

# Women in the Labor Force: A Databook

## Introduction

The past several decades have been marked by notable changes in women's labor force activities compared to men's, including increased labor force participation, employment growth in higher paying occupations, and gains in real earnings. In 1970, about 43 percent of women aged 16 and older were in the labor force; by the late 1990s, the labor force participation rate of women had risen to 60 percent. Though still well above the rates that prevailed throughout the 1970s, the 1980s, and much of the 1990s, the participation rate for women has receded slightly since 1999, to 59.4 percent in 2006. As women's labor force participation has increased, so has their employment in higher paying occupations. In 2006, half of all workers in management, professional, and related occupations were women. Women's earnings relative to men's also were substantially higher in 2006 than in previous decades. In 1979, among full-time workers, women's earnings were approximately 62 percent of men's; by 2006, the ratio had grown to about 81 percent. The increased 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, just over one-tenth of 25- to 64-year-old women in the labor force had completed 4 or more years of college; by 2006, one-third held at least a bachelor's 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 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unless otherwise noted, data are annual averages from the CPS. Users should note that the comparisons of earnings in this report are on a broad level and do not control for many factors that can be significant in explaining earnings differences. 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 2006, approximately 59 percent of women were in the labor force. The unemployment rate for women declined to 4.6 percent in 2006, down half a percentage point from a year earlier. Although higher than its most recent low

of 4.1 percent in 2000, the unemployment rate in 2006 was low by historical standards. Unemployment rates for women varied among the major race and Hispanic ethnicity groups in 2006. Asian women had the lowest rate (3.1 percent), followed by white (4.0 percent), Hispanic (5.9 percent), and black women (8.4 percent). (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 at 30-year lows—4.1 and 3.9 percent, respectively. The rates rose from 2000 to 2003 but have declined each year since. The unemployment rates for women and men were the same in 2006 (4.6 percent). (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. By 2004, the rate had receded to about 71 percent, where it remained through 2006. In general, mothers with older children (6 to 17 years of age, none younger) are more likely to participate in the labor force than mothers with younger children (under 6 years of age). Unmarried mothers have higher participation rates than married mothers, 76.4 versus 68.4 percent, respectively. (See tables 6 and 7.) (Data are from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS.)
- The educational attainment of women in the labor force aged 25 to 64 rose substantially from 1970 to 2006. One-third of these women held college degrees in 2006, compared with about one-tenth in 1970. Only about 8 percent of women were high school dropouts in 2006, down from 34 percent in 1970. (See table 9.)
- In 2006, women accounted for 50.6 percent of all persons employed in management, professional, and related occupations, somewhat more than their share of all employed workers (46.3 percent). The share of women in specific occupations within this broad category varied. For example, 7 percent of engineering managers and 33 percent of lawyers were women. In contrast, 91 percent of registered nurses and 83 percent of social workers were women. (See table 11.)

