Married couples: work and income patterns

Differences in family income among whites, blacks, and Hispanics are rooted in the work patterns of husbands and wives

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Today's married-couple families—whether white, black, or Hispanic—supply the U.S. labor force with most of its workers. By the turn of the century—a little less than two decades from now—most of these men, women, and children will still be alive. A clearer understanding of the current status of work patterns in white and minority families permits valuable insights into the nature of work and the family and needs of the family in the closing years of this century.

This article deals with white, black, and Hispanic married-couple families, highlighting their current work-income profiles and exploring briefly some of the major differences. More than 8 of 10 white families are married couples, as are 5 of 10 black families and 7 of 10 Hispanic families. Together these families supply about 71 percent of the Nation's workers. The data used were obtained primarily from supplemental questions to the March 1983 Current Population Survey.[1]

Spouses at work

Husbands and wives in white, black, and Hispanic families[2] display considerable differences in age and education, which, in turn, influence their respective labor force participation patterns and income levels. In general, black families today are more likely to be multiearner families than white or Hispanic married couples. Nonetheless, black married-couple families (like their Hispanic counterparts) have lower incomes and a higher incidence of unemployment than white families.

About 87 percent of the Hispanic husbands were in the labor force in March 1983 compared with 79 percent of whites and 76 percent of blacks (table 1). On average, Hispanic husbands are substantially younger than their black or white counterparts. But, their relative youth (which implies inexperience for many) works against them by contributing to a higher unemployment rate than for whites (but about the same as for black husbands). The majority of black and white husbands have completed high school, whereas more than half of Hispanics left prior to completion.

Wives present a somewhat different labor force pattern and the underlying reasons for it are complex. Black wives historically have been more likely to be in the labor force than white wives, as shown by labor force participation rates for selected years:

Year	*White*	*Black*
March 1950	22.8	37.0
March 1960	29.6	40.8
March 1970	39.7	52.5
March 1980	49.3	59.0

This gap continued in March 1983, when the participation rates for white and black wives were 51.0 and 60.8 percent, respectively.

The historically higher labor force participation rate of black wives reflects several interrelated elements, including the impact of economic problems stemming from many black husbands' longstanding labor market difficulties and

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Table 1. Selected characteristics of married-couple families by race and Hispanic origin, March 1983

Selected characteristics	White	Black	Hispanic
Married-couple families, total (in thousands)	45,273	3,504	2,456
As percent of all families	84.2	52.9	71.9
Husbands and wives			
Median age:			
Husband	45.4	43.8	38.9
Wife	42.5	41.2	35.9
Median years of school completed:			
Husband	12.7	12.2	11.5
Wife	12.7	12.2	11.6
Labor force participation rate:[1]			
Husband	79.4	76.3	86.9
Wife	51.0	60.8	46.9
Unemployment rate:[1]			
Husband	7.8	12.3	13.2
Wife	6.8	11.3	16.5
Presence of own children[2] under 18			
Married couples with children under 18, total (in thousands)	21,702	1,911	1,691
As percent of all married-couple families	47.9	54.5	68.9
Percent with:			
Children 6 to 17, none younger	53.1	52.1	43.1
Children under 6	46.9	47.9	56.9

[1]Not seasonally adjusted.

[2]Own children include only never-married sons, daughters, stepchildren, and adopted children. All other children in the household are excluded.

the greater frequency of marital breakups among black families.[3] Undoubtedly, the long history of black men's above average unemployment rates[4] has influenced their wives' decisions to work outside the home. The following information from different periods illustrates this point.

During the sharp labor force buildup prior to World War II, Howard Meyers wrote, "The demand (for labor) . . . is restricted largely to young white males. . . . Negroes are apparently almost entirely barred from many lines of defense production."[5] From the early 1960's: "Negro women in cities have always been able to get steadier jobs, usually as domestics, than men. This often meant that a black man was capable of being a biological father but not an economic father."[6] Finally, Richard Freeman found that in the 1960's (especially after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) black women were much more able to improve their economic position than were black men, in part because of the relatively greater ease with which the women were hired into higher-paying occupations.[7]

While economic factors are among the principal reasons for black wives' high labor force participation, the cultural heritage of Hispanic women appears to lead, in part, to their relatively low participation rates. As stated by Morris J. Newman, Hispanics are "an amalgam of several historically and culturally distinct ethnic groups linked together by the shared background of Spanish colonialism in the New World."[8] Part of this background is an emphasis on the homemaking and childbearing and rearing role of women.

