



## Single Mothers in Utah

### Setting the Stage

According to US Census Bureau data, in 2021 there were 10.7 million single-parent families in the country. Of these, 73.3% were headed by single mothers.<sup>1</sup> A single mother is a primary caregiver of one or more dependent children and identifies as separated, widowed, divorced, or never married.<sup>2</sup> The Pew Research Center indicates that the US has the highest rate of children living in single-parent households than anywhere else in the world.<sup>3</sup> Roughly 23.0% of US children live with one parent and no other adults, compared to 7.0% globally.<sup>4</sup> According to Utah data, there were 70,647 single-parent families with children in 2021; of these, 69.2% were headed by single mothers.

Being a single parent can present specific challenges for the parent as well as their children. Given that most single-parent households in the US and Utah are headed by women, understanding the unique needs of single mothers nationally and within Utah is an essential step in tailoring programs to help women thrive. Aligned with the Utah Women & Leadership Project's mission—to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women—this snapshot is meant to add to our understanding and is organized in the following areas:

- 1) US and Utah overview,
- 2) Challenges faced by single mothers,
- 3) Utah-specific factors, and
- 4) What Utahns can do.

### US and Utah Overview

In the US, the number of children living with two parents has continually decreased from 1968 (85.0%) to 2020 (70.0%).<sup>5</sup> The percentage of children living with single mothers has doubled from 7.6 million (11.0%) in 1968 to 15.3 million (21.0%) in 2020.<sup>6</sup> In 2021, 7.9 million US women were single mothers.<sup>7</sup> Nationally, 2022 data suggest 51.4% of single mothers were never married, 29.3% were divorced, and 19.2% were either separated or widowed.<sup>8</sup>

In 2021, 48,878 Utah women were single mothers.<sup>9</sup> This represents 12.7% of all Utah families with children under 18. A Utah health indicator report analyzed American Community Survey data from 2017–2021 to identify the percentage of households by county that were headed by

single mothers. The three counties with the highest percentage of single mother households were Grand (7.2%), Weber (6.0%), and San Juan (6.1%). The three counties with the lowest percentage were Piute (0.0%), Daggett (1.0%), and Beaver (1.8%).<sup>10</sup>

### Challenges Faced by Single Mothers

Single mothers may disproportionately experience challenges such as economic disadvantages, mental health concerns, work instability, decreased time to devote to their children and their own wellbeing, education barriers, and possible poorer outcomes for their children.<sup>11</sup> Because of the heavy burdens single mothers carry trying to balance work, life, and family, many are discouraged, overwhelmed, and exhausted.<sup>12</sup> These challenges, especially if faced without appropriate communal support, can keep single mothers in a place of everyday survival instead of reaching a place where they can grow, excel, and thrive.

*Finances:* The US has an exceptionally high poverty rate for single mothers. In 2021, one of every three (33.7%) single mothers lived in poverty.<sup>13</sup> One study found that single mothers were twice as likely as their married counterparts to be in financial hardship.<sup>14</sup> Some reasons for this are that women tend to make less than men, and many single mothers do not get the benefit of dual incomes.<sup>15</sup> Rent/mortgage, utilities, food, healthcare, and other bills associated with taking care of children can deplete the resources of one-income families very quickly, leaving single mothers with little money for other essentials. In 2021, the US median income in family households was \$51,168 for women with no spouse present, compared to \$70,525 for men with no spouse present, and \$106,921 for married couples.<sup>16</sup> In addition, although many single mothers receive some sort of child support, one study found that, of the single mothers who were supposed to receive child support, less than half (45.9%) received full payments.<sup>17</sup>

*Employment:* Single mothers typically have less stable employment and are paid less than women in two-parent households.<sup>18</sup> When relevant circumstances occur, many single mothers are not eligible for or cannot afford to use unpaid leave through the Family and Medical Leave Act.<sup>19</sup>

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Less stable employment also impacts access to healthcare insurance coverage. Many single mothers struggle with how to fully care for their children and still make ends meet financially. The COVID-19 pandemic and the issues surrounding remote school for children compounded these issues.<sup>20</sup> The Pew Research Center found that by September 2020, the share of single mothers at work dropped nearly nine points from a year earlier, from 76.1% to 67.4%.<sup>21</sup> The decrease for Black and Hispanic single mothers was almost double the decrease experienced by White single mothers. Being able to work enough to make a livable wage is critical to the health of single mothers and their families.