- Employed Asian women were more likely to work in the higher paying (on average) management, professional, and related occupations than employed white, black, or Hispanic women (about 46 percent compared with 39, 31, and 22 percent, respectively). Hispanic and black women were more likely than white and Asian women to work in service occupations (31 and 27 percent for Hispanic and black women, respectively, compared to 19 percent for both Asian and white women). (See table 12.)
- By industry, women accounted for more than half of all workers within financial activities, education and health services, and leisure and hospitality in 2006. However, women were substantially underrepresented (relative to their share of total employment) in mining, construction, manufacturing, and transportation and utilities. (See table 14.)
- Women who worked full time in 2006 had median weekly earnings of \$600. This was 80.8 percent of the \$743 median weekly earnings of men. Earnings of Asian and white women (\$699 and \$609, respectively) were higher than the earnings of their black and Hispanic counterparts (\$519 and \$440, respectively). Within race groups, women's-to-men's earnings ratios were higher among black and Hispanic women (87.8 and 87.1 percent, respectively) than among white and Asian women (80.0 and 79.3 percent, respectively). (See table 16.)
- In 2006, female college graduates aged 25 and older who worked full time earned about 81 percent more than women with only a high school diploma. This difference in earnings by education has increased sharply since 1979, when female college graduates earned 43 percent more than female high school graduates. (See table 17.)
- In 2006, approximately one-fourth of employed women usually worked part time—fewer than 35 hours a week. Comparatively, only about one-tenth of employed men usually worked part time. For the past 10 years, the proportions of both employed women and men who usually work part time has been relatively stable. (See table 20.)
- Women in nonagricultural industries worked an average of 36.2 hours per week in 2006. The average workweek for women has increased by about 2 hours since 1976. Men's average workweek (41.7 hours) remained relatively unchanged over the same period. (See table 21.)
- Of all women who worked at some point during calendar year 2005, 6 in 10 worked full time and year round, compared with about 4 in 10 in 1970. During the same 35-year period, the proportion of men who worked full time and year round grew from 66 to 74 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 the wife and husband had earnings from work in 57 percent of married-couple families in 2005, up from 44 percent in 1967. Couples in which only the husband worked represented 18 percent of married-couple families in 2005, compared with 36 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.)
- In 2005, working wives' contributions to family income accounted for 35 percent (median) of their families' incomes, up by about 8 percentage points from 1970, when wives' earnings accounted for 27 percent of their families' total incomes. The proportion of wives earning more than their husbands also has grown. In 1987, 18 percent of working wives whose husbands also worked earned more than their spouses; in 2005, the proportion was 26 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 2006, about 1.1 million women workers paid at an hourly rate had earnings at or below the prevailing Federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour. This was about 3 percent of all women paid at an hourly rate. About half of these women were aged 16 to 24. Among workers aged 25 years and older who were paid hourly rates, 1.8 percent of women had earnings at or below the minimum wage, twice the rate for men. (See table 26.)
- Among workers who were in the labor force for at least 27 weeks in 2005, women were slightly more likely than men to live in poverty—6.1 percent versus 4.8 percent, respectively. Of these women, blacks and Hispanics were more than twice as likely as whites and Asians to live below the poverty level. Poverty rates for women in the labor force 27 weeks or more generally decline with age: roughly 1 in 10 such women aged 16 to 24 lived below the poverty level in 2005, compared with about 1 in 30 such women aged 45 and older. (See table 27.) (Data are from the 2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.)
- 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 2004. Working at home was more common for parents than for nonparents. Women were slightly more likely than men to have a formal arrangement with their employer to be paid for the work they did at home than were men. While self-employment was fairly common among those who worked at home, women who worked at

home were less likely to be self-employed than were their male counterparts; about 29 percent of women working at home were self-employed versus 38 percent of men. (See table 31.) (Data are from the May 2004 Work Schedules supplement to the CPS.)

- About 1.7 million women and 2.1 million men were displaced from a job between January 2003 and December 2005. Women who were displaced were roughly twice as likely as men to have been out of the labor force at the time of the survey in January 2006 (21 percent versus 13 percent). (See table 32.) (Data are from the January 2006 Displaced Worker supplement to the CPS.)
- Among 2006 high school graduates, young women and young men were about equally likely to be enrolled in college in October (66.0 and 65.5 percent, respectively). (See table 33.) (Data are from the October 2006 School Enrollment supplement to the CPS.)
- About 45 percent of women aged 16 to 24 who were enrolled in either high school or college in October 2006 were in the labor force. Men enrolled in school had a slightly lower labor force participation rate (41.1 percent). Among those not enrolled in school, women were less likely to be in the labor force than men (75.1 versus 87.9 percent). (See table 34.) (Data are from the October 2005 School Enrollment supplement to the CPS.)
- Among 16-to-24-year-old women who were not enrolled in school, those who did not have a high school diploma were significantly less likely to participate in the labor force than those who had a high school diploma only (52.9 versus 72.9 percent). The high school dropouts also were twice as likely to be unemployed (25.9 versus 12.5

percent). (See table 34.) (Data are from the October 2005 School Enrollment supplement to the CPS.)

- During the last 5 years, the multiple jobholding rate for women has hovered around 5.5 percent. The multiple jobholding rate for men has been slightly lower, holding at roughly 5.0 percent. (See table 35.) (Data were collected in the May CPS.)
- Over the past 30 years, the percentage of working women who were self-employed has increased slightly (from 4.4 percent in 1976 to 5.5 percent in 2006), while the percentage of employed men who were self-employed has edged down (from 8.4 percent in 1976 to 7.9 percent in 2006). In 2006, about 38 percent of all self-employed persons were women compared with only 27 percent in 1976. (See table 36.)
- In 2006, foreign-born women were less likely to be in the labor force than native-born women (55.3 versus 60.0 percent, respectively). Of those in the labor force, foreign-born and native-born women were about equally likely to be unemployed (4.7 and 4.6 percent, respectively). Among men, foreign-born men were more likely to be in the labor force than native-born men (81.7 percent versus 72.0 percent, respectively) and less likely to be unemployed (3.5 percent versus 4.8 percent). (See table 37.)
- About 12 percent of female wage and salary workers were represented by unions in 2006, compared with about 14 percent of men. Union attachment for both sexes has fallen since 1983, when unions represented 18 percent of female wage and salary workers and nearly 28 percent of men. (See table 38.)