Whether white, black, or Hispanic, wives' employment status appears to be related to their husbands' status (table 2). While black wives' labor force participation is relatively high regardless of their husbands' employment status, all wives whose husbands were employed were more likely themselves to be employed than wives with unemployed husbands or husbands not in the labor force.

At first glance, this relationship may appear contrary to logical expectations. Shouldn't the wife try to replace earnings lost when the husband is jobless or out of the labor force? Indeed, this is the idea behind the additional-worker hypothesis of labor market activity during cyclical downturns.[9] The reality, however, is that wives of unemployed husbands have lower participation rates and experience greater difficulty finding work than wives whose husbands are at work. For instance, among whites, 3 percent of the wives of employed husbands were jobless compared with 11 percent of those whose husbands were unemployed. For those not in the labor force, age is an obvious explanatory factor; close to 80 percent of the husbands who were not in the work force were 65 years old or over and retired, as were their wives.

Children. Conventional wisdom decrees that wives with preschool children are less likely to be in the labor force than wives whose youngest child is school age. While this is true for whites and Hispanics, it has never been true for black wives. Not only do black married mothers continue to have higher labor force participation rates than white or Hispanic mothers, there is also no appreciable difference in the black rates by age of youngest child, as shown below for March 1983:

	White	*Black*	*Hispanic*
Wives with children under 18	56.2	68.5	46.8
6 to 17, none younger	63.4	69.1	53.5
Under 6	48.2	67.8	41.9

Table 2. Employment status of wives by employment status of husbands, race, and Hispanic origin, March 1983

Employment status of wives	Husband's employment status		
	Employed	Unemployed	Not in labor force
White			
Percent of wives who were:			
Employed	55.3	50.1	19.1
Unemployed	3.4	11.1	1.1
Not in labor force	41.3	38.8	79.7
Black			
Percent of wives who were:			
Employed	63.1	48.9	30.8
Unemployed	7.0	16.9	1.2
Not in labor force	29.9	34.2	67.9
Hispanic origin			
Percent of wives who were:			
Employed	43.8	30.7	19.6
Unemployed	6.4	20.4	1.6
Not in labor force	49.8	48.9	78.8

Table 3. Children[1] in married-couple families by employment status of parents, race, and Hispanic origin, March 1983

Item	White	Black	Hispanic
Children under 18 years, total[2] (in thousands)	40,814	3,769	3,722
Percent with:			
No employed parent	6.6	10.9	14.0
One employed parent or more	93.4	89.1	86.0
One employed parent only	48.8	42.2	54.2
Father	44.2	31.8	49.2
Mother	4.6	10.4	5.0
Two employed parents	44.3	46.9	31.8

[1]Children are defined as "own" children and include only never-married sons, daughters, stepchildren, and adopted children. All other children in household are excluded.

[2]Includes children whose fathers are in the Armed Forces and living with the family on or off base in the United States. These fathers are treated as employed.

Because most fathers and just over half of mothers are in the labor force (94 and 54 percent, respectively, for whites, blacks, and Hispanics combined), the overwhelming majority of children have at least one employed parent (table 3). White children are somewhat more likely to have an employed parent than black or Hispanic children, reflecting the higher unemployment rates among black and Hispanic husbands and wives.

Income and poverty

Whatever the number of earners, the 1982 average annual income of married-couple families continued to be higher for whites than for blacks or Hispanics. Median income for black ($14,200) and Hispanic ($13,800) families was roughly 60 percent of median income for white families ($23,500). For two-earner families where both spouses worked, the difference between whites and blacks was about 12 percentage points, and 21 points between whites and Hispanics (table 4). In addition, white married couples averaged more income from sources other than wages and salaries than either the black or Hispanic couples.[10]

These income differences are partly explained both by differences in weekly earnings of spouses (especially husbands) and by the number of weeks husbands and wives worked during the year. As shown in the following text tabulation, usual weekly earnings (full-time wage and salary) were more than $100 above the medians for blacks and Hispanics in 1982, while the differences among wives' earnings were considerably less:

	White	*Black*	*Hispanic*
Husbands	$412	$303	$297
Wives	$246	$231	$213

The effect of these differences in weekly earnings on differences in yearly family income is strengthened by the fact that 74 percent of white husbands who were employed at any time in 1982 worked full time all year compared with 68 percent of their black or Hispanic counterparts.

