



Labor force activity of women receiving child support or alimony

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As divorce, separation, and out-of-wedlock births climbed during the 1970's, the number of mothers rearing children whose fathers were absent from the home rose sharply. Nonetheless, as the decade drew to a close, relatively few mothers received child support payments, despite the legal obligation on the part of most fathers. In addition, very few women received alimony.

A special survey conducted in April 1979,¹ shows that an estimated 2.5 million (35 percent) of the 7.1 million mothers living with children from absent fathers had received child support payments in 1978. An additional million were entitled to them but received none (table 1).

Surprisingly, mothers receiving money for child support were found to be in the labor force more often than those not awarded such support. And, women who received alimony—financial support for their personal maintenance after the dissolution of a marriage—were also more likely to work than those who did not receive such payments.

Child support recipients

In April 1979, 75 percent of the mothers who had received child support in 1978 were in the work force, and 84 percent of those employed worked full time (35 hours a week or more). Of those not awarded support, the comparable proportions were 58 percent and 78 percent. The child-support recipients were also less likely to be unemployed; at 7.3 percent their unemployment rate was only half that of the mothers not awarded support.

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Although generally higher labor force participation rates and lower unemployment rates for the recipients were evident among most major age-race groups, much of the difference between the aggregate rates of the two groups was associated with other factors. That is, mothers not awarded support tended to be black, less educated, and young—groups with serious labor market problems. For example, 47 percent of the mothers not awarded support were black, compared with only 11 percent of the recipients.

Historically, black mothers maintaining their own families have had lower labor force participation rates and higher unemployment rates than their white counterparts. In March 1979, 56 percent of the blacks were in the labor force compared with 71 percent of the whites, and the unemployment rate for this group of blacks was 16 percent, compared with a little less than 9 percent for the white mothers.

Moreover, those not awarded support were, on average, younger, less educated, and more likely to be single (never married) than the recipients. About 30 percent of the mothers not awarded support were below age 25, and 42 percent had never been married. Of the recipients, 8 percent were below age 25 and less than 4 percent had never been married. Also, as shown below, proportionately twice as many mothers not awarded support had failed to complete high school:

	<i>Not awarded support</i>	<i>Recipients</i>
Educational attainment:		
Less than 4 years of high school	44	22
4 years of high school only	40	49
1 year or more of college	16	29

Labor force

Among both blacks and whites, participation rates of recipients were higher than those for mothers awarded no support. About 76 percent of white recipients and 64 percent of the black were working or looking for work,

Table 1. Labor force status of mothers by child support recipiency in 1978, April 1979

[Numbers in thousands]

Recipiency status	Civilian noninstitutional population		Labor force		Employed			Unemployed		Not in labor force
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent of population	Total	Percent		Number	Rate	
						Full time	Part time			
Total	7,094	100.0	4,633	65.3	4,161	81.3	18.7	472	10.2	2,462
Awarded child support	4,196	59.1	2,962	70.6	2,731	83.0	17.0	231	7.8	1,234
Support not scheduled for 1978	772	10.9	465	60.2	437	81.7	18.3	28	6.0	307
Support scheduled for 1978	3,424	48.3	2,497	72.9	2,294	83.3	16.7	203	8.1	927
Did not receive support	969	13.7	669	69.0	600	82.2	17.8	69	10.3	300
Received support	2,455	34.6	1,828	74.5	1,694	83.7	16.3	134	7.3	627
Not awarded child support	2,898	40.9	1,671	57.7	1,430	78.0	22.0	241	14.4	1,228

NOTE: Sums of individual items may not equal totals due to rounding.

compared with 60 and 55 percent of the mothers not awarded support.

By marital status, divorcees were most likely to be in the labor force whether or not they received child support. Among the recipients, almost 85 percent of the divorcees were working or looking for work, compared with 69 percent of the separated women. Moreover, nearly 70 percent of the divorcees not awarded child support were in the labor force compared with 60 percent of the married women and 55 percent of those separated or never married.

Unemployment rates were much higher for those awarded no support than for recipients, regardless of race. At 11.9 percent, the unemployment rate for white nonawardees was 5 percentage points higher than for recipients, while among blacks the nonawardees were more than twice as likely to be jobless (table 2). Unemployment among mothers not awarded child support

was highest for those who had never been married, partly because most were in their teens or early twenties, ages at which the already difficult problems of labor market entry are compounded by child-care responsibilities.

Income and work experience

Child support recipients had average (mean) annual incomes of about \$8,940 in 1978, almost 70 percent greater than the \$5,340 average for mothers not awarded support. Only part of this difference, however, can be attributed to the payments themselves; because mothers who were recipients were more likely to have earnings and other sources of income.

In 1978, overall child support payments averaged about \$1,800, or only half of the difference between the incomes of the recipients and the mothers not awarded support. This is partly because women receiving child

Table 2. Labor force status of mothers by child support recipiency in 1978 and selected characteristics, April 1979

Selected characteristics	Population (in thousands)		Labor force (in thousands)		Labor force participation rate		Unemployment rate	
	Not awarded child support	Received child support	Not awarded child support	Received child support	Not awarded child support	Received child support	Not awarded child support	Received child support
Total	2,898	2,455	1,671	1,828	57.7	74.5	14.4	7.3
Marital status								
Married spouse present	461	781	274	486	59.7	67.1	6.2	7.2
Divorced	483	1,242	333	1,050	68.9	84.6	5.7	6.3
Separated	690	337	379	232	54.9	69.0	17.2	9.9
Widowed	35	8	12	5	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)
Never-married	1,231	87	674	55	54.8	63.2	20.6	(¹)
Race and Hispanic origin:								
White	1,490	2,168	891	1,645	59.8	75.8	11.9	6.9
Black	1,349	260	743	167	55.1	64.2	17.8	8.4
Hispanic	292	124	132	62	45.2	50.0	17.4	(¹)
Age								
18 to 24 years	868	205	457	137	52.6	67.2	26.2	20.9
25 to 34 years	1,020	1,086	613	813	60.1	74.9	13.6	7.8
35 to 44 years	629	878	398	677	63.2	77.1	8.7	4.6
45 years and over	381	285	204	200	53.5	70.2	1.7	5.2

¹ Percent not shown where base is less than 75,000.

