



Single mother families and employment, race, and poverty in changing economic times[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Using American Community Survey data from 2001, 2005, and 2010, this paper assesses the relationships between employment, race, and poverty for households headed by single women across different economic periods. While poverty rates rose dramatically among single-mother families between 2001 and 2010, surprisingly many racial disparities in poverty narrowed by the end of the decade. This was due to a greater increase in poverty among whites, although gaps between whites and Blacks, whites and Hispanics, and whites and American Indians remained quite large in 2010. All employment statuses were at higher risk of poverty in 2010 than 2001 and the risk increased most sharply for those employed part-time, the unemployed, and those not in the labor force. Given the concurrent increase in part-time employment and unemployment between 2000 and 2010, findings paint a bleak picture of the toll the last decade has had on the well being of single-mother families.

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1. Introduction

At the start of the 21st century, researchers saw positive signs that poverty rates among single-parent households were on the decline (Lichter and Crowley, 2004). Employment levels among single mothers also increased and the number of such families on welfare declined (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2003; Lerman and Ratcliffe, 2001). Notably, these benefits were apparent among the most vulnerable of families, those headed by women of color (Lichter and Crowley, 2004). Ten years later, in the wake of the Great Recession of 2007–2009, much of this optimism has receded. Overall poverty rates were the highest of the decade at 15.1 percent in 2010 and single-mother households with children under 18 had poverty rates of 45 percent from 2006 to 2008 (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2010; Bratter and Damaske, 2013). A decade into the 21st century, Black and Hispanic single-mothers and their children continue to bear a much higher poverty risk than their white counterparts (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008; U. S. Census Bureau, 2010; Van Hook et al., 2004). While greater poverty rates among single mother families are not surprising in the wake of an economic downturn, did families headed by women of color disproportionately bear a greater burden of poverty risk?

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Despite the wealth of information about the relationship between race, family structure, and poverty, critical gaps remain in researchers' understanding of how the benefits of work vary across race for single-mothers. First, employment patterns differ by race (Reid, 2002) and education (Hamil-Luker, 2005) and the race wage-gap is persistent (Dozier, 2010; McCall, 2001). This suggests that the relationship between employment and poverty may differ according to race, with minority women more likely to be working in jobs that pay below-poverty wages than white women, yet these relationships have been for the most part only indirectly explored (see Lichter and Crowley, 2004 for a notable exception). Second, there has been relatively little research on how these relationships might differ during different economic periods, even though research suggests that work-focused welfare programs are less effective during times of economic depression, when the number of people seeking jobs increases, and the number of jobs decreases (Kwon and Meyer, 2011). The first decade of the 2000s mark the first full decade since the passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 that moved the majority of poor families off of the welfare rolls (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2003). The more hopeful research about the decline of poverty and the decline of women of color in poverty that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century likely reflected the fact that the economy had expanded steadily for close to ten years by 2000 (National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), 2001). In contrast, we examine the beginning of the following decade (2001), a time at which the economy experienced a mild recession, the middle of that decade (2005), a time at which the economy was in the midst of an expansion, and the end of the decade (2010), a time that followed a significant recession (Autor, 2010; NBER, 2001; Smeeding et al., 2011). Looking at the relationship between employment, race, and poverty across the first decade of the 21st century at three distinct points (beginning, middle, and close) allows us to evaluate whether changes in the broader economy affected the relationships between employment and poverty for the most vulnerable families, those headed by single women. Further, we also examine whether there is a racial dimension to this vulnerability by exploring whether Black and Hispanic women are placed at a greater risk of poverty.

This paper asks: What are the relationships between employment, race, and poverty? Did these relationships change across the first decade of the 21st century? Using data from the 2001, 2005, and 2010 American Community Surveys, we explore racial differences in poverty among single-mother households over the decade, as well as differences in how full-time employment, part-time employment, or unemployment may attenuate or exacerbate poverty rates during three distinct economic periods in the 21st century: the economic recession of 2001 that followed a long period of expansion, a period of economic growth and labor market expansion in 2005, and a period of significant economic decline at the close of the decade (for detailed characterizations of these economic periods, see Autor 2010; National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), 2001; Smeeding et al., 2011).

2. Race, poverty, and employment in single-mother households

Families headed by unmarried women are more likely to be among the working poor (Brady et al., 2010) and are the families most vulnerable to poverty (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). Race stratifies single mothers' likelihood of living at or below the poverty line: relative to white and Asian single-mother households, Black and Hispanic women (and their children) living in single-parent households are at greater risk of being in poverty (Elmelech and Lu, 2004; Lichter and Crowley, 2004; Lichter et al., 2005; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). There is some variation in child poverty risks among Asians and Hispanics, which reflects differences between new immigrants and second generations that have been attributed to the economic benefits of acculturation (Lichter et al., 2005; Van Hook et al., 2004). Recent research suggests that multiracial single-parent families may experience poverty at rates in between mono-racial whites and mono-racial single-parent families of color (Bratter and Damaske, 2013). These patterns are consistent with other indicators that demonstrate the power of racial stratification to exacerbate disadvantage even among already disadvantaged sub-groups, such as single mothers.

Although maternal employment can reduce poverty rates (Lichter and Crowley, 2004), particularly when the economy is strong (Iceland, 2003), the relationships between race, employment, single-parent births, low education levels, and a lack of work experience (Alon and Haberfeld, 2007; Ciabattari, 2007; Musick, 2002; Pettit and Ewert, 2009) may make employment less effective in pulling some groups of women out of poverty. Women who become single-mothers generally have less human capital to bring to the labor market due to having less education and fewer work experiences than their peers (Ciabattari, 2007; Musick, 2002). Furthermore, Black and Hispanic single mothers often begin motherhood at a younger age than whites and Asians, which often delays or completely eliminates educational progress beyond high school, decreasing cumulative earnings (Hoffman and Maynard, 2008). On the other hand, Lichter and Crowley (2004) found that the greatest gains of increased maternal employment in the 1990s, in terms of decreases in poverty rates, were to African-American families (Lichter and Crowley, 2004). Both lines of research suggest that the benefits of employment and its impact on poverty status differ across race. But what additionally remains unclear is whether employment status differentially impacts poverty rates across race and over time.

Race and gender variation in poverty is strongly tied to labor force experiences, encompassing both the type of employment that women secure and the wages women receive. Women's employment rates differ by race (Browne and Misra, 2003; England et al., 2004; Reid, 2002), as do women's wages (Dozier, 2010; Pettit and Ewert, 2009). Although in the mid-20th century, women of color were more likely to work than their white counterparts, this trend has reversed in recent decades (England et al., 2004; Higginbotham and Romero, 1997; Reid, 2002). Black women's wages have fallen behind white women's since the early 1980s: the wage gap between white and Black women has grown from under five percent at the start of the 1980s to between 12 and 15 percent today (Neal, 2004; Pettit and Ewert, 2009). Hispanic women also experience a wage gap compared to white women (Alon and Haberfeld, 2007; England et al., 1999; McCall, 2001), and,

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