

Left behind: Lone mothers in the labour market

Susan Crompton

Mothers with children under the age of six have become increasingly active in the labour market during the last two decades. But the sheer number of married mothers masks the precarious labour force situation of lone mothers.

In recent years, the proportion of married mothers employed outside the home has been almost twice as high as that of lone mothers. But this has not always been the case. Until 1981, lone mothers with preschoolers were more active in the job market. So why have lone mothers fallen so far behind wives? This article examines the stagnant employment situation of lone mothers in terms of their marital status, that is, whether they are separated or divorced, or have never married. ⁽¹⁾ It focusses on women whose youngest child is under the age of six, since it is these mothers whose level of employment has changed most dramatically since the 1970s (see [Data sources and definitions](#)).

Lone mothers' employment stagnant while married mothers' doubles

The number of lone mothers with at least one child under the age of six has more than doubled in the last two decades - up from 96,000 in 1976 to 228,000 in 1993. Meanwhile, the number of wives with young children has remained comparatively stable at about 1.4 million. In 1993, 14% of all women with preschoolers were raising their children alone, compared with 6% in 1976. However, lone mothers' share of employment has not kept pace with their growing share of the population; throughout the period, they never accounted for more than 9% of all working women with preschoolers.

In 1993, 60% of married women with children under six were employed, a percentage almost twice as high as in 1976. By contrast, only 26% of never-married lone mothers had a job in 1993, down from 1976. And the corresponding proportion for separated or divorced mothers was only marginally higher,

at 44% ([Chart A](#)).



Chart A Never-married mothers are the least likely to be employed.

Source: Labour Force Survey

However, looking only at the beginning and end years of the period can be misleading. The employment/population ratio (employment rate) of married mothers grew quickly and steadily, whereas gains made in one or two years by lone mothers were often offset by losses in subsequent years. These volatile movements mirrored general economic conditions, suggesting that lone mothers - for reasons discussed below - are more vulnerable than wives to the vicissitudes of economic downturns.

Work experience of wives exceeds that of lone mothers

The vulnerability of lone mothers is reflected in their most recent work experience, that is, whether they are currently employed or have been employed within the previous five years. Until the early 1980s, lone mothers were more likely to have a recent work history than married mothers, but the subsequent influx of wives into the job market significantly increased this group's work experience ([Chart B](#)). By 1993, 87% of married mothers had recent work experience, compared with 81% of separated or divorced mothers and 78% of those who had never married.



Chart B Married mothers are now the most likely to have recent work experience.

Source: Labour Force Survey

Furthermore, the proportion of married mothers who had never worked fell steadily to reach 3% in 1993, while those who had last worked more than five years before dropped by half, from 19% to 9%. Separated or divorced mothers also recorded declines, but these were not as sharp. On the other hand, in 1993, 10% of never-married lone mothers had never worked, and 12% had not worked for more than five years.

Married mothers were also more likely to have better-paid jobs. In 1993, 30% of married mothers with

recent employment experience worked in managerial, administrative or professional occupations, compared with 20% of separated or divorced and 14% of never-married mothers. [\(2\)](#)

Another important element of work experience is seniority because it tends to confer job security. Throughout the period, married mothers were much more likely to have over five years experience with the same employer; for instance, in 1993, 44% of wives had more than five years of job tenure compared with 32% of lone mothers. However, average job tenure improved considerably for all mothers. It increased by more than one-half for married mothers, from an average of 3.6 years in 1976 to 5.6 years in 1993, and doubled for lone mothers, from 2.3 to 4.6 years.

Never-married mothers are younger than other mothers

Lone mothers with preschoolers, especially those who have never married, may be disadvantaged in the labour market simply because they tend to be younger than married mothers. Since 1976, the average age of all mothers with children under six has increased by two years, but never-married lone mothers have consistently been four or five years younger than other mothers. In 1993, the average age of both married and separated or divorced mothers was 31 years, while that of never-married mothers was 26 years.