NOTE: Sums of individual items may not equal totals due to rounding.

support were more likely than those not awarded support to have had some work experience in the previous year. Nearly 80 percent of the recipients worked at some time in 1978, compared with 60 percent of those not awarded child support (table 3). Moreover, the latter tended to work fewer weeks and in lower paying jobs. Nearly the same proportions of the two groups held full-time jobs, but 54 percent of the recipients worked all year, compared with 43 percent of the others. About 2 of 3 child support recipients worked in white-collar occupations, with the remainder about equally divided between blue-collar and service occupations. In contrast, slightly over half (51 percent) of the mothers not awarded child support were blue-collar or service employees, while 48 percent were in white-collar jobs.

Alimony

Although only a very small proportion of ever-divorced or currently separated women reported that they received alimony or maintenance payments in 1978, labor force activity was strong among those who did (table 4). More than 7 of every 10 were working or looking for work. Among the women receiving alimony, those between the ages of 35 and 44 had the highest participation rates and those 45 and over, the lowest.

On average, women 45 years old and over received higher alimony payments than their younger counterparts. The higher payments probably contributed to their lower labor force participation rates, although in general, older women are usually less likely to work than younger women. These higher payments generally result from the longer duration of their marriages.

Many courts have indicated that the duration of the marriage measures the extent of the homemaker's absence from the work force and the probable degree of difficulty she will encounter in attempting to enter or reenter it. In this regard, one study concluded, that . . . "spousal support provides a form of insurance for employment benefits—e.g., work experience, accumulated

Table 4. Labor force status of ever-divorced or currently separated women who received alimony or maintenance payments in 1978, by demographic characteristics, April 1979

[Numbers in thousands]

Characteristics	Total	In labor force		Not in labor force
		Number	Participation rate	
Total, ever-divorced or currently separated	14,334	8,655	59.8	5,768
Alimony or maintenance payment recipients	528	373	70.6	155
Race and Hispanic origin:				
White	486	340	70.0	146
Black	41	32	(¹)	9
Hispanic	24	19	(¹)	6
Age:				
18 to 24 years	26	19	(¹)	7
25 to 34 years	135	99	73.3	36
35 to 44 years	188	150	79.8	37
45 years and over	179	105	58.7	74
Median payments in 1978	\$1,570	\$1,420	—	\$1,810

¹ Rate not shown where base is less than 75,000.
Note: Sums of individual items may not equal totals due to rounding.

earnings, pension plans and health insurance—the homemaker has bypassed so that she could devote herself to her family."²

IN THE UNITED STATES, there is a clear-cut legal obligation for fathers to provide financial support for their children from a marriage ending in divorce or separation regardless of the labor force status of the mother. Moreover, they are obligated to support children born out of wedlock providing paternity has been proven.³ Yet, as this report demonstrates, the receipt of child support is not widespread. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ The estimates in this report are based on data that were collected in March and April 1979 from the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted for the Bureau of Labor Statistics by the Bureau of the Census. About 56,000 households in 614 areas of the United States with coverage in each of the 50 States and the District of Columbia were eligible for interviews in March. About 40,000 of these households were reinterviewed in April and women, 18 years of age and over, were then asked supplementary questions regarding child support and alimony payments. The labor force estimates shown in this report were derived from special tabulations prepared by Bernard R. Altschuler of the Data Services Group, Office of Current Employment Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Estimates based on a sample may vary considerably from results obtained by a complete count, especially in cases where the numbers are small. Therefore, differences based on these estimates may not be significant.

For more detail and the interpretation of such differences, as well as a detailed discussion of the survey methodology and findings, see: *Child Support and Alimony: 1978, Current Population Reports, Series P-23 no. 112* (Bureau of the Census, 1981).

² See Nancy A. Veith, "Rehabilitative Spousal Support: In Need of a More Comprehensive Approach to Mitigating Dissolution Trauma," *University of San Francisco Law Review*, Spring 1978, pp. 493-525.

³ See Carol Adaire Jones, Nancy M. Gordon, and Isabelle F. Sawhill, "Child Support Payments in the United States," *Working Paper 992-03*, Urban Institute, October 1976, p. 6.

Table 3. Work experience of mothers by child support reciprocity in 1978

Weeks worked	Received child support	Not awarded child support
Total (in thousands)	2,455	2,898
Worked	1,942	1,738
Percent of total	79.1	60.0
Worked (percent)	100.0	100.0
Full time	80.7	75.8
40 weeks or more	61.9	51.3
50 to 52 weeks	53.7	43.4
39 weeks or less	18.8	24.5
Part time	19.3	24.2
40 weeks or more	8.1	10.0
50 to 52 weeks	6.0	7.1
39 weeks or less	11.2	14.2

Note: Sums of individual items may not equal totals due to rounding.