

Women in the Labor Force: A Databook

Introduction

The past several decades have been marked by notable changes in women's labor force activities. Women's labor force participation is significantly higher today than it was in the 1970s, particularly among women with children under 18 years of age. A larger share of women work full time and year round than in the past. In addition, women have increasingly attained higher levels of education: Among women aged 25 to 64 who are in the labor force, the proportion with a college degree roughly tripled from 1970 to 2010. Women's earnings as a proportion of men's earnings also have grown over time. In 1979, women working full time earned 62 percent of what men did; in 2010, women's earnings were 81 percent of men's.

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. 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 2010, 58.6 percent of women were in the labor force, down from 2009. Women's labor force participation rate peaked at 60.0 percent in 1999, following several decades in which women increasingly entered the labor market. (See tables 1 and 2.)
- The overall unemployment rate for women in 2010 was 8.6 percent, compared with 10.5 percent for men. Women's jobless rates varied by race and Hispanic ethnicity. Asian women had the lowest unemployment rate (7.1 percent), followed by White (7.7 percent), Hispanic (12.3 percent), and Black (13.8 percent) women. (See tables 1, 2, and 3.)
- The labor force participation rate of mothers with children under 18 years of age was 71.3 percent in March 2010. This rate has held at or near this level for the past several years. (See tables 6 and 7.) (Data were collected in the 2010 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS.)
- In general, mothers with children 6 to 17 years of age are more likely to participate in the labor force (77.2 percent in March 2010) than mothers with children under 6 years of age (64.2 percent). Also, unmarried mothers (never married, divorced, separated, or widowed) tend to have higher participation rates than married mothers. In March 2010, 74.9 percent of unmarried mothers were in the labor force, compared with 69.7 percent of married mothers. (See tables 6 and 7.)
- The educational attainment of women aged 25 to 64 in the labor force has risen substantially over the past 40 years. In 2010, 36 percent of these women held college degrees, compared with 11 percent in 1970. Only 7 percent of women were high school dropouts in 2010, down from 34 percent in 1970. (See table 9.)
- In 2010, women accounted for 52 percent of all persons employed in management, professional, and related occupations, somewhat more than their share of total employment (47 percent). The share of women in specific occupations within this broad category varied. For example, 13 percent of architects and engineers and 32 percent of physicians and surgeons were women, whereas 60 percent of accountants and auditors and 82 percent of elementary and middle school teachers were women. (See table 11.)
- Employed Asian women were more likely to work in the higher paying management, professional, and related occupations in 2010 (46 percent of employed Asian women worked in this field) than were employed White (42 percent), Black (34 percent), or Hispanic (24 percent) women. Meanwhile, Hispanic and Black women were more likely than White and Asian women to work in service occupations. (See table 12.)
- In 2010, women accounted for the majority of all workers in the financial activities industry and in education and health services. However, women were substantially underrepresented (relative to their share of total employment) in agriculture, mining, construction, manufacturing, and transportation and utilities. (See table 14.)