*Education:* With the demands of work and family, another important challenge facing single mothers is education. It is essential for many single mothers to continue with school because additional education can greatly increase an individual's earnings over time.<sup>22</sup> However, higher education was not designed with single mothers in mind and may not provide for their needs.<sup>23</sup> For example, a lack of financial assistance, campus-based childcare services, and targeted support may hinder single mothers from completing their education. In the US, a higher percentage of Black women (31.0%), Native American/Alaska Native women (23.0%), multiracial women (17.0%), and Latina women (16.0%) are single mother students, compared to White women (13.0%) and Asian/Pacific Islander women (7.0%).<sup>24</sup> Nationally, 8.0% of single mothers enrolled in college finish an associate or bachelor's degree within six years of starting; 49.0% of college women who are not mothers finish in the same period.<sup>25</sup> Obtaining an adequate education can contribute to single mothers' financial security. One Utah report found that single mothers with an associate or bachelor's degree were 28.0% or 54.0% less likely, respectively, to live in poverty than high school graduates.<sup>26</sup>

*Societal Stigma and Mental Health:* Research suggests single mothers have more physical and mental health struggles.<sup>27</sup> Compared to married individuals, unmarried individuals experience higher death rates for various causes (e.g., heart disease, cancer).<sup>28</sup> Single mothers often struggle in isolation with their heavy loads, which can lead to increased emotional and financial pain.<sup>29</sup> Societal attitudes and expectations can create stress associated with cultural alienation, stigma, lack of social support systems, and limited resources for single mothers.<sup>30</sup> Given various demands, single mothers may struggle with self-care, including a lack of leisure time.<sup>31</sup> Because of these issues and many other contributing factors, single mothers tend to have increased obstacles with work/life balance.<sup>32</sup> Single mothers have been shown to experience higher levels of chronic stress, loneliness, and depression than other women.<sup>33</sup> Some single mothers feel a sense of guilt, blame, and responsibility that can weigh them down and threaten their mental health. Poor mental health has been associated with an increased risk of poverty for single mothers (23.4%), compared to married mothers (4.7%).<sup>34</sup> Societal attitudes of perceived

dependency on governmental support can also increase the mental health burden for some single mothers.<sup>35</sup> Taking steps to decrease societal stigma regarding single mothers, helping them create better work/life balance, and addressing mental health are important components of helping single mothers thrive.

## Utah-Specific Factors

Specific factors add to the challenges many single mothers face in Utah. Three of these factors are highlighted below.

*Wage Gap:* A report by the Utah Department of Workforce Services affirms that Utah men consistently earn more than Utah women.<sup>36</sup> Nationally, adult women who work full-time, year-round earn approximately 81.0% of what their male counterparts earn, while in Utah women earn just 72.0%. Part of this discrepancy is tied to educational and occupational choice, which are shaped by societal norms and expectations; traditionally, women are more likely to pursue degrees and occupations that yield lower salaries.<sup>37</sup> Another reason may be that women tend to spend less time in the workforce than men, often because of caregiving responsibilities, resulting in less work experience. Utah women are more likely to work part time (30.0%) than US women (21.0%) and Utah men (16.0%).<sup>38</sup> Still, other factors such as unconscious bias and direct discrimination impact the wage gap.<sup>39</sup>

*Number of Children and Cost of Childcare:* Utah has more families with three or more children than the US average.<sup>40</sup> Because women tend to take on more childcare responsibilities, caring for larger families and balancing work obligations is hard,<sup>41</sup> particularly when Utah faces shortages of high-quality, affordable childcare.<sup>42</sup> Childcare in Utah is more expensive than college.<sup>43</sup> Infant care for one child would take 14.0% of a median family's income in Utah, and it gets more expensive with every additional child.<sup>44</sup> As with the wage gap, these costs likely affect single mothers' workforce participation and long-term earnings.

