

ASPE RESEARCH BRIEF

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

LOW-INCOME SINGLE MOTHERS DISCONNECTED FROM WORK AND PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Context

Since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, many former welfare recipients have entered the workforce. At the same time, researchers also have identified increases in the segment of the population that is not receiving government benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and also is not working – often called “disconnected”.

There has been increased focus among researchers and policy makers on disconnected single mothers, in part due to concern that current programs may not be serving certain groups well.¹ Studies have indicated that disconnected single mothers may be more likely to have serious barriers to sustained work, such as low education, mental health problems, or responsibilities for caring for disabled family members.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) contracted with the Urban Institute to learn more about low-income single mothers who are not working or receiving public assistance. The study, which currently is on-going, is examining the size and characteristics of the disconnected population, how low-income single mothers are doing economically, to what extent women move in and out of disconnectedness, and the factors associated with movements into and out of the disconnected state.

This brief presents information on trends in the disconnected over time and characteristics of the disconnected group compared to all low-income single mothers. Information on the other research questions will be disseminated when it becomes available.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

This ASPE Research Brief presents information on trends in the rate of being disconnected from both work and public assistance, and the characteristics of the disconnected group compared to all low-income single mothers. The data are from a project examining the characteristics and experiences of low-income single mothers who are not working or receiving public assistance. The project is being conducted by the Urban Institute.

Office of the Assistant
Secretary for Planning and
Evaluation

Office of Human
Services Policy

US Department of Health
and Human Services

Washington, DC 20201



¹ Rebecca M. Blank, “Improving the Safety Net for Single Mothers Who Face Serious Barriers to Work,” *Future of Children* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 183-197.

Data and Population

This brief examines low-income single mothers who are “disconnected” from both work and public assistance. We use data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (1996, 2001, and 2004 panels, and the first three waves of the 2008 panel). We did not include earlier SIPP panels due to changes between the 1993 and 1996 panels that make results difficult to compare.

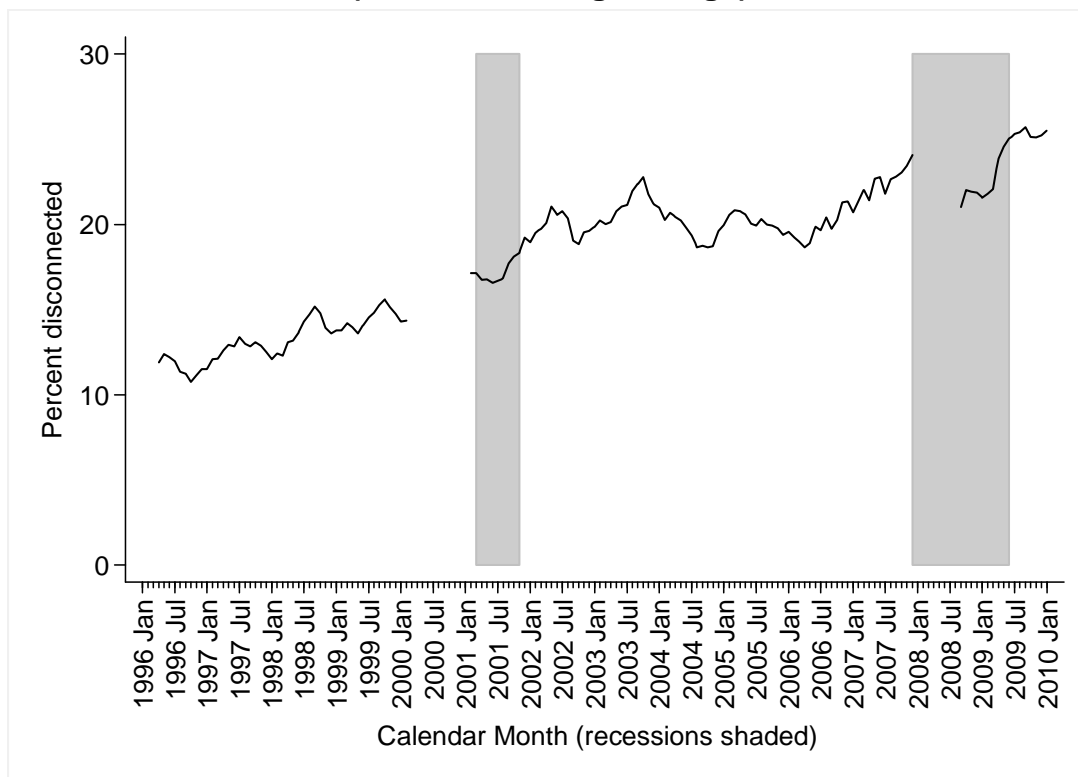
For purposes of this study, single mothers are unmarried women with at least one child under age 18 living with them. Single mothers could have cohabiting partners, and income of cohabiting partners or of other adults is included in measures of household income, but not in measures of family income. We define low-income as family income below twice the federal poverty line. In addition, we define a single mother as disconnected if she is not in school, has no family earnings, and receives no benefits from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs, for a period of four months preceding an interview.

