mississippi at 60 percent. Utah has the lowest share of breadwinner mothers (34 percent), followed by Wyoming and Washington (both 46 percent).

The median earnings of women who are primary or co-breadwinners vary by state. In 2018, The District of Columbia ranked highest in the country for median annual earnings for women, \$65,000 for women employed full-time, year-round. They also have the highest share of women living in poverty in the United States at 27 percent. The median earnings for women in Mississippi is \$31,300 and has the second highest share of women living in poverty in the U.S.⁴

SHARE OF BREADWINNER MOTHERS IN THE STATES BY RACE & ETHNICITY

- Across all states, Black mothers with children under the age of 18 are more likely to be breadwinners than White, Hispanic, or Asian mothers in every state.⁵
- Colorado and Washington States have the lowest share of Black breadwinner mothers, 62.4 percent and 63.8 percent respectively. Wisconsin (87.3 percent) and the District of Columbia (87.1 percent)
- There are more single Black breadwinner mothers than married ones in every state.
- The state of Alabama has the lowest share of Hispanic mothers who are breadwinners at 37 percent. Massachusetts has the highest share of Latina breadwinner mothers at 69 percent.
- Hawaii has the highest share of Asian/Pacific Islander mothers who are breadwinners at 56.8 percent. Indiana has the lowest share of API mothers who are breadwinner at 32.6 percent.
- Among White mothers, the share who are breadwinners range from a low of 31.1 percent in Utah to a high of 57.9 percent in Vermont and the District of Columbia. In each state, the share of White breadwinner mothers who are married is greater than the share who are single.



Table 1.**Breadwinner Mothers with Children Under 18 by Race/Ethnicity of Mother and Household Type, United States, 2018**

	All Mother Households		White Mother Households				Black Mother Households			
State	Number of Households	Share with Breadwinner Mother	Number of Households	Share without Breadwinner Mother	Share with Breadwinner Mother		Number of Households	Share without Breadwinner Mother	Share with Breadwinner Mother	
					Single	Married			Single	Married
Alabama	417,033	54.6%	269,720	55.2%	16.1%	28.6%	110,175	16.7%	62.5%	20.8%
Alaska	64,192	47.8%	40,758	55.9%	14.5%	29.6%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arizona	570,786	49.0%	287,046	54.5%	16.3%	29.2%	25,294	26.9%	49.9%	23.2%
Arkansas	272,944	56.4%	192,535	48.1%	18.8%	33.1%	42,541	14.6%	65.7%	19.7%
California	3,360,043	47.3%	1,173,688	55.2%	14.3%	30.6%	167,349	24.6%	51.0%	24.4%
Colorado	525,507	47.4%	344,829	53.9%	13.8%	32.3%	22,444	37.6%	35.7%	26.7%
Connecticut	320,872	53.6%	200,068	52.0%	14.3%	33.7%	33,296	22.2%	49.8%	28.1%
Delaware	74,627	56.8%	41,498	46.9%	17.4%	35.7%	17,252	22.6%	49.2%	28.3%
Dist. of Columbia	44,691	71.4%	16,959	42.7%	N/A	51.1%	20,278	12.9%	72.3%	14.9%
Florida	1,542,113	54.6%	730,592	50.9%	17.8%	31.3%	253,194	23.4%	50.6%	26.0%
Georgia	970,556	54.5%	491,574	54.4%	14.8%	30.8%	295,255	22.8%	52.7%	24.5%
Hawaii	103,747	50.5%	25,948	64.0%	10.0%	26.0%	2,446	N/A	N/A	N/A
Idaho	160,894	40.7%	132,793	59.3%	15.3%	25.4%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Illinois	1,174,403	51.5%	705,191	52.8%	15.1%	32.1%	147,153	16.0%	65.4%	18.6%
Indiana	601,049	50.8%	470,950	52.2%	18.0%	29.8%	57,399	16.6%	65.8%	17.5%
Iowa	294,911	54.3%	246,940	46.6%	16.1%	37.4%	11,299	20.6%	62.9%	16.5%
Kansas	284,268	50.2%	212,208	50.8%	16.2%	33.0%	15,031	21.8%	56.4%	21.8%
Kentucky	397,766	54.7%	334,357	47.1%	19.5%	33.4%	33,731	21.0%	63.2%	15.8%
Louisiana	394,875	55.7%	236,493	55.4%	17.6%	27.0%	118,221	19.2%	61.2%	19.7%
Maine	100,972	55.9%	93,454	44.5%	16.4%	39.1%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Maryland	546,498	56.0%	271,050	51.6%	13.1%	35.3%	154,542	24.3%	44.3%	31.5%
Massachusetts	605,561	54.2%	407,507	50.4%	15.2%	34.4%	44,503	23.6%	49.0%	27.4%
Michigan	855,119	52.0%	632,043	53.3%	15.9%	30.8%	117,104	15.2%	66.2%	18.6%
Minnesota	521,180	54.4%	406,055	47.4%	12.4%	40.2%	41,586	27.9%	46.2%	25.8%
Mississippi	263,786	59.8%	147,835	53.9%	15.7%	30.4%	101,121	18.1%	59.2%	22.7%
Missouri	548,491	55.4%	434,710	48.3%	18.2%	33.4%	61,963	15.0%	63.5%	21.5%
Montana	86,878	47.1%	76,762	54.1%	14.9%	31.1%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Nebraska	194,944	52.3%	149,894	48.4%	15.8%	35.8%	9,690	16.6%	50.1%	33.3%
Nevada	242,022	52.5%	110,076	51.7%	17.9%	30.4%	19,143	22.0%	58.3%	19.7%
New Hampshire	110,482	48.0%	97,502	52.4%	16.2%	31.4%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
New Jersey	853,685	49.7%	436,946	55.4%	11.2%	33.4%	102,591	23.4%	48.7%	27.9%
New Mexico	161,479	54.4%	57,257	49.8%	22.3%	28.0%	2,937	N/A	N/A	N/A