*Cost of Living:* Providing for a family in Utah has become increasingly challenging. In recent years, the US has experienced the fastest-climbing inflation rates in the last four decades.<sup>45</sup> For example, the US Consumer Price Index—or the average change of cost for a basket of goods—increased 8.0% from 2021 to 2022.<sup>46</sup> Americans in the Mountain region (including Utah) experienced the highest inflation rates as of January 2022.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, home prices have risen more quickly in Utah than in other states over the past few years.<sup>48</sup> Cost-of-living increases are especially challenging for those who are living at or close to poverty levels and can take a toll on single mothers. The median income among Utah single mothers with kids under 18 has largely stayed the same for the last decade, from \$33,100 in 2010 to \$37,900 in 2020,<sup>49</sup> even though the cost of living has continued to rise significantly.<sup>50</sup> In Utah, one in four households with a single mother (25.3%) are living below the

poverty level. This percentage increases with the number of children in the household: 48.8% of single mother households with five or more children live below the poverty level. More generally, 41.5% of Black women, 34.7% of American Indian/Alaska Native women, 22.3% of Hispanic or Latino women, 21.3% of women of two or more races, 17.4% of White women, and 7.5% of Asian women who are heads of households with no spouse present—with or without children—live below the poverty level.<sup>51</sup>

## What Utahns Can Do

Single mothers should not have to carry the heavy responsibility of caring for their children and themselves with limited resources. Currently, many programs are in place to help single mothers in Utah shoulder some of this heavy load, including the [Family Employment Program \(FEP\)](#), [Utah Food Stamp Program \(SNAP\)](#), [Utah Assisted Child Care Program](#), [Utah Medicaid](#), [Utah Children's Health Insurance Program \(CHIP\)](#), [Utah \(Section 8\) Voucher Program](#), [Utah Home Energy Assistance Target \(HEAT\) Program](#), [Utah Weatherization Assistance Program \(WAP\)](#), [Utah School Breakfast and Lunch Program](#), [Special Milk Program](#), [Utah Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#), [Utah Summer Food Service](#), [Head Start](#), [Higher Education Success Stipend Program \(HESSP\)](#), [Utah's Earned Income Tax Credit](#), and the upcoming revision to the [Utah Child Tax Credit](#). However, it should be noted that eligibility criteria, availability, and application cycles can make it difficult for single mothers to utilize these resources.

Many organizations also provide support, resources, and scholarships to single mothers, such as women resource centers on various Utah higher education campuses, the [Live Your Dream Foundation](#), the [Stella H. Oaks Foundation](#), and the [Women to Women Foundation](#). Also, [211 Utah](#) has an in-depth single-parent resource list that single mothers can utilize.

Below is a list of recommendations that Utahns can explore to improve programs and develop new initiatives and policies that will help support single mothers.

- **Childcare:** Promote childcare reform that caps childcare expenses for single-mother families, and encourage employers to offer childcare reimbursement programs. Increase access to affordable, high-quality childcare with extended operating hours, including after-school and summer programs.
- **Government and Community Support:** Through legislation, strengthen enforcement tools that ensure single mothers receive child support and alimony. Improve advocacy for single mothers navigating legal processes around child support, alimony, and custody agreements.

Identify ways to grow single parent programs that are underfunded, particularly those aimed at alleviating poverty. Develop programs with individual case managers who help meet single mothers' diverse needs and connect them to job training, education, childcare, and safety nets. Foster a sense of communal obligation towards helping the children of single mothers thrive. Build culturally concordant programs for single mothers in their respective community organizations.

- **Education:** Encourage girls and women to graduate from college and pursue careers in higher-paying industries. Provide affordable, on-campus childcare, student family housing, and flexible class schedules for single mothers. Expand employer initiatives that invest in their workforce by offering paid training, tuition reimbursement, and flexible work schedules; these will help single mothers pursue higher education without sacrificing their income. Develop mentoring programs through which single mothers who have graduated support those going through the process. Ensure that scholarship opportunities for single mothers have reasonable eligibility requirements (e.g., many single mothers cannot enroll full time). Collect data on the educational outcomes of single mothers to better inform the design and implementation of educational support programs.
- **Employment:** Promote programs focused on improving employment stability for single mothers. Support [workforce family-friendly policies and benefits](#) (e.g., robust paid time off, flexible work schedules and locations). Support policies aimed at increasing gender equality and decreasing the wage gap in Utah.
- **Mental Health and Wellbeing:** Increase access to affordable mental healthcare. Invest in services that improve a single mother's ability to self-care, cope, and grow. Implement innovative policies that empower single mothers' resilience and self-sufficiency. Recognize that many of the other recommendations given can help decrease stress and thereby impact overall wellbeing.
- Regularly assess which programs and initiatives are achieving their intended goals and increase funding for those that are most effective.