- Women who worked full time in wage and salary jobs had median usual weekly earnings of \$669 in 2010. This represented 81 percent of men's median weekly earnings (\$824). Earnings of Asian (\$773) and White (\$684) women were substantially higher than the earnings of their Black (\$592) and Hispanic (\$508) counterparts. Women's-to-men's earnings ratios were higher among Blacks (94 percent) and Hispanics (91 percent) than among Asians (83 percent) and Whites (81 percent). Users should note that the comparisons of earnings in this report are on a broad level and do not control for many factors that may be significant in explaining earnings differences. (See table 16.)
 - In 2010, female full-time wage and salary workers aged 25 and older with only a high school diploma had median usual weekly earnings of \$543. This represented 80 percent of the earnings for women with an associate's degree (\$677), and 55 percent of those for women with a bachelor's degree or higher (\$986). (See table 17.)
 - In 2010, 27 percent of employed women usually worked part time—fewer than 35 hours per week. In comparison, 13 percent of employed men usually worked part time. (See table 20.)
 - Women in nonagricultural industries worked fewer hours per week than men in 2010. On average, women worked 35.6 hours per week, compared with 40.4 hours for men. (See table 21.)
 - Of all women who worked at some point during calendar year 2009, 59 percent 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 rose slightly, from 66 to 68 percent. (See table 22.) (Data were collected in the 1971 and 2010 Annual Social and Economic Supplements to the CPS and refer to work experience during the prior calendar year.)
 - Both the husband and wife were earners in 55 percent of married-couple families in 2009, up from 44 percent in 1967. Couples in which only the husband worked represented 18 percent of married-couple families in 2009, compared with 36 percent in 1967. (See table 23.) (Data were collected in the 1968 and 2010 Annual Social and Economic Supplements to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.)
 - In 2009, working wives contributed 37 percent of their families' incomes, up by 10 percentage points from 1970, when wives' earnings accounted for 27 percent of their families' total income.
- 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 2009, the proportion was 29 percent. (See tables 24 and 25.) (Data were collected in the 1971, 1988, and 2010 Annual Social and Economic Supplements to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.)
- In 2010, approximately 2.7 million women paid at an hourly rate had earnings at or below the prevailing federal minimum wage. This represented 7 percent of all women paid at an hourly rate. Among women 25 years and older who were paid hourly rates, 5 percent had earnings at or below the minimum wage, compared with 18 percent of women aged 16 to 24. (See table 26.)
 - Among workers who were in the labor force for at least 27 weeks in 2009, nearly the same number of women and men lived in poverty (5.2 million each). The working-poor rate, however, continued to be higher for women than for men—7.5 percent, compared with 6.6 percent. Black and Hispanic women were significantly more likely than their White or Asian counterparts to be among the working poor. Poverty rates for Black and Hispanic working women were 14.2 and 13.6 percent, respectively, compared with 6.4 and 5.5 percent, respectively, for White and Asian women. (See table 27.) (Data are from the 2010 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.)
 - From January 2007 through December 2009, 6.9 million workers age 20 and over were displaced from jobs they had held for at least 3 years; women accounted for about two-fifths of those displaced. Women were equally likely as men to have found a new job at the time of the survey in January 2010; the reemployment rate for both men and women was 49 percent. Women who had been displaced were less likely to be unemployed than men, at 31 and 39 percent, respectively. Women were almost twice as likely as men to have left the labor force, 20 versus 12 percent. (See table 28.) (Data are from the January 2010 Displaced Worker Supplement to the CPS.)
 - In January 2010, the median number of years that female wage and salary workers had been with their employer was 4.2, compared with 4.6 years for their male counterparts. Among both women and men, tenure at a job was greater for workers age 45 and older. (See table 29.) (Data are from the January 2010 Displaced Worker Supplement to the CPS.)

- Among 2010 high school graduates, young women were more likely than young men to be enrolled in college in October 2010 (74 percent and 63 percent, respectively). (See table 30.) (Data are from the October 2010 School Enrollment Supplement to the CPS.)
- In October 2010, 41.4 percent of women age 16 to 24 who were enrolled in either high school or college were in the labor force. Young men of the same age group who were enrolled in school had a lower labor force participation rate (35.5 percent). Among those not enrolled in school, women were less likely to be in the labor force than men (74.8 percent, compared with 83.7 percent). (See table 31.) (Data are from the October 2010 School Enrollment Supplement to the CPS.)
- Young women 16 to 24 years old who were not enrolled in school and who did not have a high school diploma were significantly less likely to participate in the labor force (54.8 percent) than those who had a high school diploma but no additional education (69.6 percent). Among those in the labor force, high school dropouts were more likely to be unemployed (31.4 percent) than were high school graduates (23.3 percent). (See table 31.) (Data are from the October 2010 School Enrollment Supplement to the CPS.)
- In 2010, 5.4 percent of employed women held more than one job, slightly less than in the previous year. Multiple jobholding rates for women have been relatively stable in recent years and remain below the rates recorded in the mid-1990s. The rate for men declined in 2010 to 4.5 percent. (See table 32.)
- The percentage of working women who were self-employed in nonagricultural industries was 5.2 percent in 2010, compared with 7.6 percent for men. In 2010, 38 percent of all self-employed persons were women, compared with 27 percent in 1976. (See table 33.) (Data refer to workers whose businesses are unincorporated.)
- In 2010, foreign-born women were somewhat less likely than were native-born women to be in the labor force (55.7 percent, compared with 59.1 percent). Of those in the labor force, native-born women were less likely to be unemployed than were their foreign-born counterparts (8.5 versus 9.6 percent). Among men, the opposite was true. Foreign-born men were more likely to be in the labor force (80.1 percent) than were native-born men (69.5 percent) and were somewhat less likely to be unemployed (9.9 percent, compared with 10.6 percent). (See table 34.)
- Twelve percent of female wage and salary workers were represented by unions in 2010, less than men (14 percent). Union representation for both sexes had been on a long-term downward trend through 2006, but unionization rates then increased for 2 years. Since 2008, the union representation rate has declined. (See table 35.)
- In 2010, there were 11.8 million veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces in the labor force. Nine percent of these veterans were women. Among female veterans in the labor force, more than half (55 percent) served in the Gulf War-era I and II service periods (August 1990 to present). (See table 36.)
- Of the 14.4 million women in the civilian noninstitutional population with disabilities in 2010, 2.7 million, or 18.4 percent, were in the labor force. Almost half of women with disabilities were age 65 and older; the labor force participation rate for this age group was 4.8 percent, compared with 31.2 percent for those ages 16 to 64. (See table 37.)