And while it is commonly believed that a large share of lone mothers are young women aged 15 to 24, this is not the case. In 1976, 35% of lone mothers were under 25; by 1993, partly due to an aging population, only 28% were in the 15 to 24 age group.

Lone mothers have less education than married mothers

Lack of "higher education" - meaning postsecondary completion [\(3\)](#) - could also explain some of the employment disparity between married and lone mothers. At a time when the educational requirements of most jobs are rising, a mother's likelihood of being employed increases with her level of schooling. For example, the employment rate in 1993 for wives with preschoolers was 68% for those with college credentials and 74% for those with a university degree.

However, lone mothers, particularly those who never married, have considerably less education than wives. And although the proportion of all mothers with higher education doubled over the period, mirroring rising levels of schooling in the general population, lone mothers did not catch up with married mothers. By 1993, 19% of never-married mothers with preschoolers had a college diploma or university degree, compared with 29% of separated or divorced mothers and 46% of married mothers ([Chart C](#)).



Chart C Married mothers have the most education*

Source: *Labour Force Survey, 1993*

* *Mothers with preschoolers.*

Twice as many lone mothers have never married

If the belief that many lone mothers are very young is false, the belief that many have never been married is certainly true. In 1976, one-quarter of lone mothers with preschoolers had never been married; this proportion rose steadily to reach one-half in 1993 ([Chart D](#)). Consequently, the proportion of lone mothers (and their children) who now have access to the financial resources often available to divorced women, such as support payments or a share of assets built up during a marriage, has been steadily diminishing ⁽⁴⁾ (see [A snapshot of mothers not in the labour force](#)).

Compounding this initial financial disadvantage is the steadily growing proportion of never-married lone mothers who now have more children to support. In 1993, 38% of never-married mothers headed a family with two or more children, up from 20% in 1976. In contrast, the proportion of married mothers with two or more children remained stable, at about two-thirds, while it ranged from over half to two-thirds for separated or divorced mothers.

Mothers outside the labour force have less education

Throughout the period, a rapidly shrinking minority of married mothers compared with roughly half of lone mothers remained outside the labour force. Part of the reason for this may be that all mothers staying at home were less able to find jobs since they were much less likely to have postsecondary completion. In 1993, only 12% of lone mothers who stayed at home had postsecondary completion compared with 39% of those who were in the labour force. Stay-at-home wives were not as educated as their counterparts in the labour force either, although they were far more likely than lone mothers to have college or university qualifications.



Chart D Since 1976, the proportion of never-married lone mothers with preschoolers has doubled.

Source: *Labour Force Survey*

Employment prospects improve when children are older

The employment situation of lone mothers whose youngest child is aged 6 to 15 presents a considerable improvement over that of lone mothers with preschoolers. (In fact, until 1986, divorced mothers with school-age children were more likely than married mothers to hold a job.) Both never-married and separated or divorced mothers were much more likely to be employed if their children were older, although the gap between these two groups widened over time as the position of never-married lone mothers stagnated.

Conclusion

The stagnating employment situation of lone mothers is not for lack of willingness to work. Many lone mothers currently outside the labour force want to work; those who are working are more likely than wives to be employed full time, and a substantial proportion of those working part time would rather have full-time jobs. However, wives are older and better educated and have more work experience. Moreover, having another adult to help with child-care arrangements can only make it easier for married mothers to look for and retain a job. Faced with competition from a large pool of better-educated women (married mothers with preschoolers outnumbered lone mothers six to one in 1993), it is not surprising that many lone mothers have difficulty establishing themselves in the job market.

But a "hierarchy of success" can also be found in the population of lone mothers. Separated or divorced mothers are "ex-wives" who occupy a more advantageous position in the labour market than never-married women because they have more education and more work experience. Much of the labour market disadvantage of never-married lone mothers may be attributable to their lower educational attainment, which raises the question of whether pregnancy outside marriage increases the likelihood of interrupting formal education and delaying the acquisition of work experience. It is certainly clear that two distinct types of women, with considerably different demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, are merged under the general rubric "lone mother." It seems a disservice to both groups of mothers to ignore the differences between them.

