

Women in the Labor Force: A Databook

Introduction

A major development in the American workforce has been the increased labor force participation of women. In 1970, only about 43 percent of women age 16 and older were in the labor force; by 1999, that figure had risen to 60 percent. From 1999 to 2004, women's labor force participation rate receded slightly to 59.2 percent, still well above the rates that prevailed throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and much of the 1990s. Along with rising labor force participation, women also made substantial inroads into higher paying occupations. In 2004, half of all management, professional, and related occupations were held by women. Women's earnings relative to men's also have risen. From 1979 to 2004, women's earnings as a percent of men's increased by 18 percentage points, from 62 to 80 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 had completed 4 or more years of college; by 2004, nearly 33 percent held a college degree.

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 2004, about 59 percent of women were in the labor force. Although the unemployment rate for women rose from 4.1 percent in 2000 to 5.4 percent in 2004, it remained relatively low by historical standards. The unemployment rates for white and Asian women were much lower than those of their black and Hispanic counterparts. (See tables 1, 2, and 3.)
 - Since the early 1980s, women's and men's unemployment rates have been roughly similar. In 2000, the jobless rates for women and men were 4.1 and 3.9 percent, respectively.
- Both figures were the lowest in 30 years. From 2000 to 2003, unemployment rates for both sexes rose but then declined in 2004. (See table 2.)
- From 1975 to 2000, the labor force participation rate of mothers with children under age 18 rose from 47 to 73 percent. From 2000 to 2004, the rate receded slightly to 71 percent. Mothers with older children (6 to 17 years of age) are more likely to participate in the labor force than are mothers of younger children (under 6 years of age). Unmarried mothers have higher participation rates than do married mothers. (See tables 6 and 7.)
 - The educational attainment level of women age 25 to 64 rose substantially from 1970 to 2004. About 3 in 10 women in the labor force held college degrees in 2004, compared with about 1 in 10 in 1970. About 8 percent of women in the labor force were high school dropouts in 2004, compared with 34 percent in 1970. (See table 9.) Data from 1970 were from the March supplement to the CPS.
 - Women held half of all management, professional, and related occupations in 2004. However, women's share of specific occupations within this broad category varied. For example, only 14 percent of architects and engineers and 29 percent of physicians and surgeons were women. In contrast, 86 percent of paralegals and legal assistants and 89 percent of dietitians and nutritionists were women. (See table 11.)
 - Employed Asian women were more likely than employed white, black, or Hispanic women to work in management, professional, and related occupations (about 44 percent compared with 39, 31, and 22 percent, respectively). Hispanic and black women (30 and 27 percent, respectively) were more likely than white or Asian women (19 percent each) to work in service occupations. (See table 12.)
 - In 2004, women accounted for more than half of all workers in each of the following industries: Financial activities, education and health services, and leisure and hospitality. Women were underrepresented (relative to their share of total employment) in mining, construction, and transportation and utilities. (See table 14.)

