

Women in the Labor Force: A Databook

Introduction

Over the past three decades, a significantly greater proportion of women have participated in the American workforce. In addition, women have made substantial inroads into higher-paying occupations, during this time. In 1970, only about 43 percent of women age 16 and older participated in the labor force, but by 2002 this labor force participation rate had risen to 60 percent. Moreover, from 1983 to 2002, the proportion of women employed as managers, administrators, or executives nearly doubled. As increasing proportions of women moved into higher-paying job categories, their earnings also advanced. From 1979 to 2002, women's real earnings (adjusted for inflation) increased by 27 percent, while men's real earnings increased by only 1 percent. The movement of women into the labor force and into higher-paying occupations has gone hand-in-hand with their pursuit of higher education. For example, in 1970, only 11 percent of women age 25 to 64 years had completed 4 or more years of college; 32 percent held college degrees, by 2001. (The percentage of men with a college degree doubled over the same period from 16 percent to 32 percent.)

This report presents historical and current labor force and earnings data for women and men from the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a national monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unless otherwise noted, data are annual averages from the CPS. For a detailed description of the source of the data and an explanation of concepts and definitions used, see the Technical Note at the end of this report.

Highlights

- In 2002, about three-fifths of women were in the labor force. Although the unemployment rate for women rose from 4.7 percent in 2001 to 5.6 percent in 2002, it remained low by historical standards. White women's unemployment rates continued to be lower than those of their black, Asian, or Hispanic counterparts. (See tables 1, 2, and 3.)
- Since the early 1980s, women and men's unemployment rates have been roughly similar. In 2000, the unemployment rates for both sexes hit 30-year lows at 4.1 and 3.9 percent, respectively. (See table 2.)
- Since 1975, the labor force participation rate of mothers with children under age 18 has grown from 47 to 72 percent. The biggest increase in labor force participation among mothers occurred among women with children under age 3. Fully 61 percent of this group was in the labor force in 2002, compared with only 34 percent about a quarter century earlier. Additionally, these proportions were higher for unmarried mothers than for married mothers. (See tables 6 and 7.)
- Both women and men have increased their educational attainment levels during the past 30 years. About 30 percent of both women and men in the labor force held college degrees in 2002. However, only about 8 percent of women age 25 to 64 in the labor force were high school dropouts in 2002, compared with 34 percent in 1970. (See tables 8 and 9.)
- Thirty-four percent of women worked in a managerial or professional specialty occupation in 2002, compared with 22 percent in 1983. Nonetheless, women still accounted for the lion's share of employment in some of the relatively lower-paying occupations within this broad category. For example, although 55 percent of persons employed in professional specialty occupations were women, only 11 percent of engineers were women; but 98 percent of preschool and kindergarten teachers were women. Only 19 percent of dentists were women, whereas 93 percent of registered nurses were women. (See tables 10 and 11.)
- White women were more likely than black women to work in managerial or professional specialty occupations (about 35 percent compared with 26 percent, respectively) and almost twice as likely as Hispanic women (about 19 percent) to work in these higher-paying occupations in 2002. Nearly 4 in 10 employed white, black, and Hispanic women worked in technical, sales, and administrative support occupations; but Hispanic and black women were much more likely than white women to work in service occupations. Twenty-eight percent of black and 27 percent of Hispanic women worked in these occupations, compared with 17 percent of white women. (See table 12.)
- In 2002, women's earnings were 78 percent of men's, on average. Overall, women's real earnings (earnings

adjusted for inflation) have increased by 27 percent from 1979 to 2002; increases varied among the race and ethnic groups. Real earnings of white women increased by 30 percent, while black women's earnings increased by 22 percent; and Hispanic women's earnings increased by 10 percent. (See table 13.)

- Black and Hispanic women have more earnings parity with black and Hispanic men, respectively, than do white women with white men. While black and Hispanic women earned 91 percent and 88 percent, respectively, of black and Hispanic men's earnings, white women earned 78 percent of white men's earnings. (See table 13.)
- Women and men with college degrees earned about 76 percent more than those with only a high school diploma, in 2002. Nonetheless, female college graduates who were full-time wage and salary workers had median earnings of \$809 a week, compared with \$1,089 for men. (See table 14.)
- Differences between women and men's earnings reflect, in part, differences by occupation. For example, women in professional specialty occupations (which typically require at least a bachelor's degree) have earnings that are about 75 percent those of men's—a difference due partly to women's concentration in lower-paying professional occupations, such as nursing and teaching. (See table 15.)
- In 2002, approximately 25 percent of employed women usually worked part time, that is, less than 35 hours a week. This compares to about 11 percent of employed men. Over the past three decades, the proportion of women who worked part time has changed little, and the proportion for men has edged up slightly. (See table 16.)
- Although women still worked shorter weeks, women increased their workweek by 2 hours over the prior 26 years, while men increased their workweek by less than half an hour. For example, in 2002, women employed in nonagricultural industries worked an average of 36.1 hours per week, although men worked an average of 41.8 hours. (See table 17.)
- Nearly 60 percent of women who worked at some time in calendar year 2001 worked full time and year round, compared with 41 percent in 1970. During the same period, the proportion for men grew from 66 to 73 percent. (See table 18.) Data were collected in the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the CPS and refer to work experience during the entire prior calendar year.
- Both wife and husband had earnings from work in 59 percent of married-couple families in 2001, compared with 44 percent in 1967. (See table 19.)
- Working wives' contributions to family income grew about 7 percentage points over the last three decades.