	All Mother Households		White Mother Households				Black Mother Households			
State	Number of Households	Share with Breadwinner Mother	Number of Households	Share without Breadwinner Mother	Share with Breadwinner Mother		Number of Households	Share without Breadwinner Mother	Share with Breadwinner Mother	
					Single	Married			Single	Married
New York	1,647,661	54.2%	890,088	52.0%	14.2%	33.9%	226,250	21.3%	54.5%	24.2%
North Carolina	936,832	54.9%	572,562	50.5%	15.5%	34.0%	187,247	20.2%	56.1%	23.7%
North Dakota	72,211	49.8%	60,400	54.3%	13.5%	32.2%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ohio	1,018,771	55.3%	786,508	49.2%	18.1%	32.7%	135,850	15.7%	67.5%	16.9%
Oklahoma	360,506	50.1%	230,944	53.4%	18.5%	28.1%	26,406	20.7%	58.4%	20.9%
Oregon	347,002	49.7%	253,177	50.5%	17.3%	32.1%	6,153	37.3%	N/A	28.0%
Pennsylvania	1,067,582	53.1%	793,710	51.0%	15.2%	33.8%	110,925	18.9%	59.9%	21.1%
Rhode Island	89,072	57.0%	58,927	46.2%	18.7%	35.1%	6,050	N/A	54.0%	N/A
South Carolina	421,706	56.0%	266,596	52.5%	16.6%	30.9%	109,370	18.8%	61.3%	20.0%
South Dakota	80,873	56.2%	68,818	46.0%	16.2%	37.8%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Tennessee	589,788	53.5%	423,274	51.3%	17.5%	31.2%	101,304	19.4%	61.1%	19.5%
Texas	2,760,622	48.4%	1,078,953	56.2%	14.6%	29.2%	318,196	23.6%	50.1%	26.3%
Utah	332,638	33.8%	263,629	68.9%	9.8%	21.3%	3,146	N/A	N/A	N/A
Vermont	47,998	58.0%	45,321	42.1%	20.3%	37.6%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Virginia	777,228	50.5%	467,299	53.7%	13.4%	32.9%	134,154	26.6%	47.7%	25.6%
Washington	673,062	45.7%	443,989	56.3%	14.0%	29.8%	25,790	36.2%	37.0%	26.8%
West Virginia	141,670	51.7%	132,337	49.4%	20.6%	30.0%	4,663	N/A	53.1%	N/A
Wisconsin	527,885	55.1%	418,895	47.7%	15.3%	37.0%	36,380	12.7%	72.7%	14.6%
Wyoming	50,651	45.9%	42,351	55.1%	16.0%	28.9%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
United States	28,610,132	51.6%	16,773,016	52.4%	15.6%	32.1%	3,471,462	21.2%	55.5%	23.3%