Findings

Trends

The rate of being disconnected has increased over the last decade: about one in eight low-income single mothers was disconnected in 1996 and 1997, but about one in five was disconnected in the period from 2004 to 2008 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage disconnected among low-income single mothers age 18-54 (4-month moving average)



Source: Calculations from 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008 SIPP data conducted by the Urban Institute.

The year 2000 was a gap year with no multi-year longitudinal SIPP panel data available. Since the 2008 SIPP panel started in May 2008, the first four-month moving average data is available in August 2008.

Characteristics of Disconnected Single Mothers

Characteristics of disconnected and all low-income single mothers are presented in Table 1. Characteristics and household structure information are based on point-in-time data collected for the second wave of the SIPP panel.

Family Characteristics

In 2008, over half of disconnected single mothers (59.3%) lived with other adults who were “connected.” This percentage was higher than for all low-income single mothers (51.4%). One-third (32.9%) lived with a cohabiting partner, which is higher than all low-income single mothers (23.9%). Roughly another third (32.2%) of disconnected mothers lived without any other adults. A higher percentage of disconnected mothers had a child under five (42.9%), compared to all low-income single mothers. These differences also existed in the 2004 data.

Individual Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of disconnected mothers generally were similar to other low-income single mothers. Disconnected single mothers, however, were:

- More likely to have a health problem limiting or preventing work
- Less likely to have completed high school and less likely to have attended college
- Less likely to be a U.S. citizen.

Work, Income and Program Participation

By definition, disconnected single mothers had not worked during the previous four months. Disconnected single mothers were more likely to report that they were not working because they are pregnant or taking care of children than low-income single mothers generally.

Largely due to having no earnings, disconnected mothers had very low material well-being. In 2004, total family income for disconnected mothers averaged 33 percent of the poverty line, compared to 85 percent for all low-income single mothers. Total household income also was lower for disconnected mothers, but the difference was much smaller. Both groups fared worse in 2008: total family income for disconnected mothers averaged 27 percent of the poverty line, compared to 79 percent for all low-income single mothers. In addition, disconnected mothers lived in households with similar rates of receipt of in-kind benefits as other low-income single mothers, including food stamp receipt, housing assistance, and public health insurance.

Data Notes

For this analysis, family is defined as a nuclear family with mother and minor children only. Earnings of any minor children are counted as their mother’s. The sample is limited to mothers who are age 18 through 54 and unmarried in all four months prior to the interview, and whose family income is less than twice the poverty line over a four-month period. We also look at the characteristics of the households in which these women live.