## Conclusion

Supporting children's primary caregivers, including single mothers, helps ensure the successful future of our state and nation. Although many challenges are associated with being a single mother in Utah, there are many resources in place to help these individuals; however, the data still shows a need for adjustments and additional programs, services, and policies. Providing intentional and targeted support can build help and hope for single mothers and their families, which will positively impact our communities.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2021a). *American Community Survey 1-year estimates: B11003 family type by presence and age of own children*

under 18 years. [https://data.census.gov/table?q=B11003:+FAMILY+TYPE+BY+PRESENCE+AND+AGE+OF+OWN+CHILDREN+UN- DER+18+YEARS&g=010XX00US\\_040XX00US49&tid=ACSDT1Y2021.B11003](https://data.census.gov/table?q=B11003:+FAMILY+TYPE+BY+PRESENCE+AND+AGE+OF+OWN+CHILDREN+UN- DER+18+YEARS&g=010XX00US_040XX00US49&tid=ACSDT1Y2021.B11003).

<sup>2</sup> Crumb, L. (2021). Underserved but undeterred: Single mother students' experiences at community colleges. *Community College Enterprise*, 27(1), 66–72. In most datasets presented, single mothers are specified as female householders with children under 18 years that have no spouse present.

<sup>3</sup> Kramer, S. (2019, December 12). *U.S. has world's highest rate of children living in single-parent households*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/12/12/u-s-children-more-likely-than-children-in-other-countries-to-live-with-just-one-parent/>

<sup>4</sup> Kramer, S. (2019, December 12).

<sup>5</sup> Hemez, P., & Washington, C. (2021, April 12). *Percentage and number of children living with two parents has dropped since 1968*. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/number-of-children-living-only-with-their-mothers-has-doubled-in-past-50-years.html>

<sup>6</sup> Hemez, P., & Washington, C. (2021, April 12).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2021a).

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Table FG6. One-parent unmarried family groups with own children under 18, by marital status of the reference person: 2022*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2022/demo/families/cps-2022.html>

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2021a).

<sup>10</sup> Public Health Indicator Based Information System. (2023, January 5). *Complete health indicator report of Utah population characteristics: Household structure*. Utah Department of Health. [https://ibis.health.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/complete\\_profile/HHStruct.html](https://ibis.health.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/complete_profile/HHStruct.html)

<sup>11</sup> Waldfogel, J., Craigie, T.-A., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2010). Fragile families and child wellbeing. *Future Child*, 20(2), 87–112. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2010.0002>

<sup>12</sup> Umunna, D. (2012). Rethinking the neighborhood watch: How lessons from the Nigerian village can creatively empower the community to assist poor, single mothers in America. *Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law*, 20(4), 847–869. <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/jgspl/vol20/iss4/6/>

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2021b). *American Community Survey 1-year estimates: S1702 poverty status in the past 12 months of families*. <https://data.census.gov/table?q=utah&t=Income+and+Poverty&g=010XX00US&tid=ACSST1Y2021.S1702>

<sup>14</sup> Stack, R. J., & Meredith, A. (2018). The impact of financial hardship on single parents: An exploration of the journey from social distress to seeking help. *Journal of Family and Economic Issue*, 39(2), 233–242. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-017-9551-6>

<sup>15</sup> Semega, J., & Kollar, M. (2022, September). *Income in the United States: 2021*. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2022/demo/p60-276.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Semega, J., & Kollar, M. (2022, September).

