

# 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, and a larger share of women work full time and year round than in past decades. 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 2008. 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 2008, women's earnings were 80 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. 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 2008, 59.5 percent of women were in the labor force, and this share has been relatively stable over the past several years. Women's labor force participation rate peaked at 60 percent in 1999, following several decades in which women increasingly entered the labor market. (See tables 1 and 2.)
- In 2008, the overall unemployment rate for women was 5.4 percent, but rates varied by race and Hispanic ethnicity. Asian women had the lowest rate (3.7 percent), followed by white (4.9 percent), Hispanic (7.7 percent), and black (8.9 percent) women. (See tables 1, 2, and 3.)
- From March 1975 to March 2000, the labor force participation rate of mothers with children under age 18 rose from 47 percent to a peak of 73 percent. (These data were collected in the March CPS.) By 2004, the participation rate for mothers had receded to 71 percent, where it remained through 2008. (See tables 6 and 7.)
- 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), and unmarried mothers have higher participation rates than married mothers. In 2008, 76 percent of unmarried mothers were in the labor force, compared with 69 percent of married mothers. (See tables 6 and 7.)
- The educational attainment of women aged 25 to 64 in the labor force rose substantially from 1970 to 2008. Thirty-six percent of these women held college degrees in 2008, compared with 11 percent in 1970. Only 7 percent of women were high school dropouts in 2008, down from 34 percent in 1970. (See table 9.)
- In 2008, women accounted for 51 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, 8 percent of construction managers and 34 percent of lawyers were women, while 61 percent of accountants and 79 percent of social workers were women. (See table 11.)
- Employed Asian women were more likely (46 percent) to work in the higher paying management, professional, and related occupations in 2008 than were employed white (41 percent), black (31 percent), or Hispanic (24 percent) women. Meanwhile, Hispanic women (31 percent) and black women (28 percent) were more likely than white and Asian women (each 19 percent) to work in service occupations. (See table 12.)
- In 2008, women accounted for more than half of all workers within several industry sectors: financial activities, education and health services, leisure and hospitality, and other 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 \$638 in 2008. This represented 80 percent of men's median weekly earnings (\$798). Earnings of Asian (\$753) and white (\$654) women were substantially higher than the earnings of their black (\$554) and Hispanic (\$501) counterparts. Women's-to-men's earnings ratios were higher among blacks (89 percent) and Hispanics (90 percent) than among whites (79 percent) and Asians (78 percent). (See table 16.)
- In 2008, female full-time wage and salary workers aged 25 and older with only a high school diploma had median usual weekly earnings of \$520. This represented 79 percent of the earnings for women with an associate degree (\$661), and 54 percent of those for women with a bachelor's degree or higher (\$955). (See table 17.)
- In 2008, 25 percent of employed women usually worked part time—fewer than 35 hours per week. In comparison, 11 percent of employed men usually worked part time. (See table 20.)
- Women in nonagricultural industries worked an average of 36.1 hours per week in 2008. The average workweek for men in nonagricultural industries was 41.2 hours. (See table 21.)
- Of all women who worked at some point during calendar year 2007, 62 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 grew from 66 to 75 percent. (See table 22.) (These data were collected in the 1971 and 2008 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 58 percent of married-couple families in 2007, up from 44 percent in 1967. Couples in which only the husband worked represented 18 percent of married-couple families in 2007, compared with 36 percent in 1967. (See table 23.) (These data were collected in the 1968 and 2008 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.)
- In 2007, working wives contributed 36 percent of their families' incomes, up by 9 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 2007, the proportion was 26 percent. (See tables 24 and 25.) (These data were collected in the 1971, 1988, and 2008 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.)
- In 2008, approximately 1.5 million women paid at an hourly rate had earnings at or below the prevailing Federal minimum wage. This represented 4 percent of all women paid at an hourly rate. Among women 25 years and older who were paid hourly rates, 3 percent had earnings at or below the minimum wage, compared with 10 percent of women aged 16 to 24. (On July 24, 2008, the Federal minimum wage level rose from \$5.85 to \$6.55 an hour. Data in this report reflect the average number of workers who earned \$5.85 or less from January 2008 through July 2008 and those who earned \$6.55 or less from August 2008 through the end of the year.) (See table 26.)
- Among workers who were in the labor force for at least 27 weeks in 2007, women were slightly more likely than men to live in poverty—6 percent, compared with 5 percent. Black and Hispanic women who were in the labor force for 27 weeks or more were significantly more likely than their white or Asian counterparts to be among the working poor. The poverty rates for black and Hispanic working women were 12 percent and 11 percent, respectively, compared with 5 percent and 4 percent, respectively, for white and Asian women. (See table 27.) (Data are from the 2008 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS and reflect earnings and work experience of the prior calendar year.)
- Among 2008 high school graduates, young women (72 percent) were somewhat more likely than young men (66 percent) to be enrolled in college in October 2008. (See table 33.) (Data are from the October 2008 School Enrollment Supplement to the CPS.)
- In October 2008, 45 percent of women aged 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 (39 percent). Among those not enrolled in school, women were less likely to be in the labor force than men (74 percent, compared with 85 percent). (See table 34.) (Data are from the October 2008 School Enrollment Supplement to the CPS.)
- Among 16- to 24-year-old women who were not en-

rolled 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 but no additional education (50 percent, compared with 71 percent). Of those in the labor force, the high school dropouts were more likely to be unemployed than the high school graduates (25 percent, compared with 13 percent). (See table 34.) (Data are from the October 2008 School Enrollment Supplement to the CPS.)

- In May 2008, 5.6 percent of employed women held more than one job, nearly the same as the previous year. The May 2008 multiple jobholding rate for men was lower, at 4.9 percent. Multiple jobholding rates for both women and men have declined since the mid-1990s. (See table 35.) (Data were collected in the May CPS.)
- Since 1976, the percentage of working women who were self-employed has trended up (from 4.4 percent in 1976 to 5.2 percent in 2008), while the percentage of men who were self-employed has edged down (from 8.4 percent to 7.6 percent). In 2008, 38 percent of all

self-employed persons were women, compared with 27 percent in 1976. (See table 36.)

- In 2008, foreign-born women were less likely than native-born women to be in the labor force (55 percent, compared with 60 percent). Of those in the labor force, native-born women were less likely to be unemployed (5.3 and 6.0 percent, respectively). Among men, the opposite was true. Foreign-born men were more likely than the native born to be in the labor force (81 percent, compared with 71 percent) and somewhat less likely to be unemployed (5.7 and 6.2 percent, respectively). (See table 37.)
- Thirteen percent of female wage and salary workers were represented by unions in 2008, compared with 15 percent of men. Union attachment for both sexes had been on a downward trend since 1983, when unions represented 18 percent of women and 28 percent of men in wage and salary jobs. Over the past 2 years, however, union representation has increased slightly among both women and men, from lows in 2006 of 12 percent and 14 percent, respectively. (See table 38.)