Table 1 Con't

Breadwinner Mothers by Race/Ethnicity and Household Type, 2018

State	Hispanic Mother Households				Asian/Pacific Islander Mother Households			
	Number of Households	Share without Bread-winner Mother	Share with Bread-winner Mother		Number of Households	Share without Bread-winner Mother	Share with Bread-winner Mother	
			Single	Married			Single	Married
Alabama	22,325	63.0%	21.5%	15.6%	6,814	61.5%	N/A	28.5%
Alaska	4,900	N/A	N/A	N/A	5,018	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arizona	201,160	50.6%	27.1%	22.3%	27,084	54.8%	8.4%	36.8%
Arkansas	25,217	52.9%	25.9%	21.3%	5,961	63.9%	N/A	32.9%
California	1,368,289	53.8%	22.0%	24.2%	550,003	54.2%	9.9%	35.9%
Colorado	123,664	51.3%	25.1%	23.6%	20,410	59.3%	11.1%	29.6%
Connecticut	59,438	35.7%	41.5%	22.8%	21,298	63.1%	6.4%	30.5%
Delaware	9,240	55.8%	24.8%	19.4%	5,042	63.4%	N/A	33.3%
Dist. of Columbia	5,198	N/A	N/A	N/A	1,329	N/A	N/A	N/A
Florida	468,382	47.6%	25.8%	26.6%	58,429	55.3%	10.2%	34.5%
Georgia	112,750	58.1%	20.9%	21.1%	51,673	62.7%	6.0%	31.3%
Hawaii	13,871	47.3%	22.4%	30.2%	42,027	43.2%	15.6%	41.2%
Idaho	21,320	59.0%	22.3%	18.7%	2,395	N/A	N/A	N/A
Illinois	221,503	53.5%	21.1%	25.4%	81,245	57.1%	7.7%	35.2%
Indiana	47,953	55.3%	24.7%	20.0%	15,968	67.4%	8.6%	23.9%
Iowa	20,186	49.5%	26.9%	23.6%	11,692	47.7%	N/A	44.4%
Kansas	38,206	54.3%	22.8%	22.9%	10,385	58.7%	N/A	28.6%
Kentucky	15,520	55.0%	23.7%	21.4%	8,358	61.8%	N/A	26.0%
Louisiana	24,351	55.7%	26.4%	17.9%	8,487	52.7%	N/A	35.0%
Maine	2,134	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Maryland	59,974	54.7%	19.8%	25.5%	45,668	52.9%	8.8%	38.3%
Massachusetts	85,302	31.0%	48.8%	20.3%	52,444	55.5%	8.6%	35.9%
Michigan	46,299	48.6%	28.2%	23.2%	38,531	61.7%	6.2%	32.1%
Minnesota	31,083	47.1%	25.9%	27.0%	28,920	51.1%	12.1%	36.9%
Mississippi	9,072	59.0%	22.1%	18.9%	2,520	N/A	N/A	N/A
Missouri	26,234	46.4%	26.0%	27.6%	14,567	58.6%	N/A	32.5%
Montana	3,332	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Nebraska	25,917	56.3%	23.9%	19.8%	5,629	54.1%	N/A	29.4%
Nevada	82,906	50.0%	25.3%	24.7%	20,729	44.0%	15.6%	40.4%
New Hampshire	5,418	N/A	N/A	N/A	4,803	53.5%	N/A	38.6%
New Jersey	188,620	45.7%	30.8%	23.5%	111,446	63.3%	5.1%	31.6%
New Mexico	83,750	44.3%	30.8%	24.8%	3,357	N/A	N/A	N/A

State	Hispanic Mother Households				Asian/Pacific Islander Mother Households			
	Number of Households	Share without Bread-winner Mother	Share with Bread-winner Mother		Number of Households	Share without Bread-winner Mother	Share with Bread-winner Mother	
			Single	Married			Single	Married
New York	333,182	39.9%	38.4%	21.6%	158,127	58.7%	8.7%	32.6%
North Carolina	109,926	55.3%	23.0%	21.7%	40,910	60.4%	7.9%	31.7%
North Dakota	2,847	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ohio	42,846	43.3%	35.9%	20.8%	31,896	66.2%	6.1%	27.7%
Oklahoma	46,097	58.8%	24.3%	16.9%	9,037	53.4%	N/A	36.8%
Oregon	51,936	50.2%	23.0%	26.8%	21,480	55.8%	9.2%	34.9%
Pennsylvania	92,074	39.1%	39.4%	21.6%	51,802	59.7%	8.6%	31.7%
Rhode Island	18,184	37.1%	41.7%	21.2%	3,606	N/A	N/A	N/A
South Carolina	29,487	58.2%	22.1%	19.7%	8,763	52.7%	N/A	35.1%
South Dakota	2,924	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Tennessee	40,045	60.7%	20.2%	19.1%	14,690	60.8%	11.5%	27.7%
Texas	1,141,751	53.9%	25.8%	20.3%	176,069	59.5%	8.4%	32.1%
Utah	45,874	54.3%	21.5%	24.2%	11,453	63.4%	N/A	24.3%
Vermont	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Virginia	85,500	55.4%	21.4%	23.2%	68,061	59.6%	8.6%	31.7%
Washington	97,308	49.6%	25.6%	24.8%	77,470	58.5%	11.2%	30.3%
West Virginia	1,800	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Wisconsin	41,806	46.0%	28.1%	26.0%	20,117	51.6%	N/A	35.6%
Wyoming	5,876	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
United States	5,643,655	50.9%	26.1%	23.0%	1,962,626	57.0%	9.2%	33.8%