The size of the gap in husbands' average weekly earnings reflects the marked difference in their occupations. By comparison, wives, whose earnings are far more similar, tend to work in much the same occupations (table 5). White husbands are more often employed in managerial, professional specialty, and precision production occupations (which are usually relatively high-paying) than their black and Hispanic counterparts. In contrast, a higher proportion of the blacks and Hispanics work in lower paying jobs, such as operators and fabricators, service workers, and equipment handlers, cleaners, and helpers. Wives, whether white, black, or Hispanic, tend to be concentrated in the same occupational groupings, namely, technical, sales, and administrative support.

Poverty. In 1982, about 7 percent of the white couples had incomes below the poverty level[11] compared with 16 percent for blacks and 19 percent for Hispanics. These rates reflect the earnings and employment differences discussed above as well as the fact that black and Hispanic families have more children, on average, than white families.

The incidence of poverty was relatively low by race or Hispanic origin when both the husband and wife were earn-

Table 4. Number of earners, median family income, and poverty status in 1982 of married-couple families, by race and Hispanic origin, March 1983

Number and relationship of earners	White			Black			Hispanic		
	Total	Median income	Percent in poverty	Total	Median income	Percent in poverty	Total	Median income	Percent in poverty
Total (in thousands)	45,273	$26,710	6.9	3,504	$20,680	15.6	2,456	$19,390	19.3
In percent	100.0	–	–	100.0	–	–	100.0	–	–
No earners	13.0	12,710	16.8	12.4	7,470	43.9	7.7	7,220	48.9
One earner	28.7	22,310	10.3	25.7	13,650	24.4	33.6	13,760	29.2
Husband	23.6	23,460	9.0	17.7	14,240	24.4	30.5	13,820	28.7
Wife	3.9	16,220	16.4	6.8	12,450	23.5	2.0	([1])	([1])
Other	1.2	21,090	15.7	1.2	([1])	([1])	1.1	([1])	([1])
Two earners or more	58.3	32,220	3.0	61.9	26,520	6.2	58.6	24,760	9.6
Husband and wife only	38.9	29,650	2.9	42.9	26,110	4.2	36.9	23,290	9.4
Husband, wife, and other(s)	11.6	41,980	1.6	11.6	32,900	3.2	5.5	33,190	6.2
Husband and other(s)	6.5	35,730	4.4	4.7	21,500	25.8	9.2	24,130	12.9
Other combinations	1.4	25,180	10.5	2.8	18,930	17.3	2.0	([1])	([1])

[1]Median and percent not shown where base is less than 75,000.

Table 5. Occupation of employed husbands and wives, by race and Hispanic origin, March 1983

Occupations	Husbands			Wives		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
Total (in thousands)	33,152	2,348	1,908	21,766	1,881	1,041
In percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Managerial and professional specialty	29.6	14.2	12.9	25.1	17.6	14.0
Executive, administrative, and managerial	16.2	8.2	8.3	9.0	4.9	6.1
Professional specialty	13.4	6.0	4.6	16.0	12.7	8.0
Technical, sales, and administrative support	19.4	14.3	13.5	47.4	34.6	39.3
Technicians and related support	2.5	2.1	1.9	3.2	3.6	1.9
Sales	12.1	3.8	6.3	12.5	6.4	10.2
Administrative support, including clerical	4.9	8.3	5.2	31.7	24.6	27.2
Service occupations	6.3	14.8	12.2	14.6	28.0	20.8
Private household	(1)	—	—	1.0	4.9	2.4
Protective service	2.7	4.1	2.6	0.3	0.4	0.5
All other	3.6	10.7	9.6	13.3	22.7	18.0
Precision production, craft, and repair	22.1	16.1	23.3	1.9	2.9	3.7
Mechanics and repairers	8.1	6.1	8.2	0.3	0.2	0.5
Construction trades	7.5	5.5	7.7	0.1	0.2	0.4
Other precision production	6.4	4.6	7.4	1.5	2.5	2.9
Operators, fabricators, and laborers	17.6	35.9	31.4	9.6	16.3	20.4
Machine operators, assemblers, and inspectors	7.5	12.3	14.3	7.4	13.8	16.5
Transportation and material moving	6.7	13.7	9.1	0.9	1.1	0.9
Handlers, equipment cleaners, and helpers	3.5	9.9	8.0	1.3	1.3	2.9
Farming, forestry, and fishing	5.0	4.8	6.8	1.4	0.6	1.7