Table 1. Characteristics of disconnected and all low-income single mothers, 2004 and 2008

Family characteristics	2004		2008	
	Low-Income Single Mothers	Disconnected	Low-Income Single Mothers	Disconnected
Percent living with connected adult	46.1%	59.6%*	51.4%	59.3%*
Percent living with only disconnected adults	6.3%	6.7%	7.2%	8.5%
Percent living alone without other adults	47.5%	33.7%*	41.5%	32.2%*
Percent living with cohabiting partner	21.0%	32.1%*	23.9%	32.9%*
Percent living with adult child	9.0%	7.5%	10.2%	9.6%
Percent living with parent	16.9%	18.7%	20.0%	20.5%
Household size	3.81	4.16*	3.90	4.15*
Mean number of children	1.81	1.81	1.80	1.86
Percent with child under 5	37.6%	43.7%*	38.4%	42.9%*
Individual characteristics	Low-Income Single Mothers	Disconnected	Low-Income Single Mothers	Disconnected
Race/ethnicity				
<i>White</i>	41.6%	44.0%	43.3%	42.8%
<i>Black</i>	32.3%	24.7%*	28.5%	25.9%
<i>Hispanic</i>	20.5%	23.1%	23.7%	26.1%
Education				
<i>Less than HS</i>	20.9%	31.9%*	18.4%	28.8%*
<i>HS Degree</i>	33.4%	36.0%	34.9%	33.8%
<i>Some College</i>	40.9%	27.5%*	40.3%	32.1%*
<i>College or More</i>	4.8%	4.6%	6.3%	5.3%
Average age in years	32.1	32.5	32.0	32.1
<i>Age 18-24</i>	25.3%	28.1%	23.0%	23.0%
<i>Age 25-29</i>	19.2%	16.7%	22.7%	23.3%
<i>Age 30-39</i>	33.6%	30.3%	33.3%	31.1%
<i>Age 40-49</i>	18.5%	18.7%	18.3%	19.6%
<i>Age 50-54</i>	3.5%	6.2%*	2.7%	3.1%
Health problem that limits work	13.6%	21.8%*	13.2%	20.2%*
Health problem that prevents work	8.6%	18.5%*	8.5%	17.9%*
Private health insurance	29.7%	11.7%*	24.8%	7.3%*
Public health insurance	46.7%	50.8%	42.7%	46.6%
U.S. Citizen	90.9%	85.9%*	90.0%	82.6%*

Continued on next page

**Table 1. Characteristics of disconnected and all low-income single mothers, 2004 and 2008
(Continued)**

Work, income, and program participation	2004		2008	
	Low-Income Single Mothers	Disconnected	Low-Income Single Mothers	Disconnected
Any work in previous 4 months	68.4%	0%	65.8%	0%
If not working, reason given				
<i>Injury, disability, or health reason</i>	23.2%	16.1%*	21.8%	16.1%*
<i>Pregnant, taking care of children/others</i>	48.5%	60.5%*	45.2%	56.9%*
<i>Unable to find work, or on layoff</i>	12.3%	15.3%*	19.0%	21.6%*
<i>Not interested in working</i>	1.5%	2.1%	1.0%	1.3%
<i>Other (including school)</i>	14.5%	5.9%*	13.1%	4.1%*
Family income as % of poverty line	85.0%	32.8%*	79.1%	27.1%*
Total family income	\$14,189	\$5,466*	\$13,325	\$4,701*
Total household transfer income	\$1,739	\$1,132*	\$1,542	\$904*
Total household income	\$31,677	\$28,642*	\$32,592	\$26,368*
Receiving food stamps	39.5%	38.9%	44.1%	49.9%*
Child SSI	3.4%	4.6%	3.8%	4.4%
With public housing or subsidies	22.7%	20.1%	20.3%	20.8%
Sample size	2,465	428	2,372	477

* Proportions or means differ significantly ($p < .05$) across all low-income single mothers and the subset who are disconnected (or equivalently, between connected and disconnected low-income single mothers).

Sample: All single mothers age 18-54 with family income under 200% of poverty, from Wave 2 of the SIPP (characteristics measured in month 4, income over all 4 months in wave). For definition of disconnected see data note above. Dollar amounts are in 2008 dollars.

**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
& HUMAN SERVICES**

Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use \$300