A snapshot of mothers not in the labour force

(Data from the Survey of Persons Not in the Labour Force, November 1992)

Plans to look for work

In November 1992, two-thirds of lone mothers not in the labour force intended to look for work some time in the future; however, only 22% of them planned to start a job search within the next 12 months and 37% were unsure when they would begin looking. Married mothers were less likely to plan to get a job outside the home - only half said they intended to look for work. However, 26% of those who did want to enter the labour force, planned to start their search in less than a year.

Lone mothers were probably more anxious than wives to find employment because of their financial position. Over half (56%) of stay-at-home never-married lone mothers estimated their 1992 family income at less than \$10,000, while 47% of separated or divorced mothers reported that it was between \$10,000 and \$14,999. In contrast, over half of married mothers (55%) reported family incomes of \$30,000 or more; in fact, 12% had family incomes of \$60,000 or more.

Almost all lone mothers outside the labour force relied on social assistance - 96% of never-married and 94% of separated or divorced mothers received welfare in November 1992 [\(5\)](#). The only other significant source of income for separated or divorced mothers was the financial support received from family members or "other" sources (alimony, inheritance, estate) On the other hand, over two-thirds (68%) of married mothers were supported financially by their husbands, and 16% received social assistance. Almost one in seven (15%) were drawing Unemployment Insurance benefits or Workers' Compensation, a source unheard of among lone mothers. [\(6\)](#)

Plans to return to school among mothers aged 15 to 24

In November 1992, 52% of lone mothers and 43% of wives aged 15 to 24 with a child under six had last attended school some time in the previous four years (between 1989 and 1992). Over half (54%) of these lone mothers planned to return to school, although the majority had no definite return date in mind. In contrast, only one-third (35%) of the wives intended to continue their education.

Data sources and definitions

This article uses annual average data from the monthly Labour Force Survey (LFS) for the years 1976 to

1993. With the exception of the brief paragraph on mothers with school-age children, the data apply exclusively to mothers whose youngest child is under the age of six.

The LFS data are complemented by information from the Survey of Persons Not in the Labour Force (NLF), a supplement to the November 1992 LFS, conducted to learn more about people who are not in the job market. Women made up the vast majority of Canadians aged 15 to 49 who were neither in the labour force nor attending school; most of these women cited caring for children and homemaking as their main activities. NLF data cover variables such as the current non-labour market activities, education and job plans of youths neither working nor attending school, and the reasons for the early retirement of older workers. (Survey highlights were published in the April 1993 issue of *The Labour Force*, Catalogue 71-001. For more information about the Survey of Persons Not in the Labour Force, call Mike Sivyer in Special Surveys Group, Household Surveys Division, at (613) 951-4598.)

Lone mother: the female head of a family in which no spouse is present. Marital status is self-assessed, meaning that respondents' definitions of their marital situation are accepted as fact, regardless of their standing in law. Therefore, "married" respondents may include common-law as well as legally married couples; similarly, "never-married" and "separated or divorced" respondents may include those who have previously lived in common-law unions.

Child under 6: the youngest child in the family is less than 6 years old, other children in the family, if any, may be older.

Child aged 6 to 15: the youngest child in the family is between 6 and 15 years old.

Postsecondary completion: having obtained a certificate or diploma from a community college, junior college, CEGEP, or trade/vocational school, or a university degree, certificate or diploma.

Employment rate: the percentage of people in a specified population who are employed. The employment rate is also known as the employment-population ratio.

Work experience: currently employed or employed within the last five years if not currently working.

Notes

Note 1

Lone mothers who were widowed or "married" (husband absent, for example, in prison, or the wife choosing not to describe herself as separated) accounted for such a small and declining proportion of the

population - only 18% (17,000) in 1976 and less than 8% (also 17,000) by 1993 - that they are excluded from the discussion. However, overall totals include all lone mothers, regardless of marital status.