In 1970, wives' earnings accounted for almost 27 percent (median) of their families' incomes. By 2001, the proportion had grown to 34 percent. A growing proportion of wives also earn more than their husbands. Eighteen percent of working wives whose husbands also worked earned more than their spouses, in 1987. In 2001, this proportion was 24 percent. (See tables 20 and 21.)

- Overall, around 4 percent of female workers paid hourly had earnings at or below the Federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour. Among those 25 years and over, women were almost twice as likely as men to have earnings at or below the minimum wage. (See table 22.) Data are 2002 CPS annual averages.
- Women who worked 27 weeks or more in 2001 were slightly more likely than men to live in poverty; 5.5 percent of women were in poverty versus 4.4 percent of men. Moreover, among those who worked 27 weeks or more, black and Hispanic women were more than twice as likely as white women to live below the poverty level. Poverty rates generally decline with age among those who worked 27 weeks or more; nearly 1 in 4 women between the ages of 16 and 24 lived below the poverty level in 2001, compared with 1 in 5 women age 25 and older. (See table 23.) Data are from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.
- In February 2001, the proportions of women and men employed on a *contingent* basis were about the same, 4.2 percent and 3.8 percent, respectively. Contingent workers are those who do not expect their jobs to last. (See table 24.) Data are from the February 2001 Contingent and Alternative Work Arrangements supplement to the CPS.
- Men were slightly more likely than women to have flexible schedules on their jobs in May 2001, and white women were more likely to have flexible schedules than either black or Hispanic women. Unmarried women were more likely to have flexible schedules on their jobs than married women, although the reverse was true for men. (See table 26.) Data are from the May 2001 Work Schedules supplement to the CPS.
- About 15 percent of both women and men reported working at home at least once per week, as part of their main job in May 2001. Work at home was more common for parents than for non-parents. Women were slightly more likely than men to be paid for work they did at home. Work at home was common among the self-employed in May 2001; about 27 percent of self-employed women and 33 percent of self-employed men worked at home. (See table 27.) Data are from the May 2001 Work Schedules supplement to the CPS.

- Among those who experienced job displacement between January 1999 and December 2001, women were about half again as likely as men to have left the labor force by January 2002. Moreover, white women were nearly twice as likely as white men to be out of the labor force in that month. (See table 28.) Data are from the January 2002 Displaced Worker supplement to the CPS.
- Among young women who had graduated from high school in 2001, nearly 79 percent of those not enrolled in college were in the labor force in October 2001. In contrast, only about 61 percent of young women who had dropped out of school during the 2000-01 school year were working or looking for work. Among young women overall who were not in school, labor force participation rates were dramatically lower and unemployment rates seven times higher for those who had not completed high school than for those who had graduated from college. (See tables 29 and 30.) Data are from the October 2001 School Enrollment supplement to the CPS.
- Women age 16 to 24 who were enrolled in either high school or college in October 2001 were more likely than men who were in high school or college to be in the labor force. Women not in school were less likely than their male counterparts to be in the labor force. (See table 30.)
- Since 1970, the multiple jobholding rate for women—the percent of employed women with more than one job—has grown from approximately 2.2 percent to 5.5 percent in 2002. (The multiple jobholding rate had reached a peak of 6.5 percent in 1995.) In contrast, this rate for men has fallen, from 7 percent in 1970 to 5.1 percent in 2002. (See table 31.) Data were collected in the May CPS.
- About 5.4 percent of employed women were self-employed in 2002. This compares with 7.3 percent of men. During the 1976-2002 period, the percentage of women who were self-employed increased by 1 percentage point, while the percentage of men who were self-employed declined by about the same amount. In 2002, women made up about 40 percent of self-employed persons, compared with 27 percent in 1976. (See table 32.) Data are annual averages from the CPS.
- Foreign-born women were less likely to be in the labor force than U.S.-born women, in 2001. The reverse was true for men. (See table 33.)
- Thirteen percent of female wage and salary workers were represented by unions in 2002, compared with 16 percent of men. Union attachment for both groups has fallen since 1983, when unions represented 18 percent of female wage and salary workers and nearly 28 percent of men. (See table 34.)