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recovery and relief efforts should include ways to support single mothers, who have dual roles during the pandemic: workers and primary caregivers.

Additional and extended stimulus support for unemployed single mothers or mothers to care for children who are out-of-school or without care. States can also increase support and provide funding for childcare for mothers who are essential workers.

Raise the minimum wage for all workers in the United States.

Black and Latina women are more likely to be employed in lower-wage jobs compared to men and other workers. Raising the minimum wage of working women would be a boon for local economies and cut the number of working women living in poverty in half.

Work to close the gender wage gap.

The earnings wage gap translates into lower lifetime pay for women, less income for families, and higher rates of poverty across the country. Federal and state governments could increase women's earnings and grow the economy by fully enforcing the Equal Pay Act and state equivalents. If women received equal pay with comparable men, poverty among working women would be cut in half.

Provide paid sick days and paid family and medical leave for all workers.

Mothers disproportionately shoulder unpaid caregiving responsibilities, for elderly relatives, individuals with a disability, and children, which they often must balance with employment. Paid sick days and paid family and medical leave can provide breadwinner mothers with caregiving commitments the chance to stay in their jobs and advance, rather than cutting back or leaving entirely. While access to paid leave has increased as a result of the pandemic relief, this access should be expanded to cover all workers and should remain even after the relief efforts have ended.

Ensure that all parents have access to affordable and quality child care.

Quality child care is unaffordable for many families, leading either to high child care costs or reduced paid work time. Expanding publicly funded early childhood care would ensure that eligible parents can receive child care whether they are employed, looking for work, or pursuing education or training, and would increase the family's disposable income and standard of living. Expanding child care subsidies could also increase parents' access to quality child care, improve performance and advancement at work, and reduce child-care related work interruptions. This will be a vital component to getting unemployed mothers back to work as businesses reopen.

CONCLUSION

Today, more than ever, families rely on the income and earnings of working mothers to make ends meet.

This brief highlights the need for targeted programs, policies, and interventions that put the needs of breadwinner mothers at the forefront of recovery efforts, so that families have the social supports they need to not only survive, but thrive following the Pandemic.



ENDNOTES

¹ See Ariane Hegewisch (2020) “Women Lost More Jobs than Men in almost all Sectors of the Economy.” Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research <<https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/QF-Jobs-Day-April-FINAL.pdf>>.

² Ibid.

³ See Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2018) “The Economic Status of Women in the States 2018.” <<https://statusofwomendata.org/featured/economic-status-women-states-2018/>>.

⁴ See Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2018) “The Economic Status of Women in the States 2018.” <<https://statusofwomendata.org/featured/economic-status-women-states-2018/>>.

⁵ Sample sizes are inadequate to provide reliable data for Hispanic women in 9 states and the District of Columbia, Black women in 14 states, and Asian women in 12 states and the District of Columbia. Additionally, sample sizes are inadequate to show the share of Asian single breadwinner mothers in 26 states and the District of Columbia. Due to inadequate sample sizes, data for other racial groups are not included in Table 1.

Figure 1 Notes:

A breadwinner mother is defined as a single mother who heads a household (irrespective of earnings) or a married mother who earns at least 40 percent of the couple’s joint earnings; single mothers who live in someone else’s household (such as with their parents) are not included in breadwinners. Racial categories are non-Hispanic. Data, calculated using three-year averages (2016-2018), include households with a mother and children under age 18.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey microdata (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 9.0).

Figure 2 Notes:

Data are three-year averages (2016-2018) and include households with a mother and children under age 18. See Figure 1 note for definition of a breadwinner mother. Racial categories are non-Hispanic.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey microdata (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 9.0).

Table 1 Notes:

Data are three-year averages (2014-2018) and include households with a mother and children under age 18. Shares may not add to 100% due to rounding. See Figure 1 note for definition of a breadwinner mother. Racial categories are non-Hispanic. N/A = not available. Data for other racial groups are not included due to inadequate sample sizes.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey microdata (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 9.0).

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