<sup>17</sup> Grall, T. (2020, May). *Custodial mothers and fathers and their child support: 2017*. Current Population Reports. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-269.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Wu, C. F., Chang, Y. L., Rhodes, E., Musaad, S., & Jung, W. (2020). Work-hour trajectories and associated socioeconomic characteristics among single-mother families. *Social Work Research*, 44(1), 47–57. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svz029>

<sup>19</sup> Cai, Y., & Appelbaum, E. (2021, February). *It is time for the FMLA to fulfill the promise of inclusive and paid leave*. Center for Economic Policy and Research. <https://cepr.net/report/it-is-time-for-the-fmla-to-fulfill-the-promise-of-inclusive-and-paid-leave/>

<sup>20</sup> Cai, Y., & Appelbaum, E. (2021, February).

<sup>21</sup> Barroso, A., & Kochhar, R. (2020, November 24). *In the pandemic, the share of unpartnered moms at work fell more sharply than among other parents*. Pew Research Center. <https://pewrsr.ch/3pZDwAk>

<sup>22</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2020). *Investing in single mothers' higher education in Utah: Costs and benefits to individuals, families, and society*. <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Utah.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2020).

<sup>24</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2020).

<sup>25</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2020).

<sup>26</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2020).

<sup>27</sup> Vo, T., & Canty, L. (2023). Global mental health experiences of single mothers: A mixed methods research synthesis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 79(1), 68–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15461>

<sup>28</sup> Curtin, S. C., Tejada-Vera, B., & Anderson, R. N. (2021). *Death rates by marital status for leading causes of death: United States, 2010–2019*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr70/nvsr70-10.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Umunna, D. (2012).

<sup>30</sup> Vo & Canty (2023).

<sup>31</sup> Public Health Indicator Based Information System. (2023, January 5).

<sup>32</sup> Vo, T., & Canty, L. (2023).

<sup>33</sup> Stack, R. J., & Meredith, A. (2018).

<sup>34</sup> Vo, T., & Canty, L. (2023).

<sup>35</sup> Umunna, D. (2012).

<sup>36</sup> Kervin, G. (2022, November 28). *Utah's gender wage gap*. Department of Workforce Services. <https://jobs.utah.gov/blog/post/2022/11/28/utah-s-gender-wage-gap#continue>

<sup>37</sup> Kervin, G. (2022, November 28).

<sup>38</sup> Kervin, G. (2022, November 28).

<sup>39</sup> Winkel, R., Darowski, E. S., & Madsen, S. R. (2021, October 5). *Utah gender wage gap: A 2021 update*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/snapshot/31.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Kervin, G. (2022, November 28).

<sup>41</sup> Kervin, G. (2022, November 28).

<sup>42</sup> Economic Policy Institute. (2020, October). The cost of childcare in Utah. <http://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/#/UT>

<sup>43</sup> Economic Policy Institute. (2020, October).

<sup>44</sup> Economic Policy Institute. (2020, October).

<sup>45</sup> Benson, J. (2022, March 2). *How much is inflation costing you? It depends on where you live*. United States Congress Joint Economic Committee. <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/analysis?ID=C79AE4C4-2B14-4F1A-9AF3-61E2E91F3D6F>

<sup>46</sup> Department of Workforce Services. (n.d.). *Consumer Price Index (CPI) and cost of living comparisons*. <https://jobs.utah.gov/wi/data/library/wages/costofliving.html>

<sup>47</sup> Benson, J. (2022, March 2).

<sup>48</sup> Benson, J. (2022, March 2).

<sup>49</sup> Knox, A. (2021, February 15). She's trying to help the 'invisible population' of single moms weather the pandemic. *Deseret News*. [https://www.deseret.com/utah/2021/2/15/22268960/pandemic-university-of-utah-grad-wants-to-help-fellow-single-mothers-weather-storm-get-degrees#:~:text=7%2C%202021-,Sledge earned a law degree while a single mother and nonprofit Freedom for Resilient Women.&text=The pandemic has raised the calls %E2%80%9CCan%20invisible population.%E2%80%9D](https://www.deseret.com/utah/2021/2/15/22268960/pandemic-university-of-utah-grad-wants-to-help-fellow-single-mothers-weather-storm-get-degrees#:~:text=7%2C%202021-,Sledge%20earned%20a%20law%20degree%20while%20a%20single%20mother%20and%20nonprofit%20Freedom%20for%20Resilient%20Women.&text=The%20pandemic%20has%20raised%20the%20calls%20for%20invisible%20population.%E2%80%9D)

<sup>50</sup> Benson, J. (2022, March 2).

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2021b).

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