[1] Less than 0.05 percent.

ers. However the poverty rate of white multiearner families was half that of similar black and one-third that of similar Hispanic families—3 percent for whites, 6 percent for blacks, and 10 percent for Hispanics in 1982. In contrast, among one-earner families the poverty rate for white families—at 10.3 percent—was 14 percentage points below that of similar black couples and 19 points below the Hispanic rate. Among families with no earners, the differences were 27 percent for whites and 32 percent each for blacks and Hispanics.

Although the incidence of poverty is reduced when there are earners in the family, many families have earners and still remain in poverty.[12] In fact, the majority of married couples with incomes below the poverty line in 1982 contained at least one earner at some time during the year. About 68 percent of white, 65 percent of black, and 80 percent of Hispanic married-couple families in poverty had income from the earnings of at least one member during the year. Moreover, about 1 of 4 families in poverty had two earners or more. □

———*FOOTNOTES*———

[1] The Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted for the Bureau of Labor Statistics by the Bureau of the Census, is a monthly sample survey of some 60,000 households in the United States. The information obtained from this survey relates to the employment status of persons 16 years old and over in the civilian noninstitutional population. In the March survey, taken each year, supplemental information is obtained annually regarding earnings and income as well as the work experience of individuals in the prior year. Data on persons from the March surveys are tabulated by marital and family status.

Because it is a sample survey, estimates derived from the Current Population Survey may differ from the actual counts that could be obtained from a complete census. Therefore, small estimates or small differences between estimates should be interpreted with caution. For a more detailed explanation, see the Explanatory Note in *Marital and Family Patterns of Workers:An Update*, Bulletin 2163 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1983).

[2] A family consists of two persons or more who are related by blood or marriage and living together in the same household. Relationship of family members is determined by their relationship to the reference person or householder, that is, the person in whose name the housing unit is owned or rented.

[3] See Gordon Green and Edward Welniak, "Changing families, shifting incomes," *American Demographics*, February 1983, pp. 40–43.

[4] See *Perspectives on Working Women: A Databook*, Bulletin 2080 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1980), table 65.

[5] See Howard B. Meyers, "Effects of the National Defense Program on Unemployment and Need" (address presented at the National Conference on Social Work, Atlantic City, N.J.). Release dated June 5, 1941, p. 7.

[6] Michael Harrington, "The Economics of Protest," in Arthur M. Ross and Herbert Hill, eds., *Employment, Race and Poverty* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), p. 250.

[7] Richard B. Freeman, "Changes in the Labor Market for Black Americans, 1948–72," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 1: 1973, pp. 67–131.

[8] See Morris J. Newman, "A profile of Hispanics in the U.S. work force," *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1978, pp. 3 and 5.

[9] See, for example, W. G. Bowen and T. A. Finegan, *The Economics of Labor Force Participation* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 147–51.

[10] See *Money Income of Households, Families and Persons in the United States: 1981*, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60, No. 137 (Bureau of the Census, 1982), table 23.

[11] In accordance with the poverty index adopted by a 1969 Federal interagency committee, families are classified as being above or below the low income level. The poverty threshold for a family of four in 1982 was $9,862. For further details, see *Money Income and Poverty Status of Families and Persons in the United States: 1982*, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60, No. 140 (Bureau of the Census, 1983), p. 295.

[12] For information relating employment problems and economic status see *Linking Employment Problems to Economic Status*, Bulletin 2169 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1983).