Note 2

The employment increase in managerial and administrative occupations over the period is partly attributable to the switch from the 1970 to the 1980 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) undertaken by the Labour Force Survey in 1984. The 1980 SOC defines the managerial function much more broadly than its predecessor; therefore, workers who were classified as managers and administrators using the 1980 SOC might have been classified differently had the 1970 SOC been used instead.

Note 3

Postsecondary training or education appears to be essential for finding well-paid employment (Gilbert, 1993), therefore, this study defines higher education as college or university graduation. The Labour Force Survey educational category "at least some postsecondary education" is excluded from consideration because the amount of time spent in a postsecondary program - whether one week of an introductory course or one week short of program completion - cannot be determined.

Note 4

[Galarneau](#) (1992) shows how important support payments are to lone-parent families with children under 18. The per capita income of lone-parent families receiving support payments exceeded that of families without support by 45% to 56%, depending on the number of children in the family. Galarneau also calculated that, in 1988, support payments accounted for 19% of the average income of lone-parent families with dependent children, a percentage which increased with the number of children in the family.

Note 5

The November 1992 Survey of Persons Not in the Labour Force showed that dependence on social assistance did not decline for stay-at-home never-married lone mothers with older children: 95% with no preschoolers but at least one child aged 6 to 15 relied on welfare as a source of income, compared with 74% of separated or divorced mothers with children the same age.

Note 6

Because it is not possible to separately identify the UI and the Worker's Compensation benefits, it cannot be determined how many wives might have been drawing disability benefits. And many married mothers with income from Unemployment Insurance were probably on maternity leave.

References


- Bartholomew, R., A. Hibbett and J. Sidaway. "Lone parents and the labour market - evidence from the Labour Force Survey." *Employment Gazette* 100, no. 11 (November 1992): 559-578.
- Devereaux, M. S. and C. Lindsay. "[Female lone parents in the labour market.](#)" *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 5, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 9-15.
- Galarneau, D. "[Alimony and child support.](#)" *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 4, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 8-21.
- Gilbert, S. "[Labour market outcomes for high school leavers.](#)" *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 5, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 12-16.

Author

Susan Crompton is with the Labour and Household Surveys Analysis Division of Statistics Canada.

Source


Perspectives on Labour and Income, Summer 1994, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E). This is the third of seven articles in the issue.

 **HIGHLIGHTS**

 **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

 **SUBJECT INDEX**

 **AUTHOR INDEX**

 **FRANÇAIS**

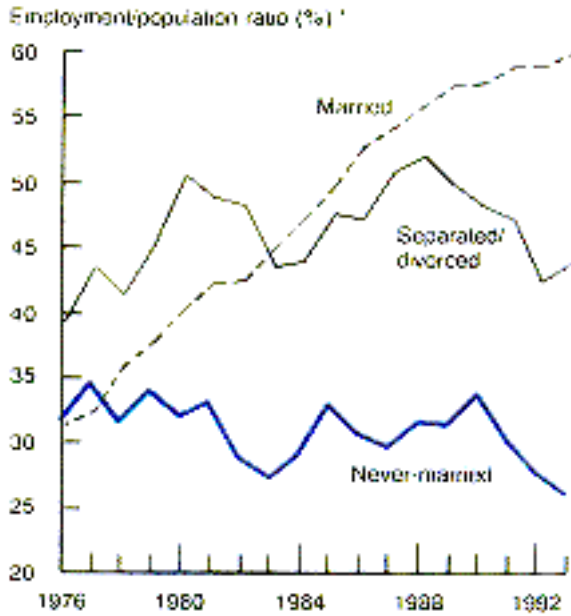
 **HELP**

 **HOME**



Chart A

Never-married mothers are the least likely to be employed.