- In 2004, women who worked full time had median weekly earnings of \$573. Asian and white women earned more than their black and Hispanic counterparts (\$613 and \$584 compared with \$505 and \$419). In 2004, women's median weekly earnings were 80 percent of men's. Women's-to-men's earnings ratios were higher among black and Hispanic workers (89 and 87 percent, respectively) than among white and Asian workers (80 and 76 percent, respectively). (See table 16.) (Users should note that the comparisons of earnings in this report are made on a broad level and do not control for many factors that can be significant in explaining earnings differences.)
- Female college graduates age 25 and over earned about 76 percent more than women with only a high school diploma in 2004. This difference in earnings by education has increased sharply since 1979, when female college graduates earned 43 percent more than female high school graduates. Nonetheless, female college graduates who were full-time wage and salary workers had median weekly earnings that were only 75 percent of those of their male counterparts in 2004, \$860 versus \$1,143. (See table 17.)
- In 2004, approximately 26 percent of employed women usually worked part time, compared with about 11 percent of employed men. Over the past 35 years, the proportion of women who worked part time has changed little, and the proportion for men has edged up slightly. (See table 20.) (Part-time workers are defined as those who usually work less than 35 hours a week.)
- From 1976 to 2004, women in nonagricultural industries increased their average workweek by about 2 hours to 35.9 hours. Men's average workweek remained relatively unchanged over the same period and was 41.6 hours in 2004. (See table 21.)
- Nearly 60 percent of all women who worked at some time in calendar year 2003 worked full time and year round, compared with 41 percent in 1970. During the same period, the proportion of men who worked full time and year round grew from 66 to 73 percent. (See table 22.) These data were collected in the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and refer to work experience during the prior calendar year.
- Both wife and husband had earnings from work in 58 percent of married-couple families in 2003, compared with 44 percent in 1967. (See table 23.) These data were collected in the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.
- Working wives' contributions to family income grew by about 9 percentage points between 1973 and 2003. In 1973, wives' earnings accounted for 26 percent (median) of their families' incomes; by 2003, that share had grown to 35 percent. The proportion of wives earning more than their husbands also grew. In 1987, 18 percent of working wives whose husbands also worked earned more than their spouses; in 2003, this proportion was 25 percent. (See tables 24 and 25.) These data were collected in the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.
- In 2004, about 1.3 million female workers paid at an hourly rate had earnings at or below the Federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour; nearly half of these women were age 16 to 24. Among workers age 25 years and over who were paid hourly rates, about 2 percent of women had earnings at or below the minimum wage, twice the rate for men. (See table 26.)
- Women who were in the labor force for 27 weeks or more in 2003 were slightly more likely than men to live in poverty; 6.0 percent of women were in poverty versus 4.7 percent of men. Moreover, among those who worked or looked for work for 27 weeks or more, black and Hispanic women were more than twice as likely as white and Asian women to live below the poverty level. Poverty rates generally decline with age; among those in the labor force for 27 weeks or more, about 1 in 10 women between the ages of 16 and 24 lived below the poverty level in 2003, compared with about 1 in 20 women age 25 and older. (See table 27.) Data are from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.
- 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 30.) 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. Working at home was more common for parents than for nonparents. Women were slightly more likely than men were to be paid for work they did at home. Self-employment was fairly common among those who worked at home in May 2001: about 27 percent of women who worked at home were self-employed; the comparable figure for men was 33 percent. (See table 31.) Data are from the May 2001 Work Schedules supplement to the CPS.

- About 2.3 million women and 3.0 million men experienced job displacement between January 2001 and December 2003. Women who were displaced were roughly twice as likely as men to have left the labor force by January 2004 (20 percent versus 12 percent). (See table 32.) Data are from the January 2004 Displaced Worker supplement to the CPS.
- In 2004, among recent high school graduates, young women were more likely than young men to enter college (72 percent versus 61 percent). (For information on the labor force status of recent high school graduates and dropouts by school enrollment and sex, see table 33.) Data are from the October 2004 School Enrollment supplement to the CPS.
- Almost 48 percent of women age 16 to 24 who were enrolled in either high school or college in October 2004 were in the labor force. This is slightly above the labor force participation rate of men enrolled in school. Young women not in school were less likely than their male counterparts to be in the labor force (73 percent versus 87 percent). Among young women who were not in school, labor force participation rates were dramatically lower and unemployment rates four times higher for those who had not completed high school than for those who had graduated from college. (See table 34.) Data are from the October 2004 School Enrollment supplement to the CPS.
- In 1970, 2.2 percent of employed women were multiple jobholders, but by 1995, the rate had nearly tripled to 6.5 percent. Subsequently, the multiple jobholding rate for women trended downward, falling to 5.6 percent by 2004. The multiple jobholding rate for men also has declined in recent years, from 6.3 percent in 1998 to 4.9 percent in 2004. (See table 35.) Data were collected in the May CPS.
- In 2004, 5.6 percent of employed women were self-employed compared with 8.0 percent of men. During the 1976-2004 period, the percentage of women who were self-employed increased by 1.2 percentage points, while the percentage of men who were self-employed edged down by less than half a percentage point. In 2004, women made up about 38 percent of self-employed persons, compared with nearly 27 percent in 1976. (See table 36.)
- In 2003, foreign-born women (54 percent) were less likely to be in the labor force than native-born women (60 percent). The reverse was true for men. (See table 37.)
- Thirteen percent of female wage and salary workers were represented by unions in 2004, compared with 15 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 38.)