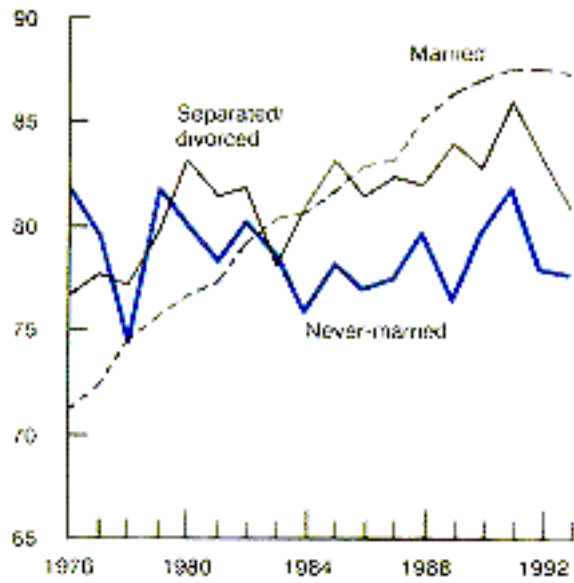


Source: Labour Force Survey
* Of mothers with preschoolers.

Chart B

Married mothers are now the most likely to have recent work experience.

% with recent work experience *

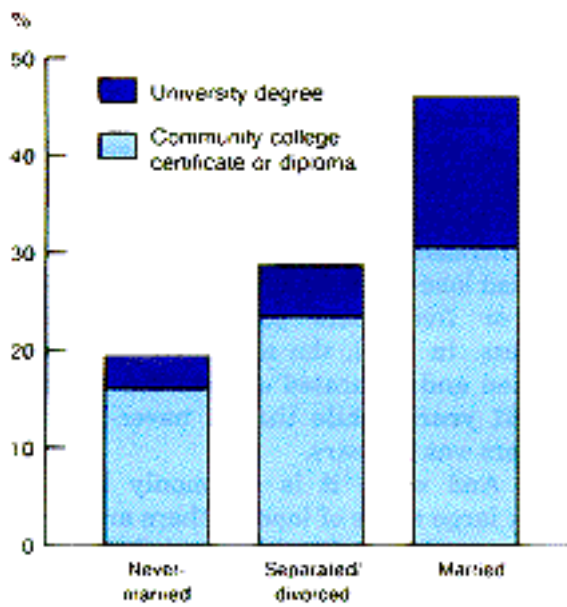


Source: Labour Force Survey

* Mothers with preschoolers who were employed at the time of the survey or had worked within the previous five years.

Chart C

Married mothers have the most education*.

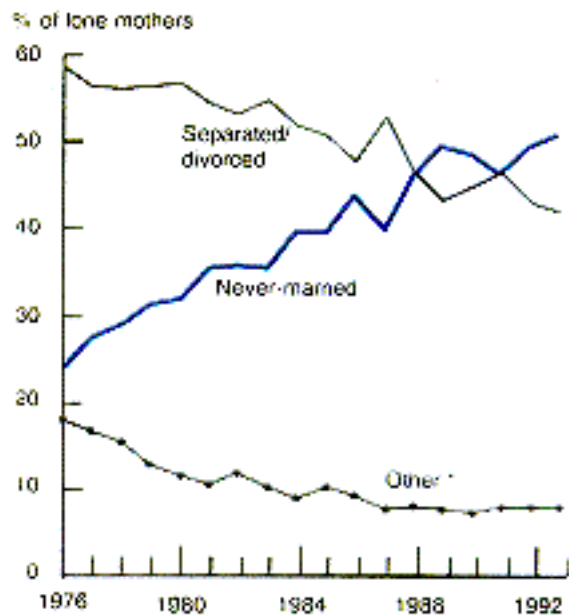


Source: *Labour Force Survey, 1993*

* Mothers with preschoolers.

Chart D

Since 1976, the proportion of never-married lone mothers with preschoolers has doubled.



Source: Labour Force Survey

* Widowed and married (see Note 1).