

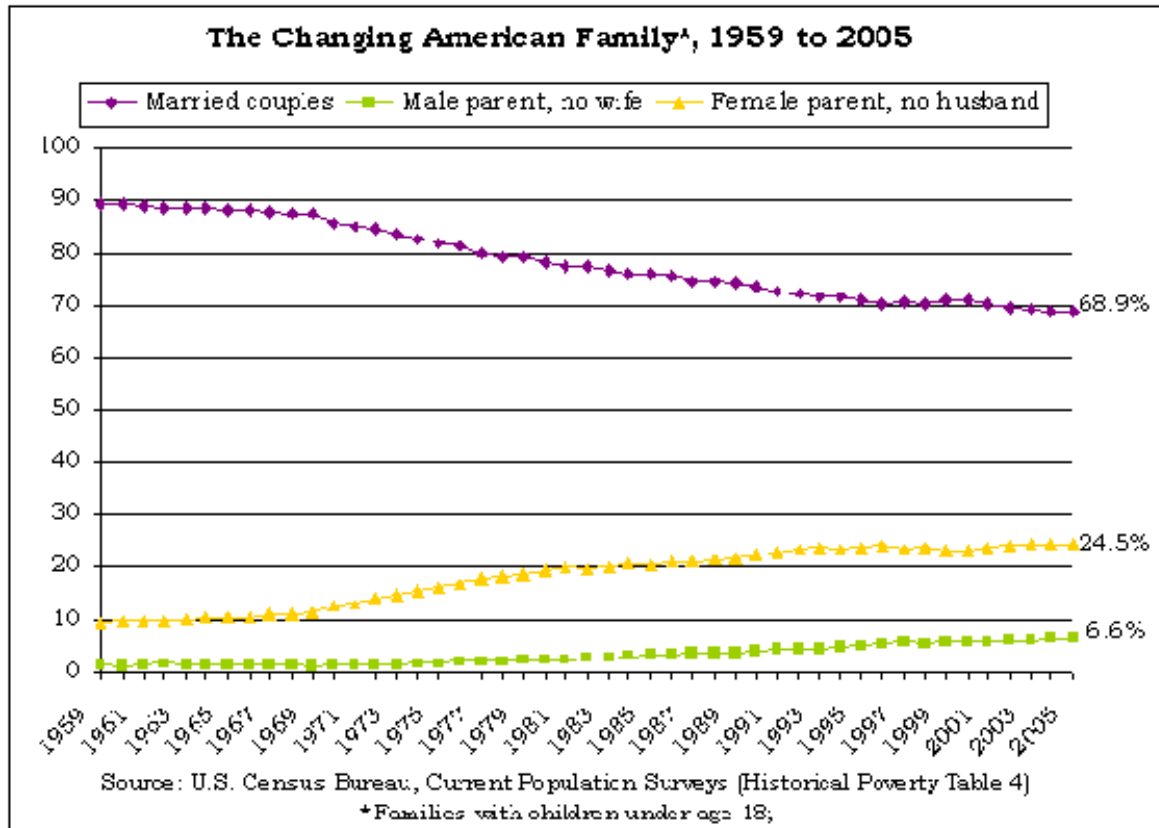
Family

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Poverty and the American Family

Change in the structure of families over the past 40 years has likely contributed to higher poverty rates. As shown below, between 1959 and 2005, the percent of families that were headed by a single parent, whether male or female, nearly tripled (from 10.7% in 1959 to 31.1% in 2005). Though the percent of single father families has increased considerably, 79% of families with a single parent were headed by women in 2005. Single parent families are economically vulnerable for the simple reason that most of them have only one wage earner.

- [Link to data in Microsoft EXCEL format](#)
- [Link to source table](#)



Families headed by single mothers are especially at risk of poverty because of lower wages paid to women generally. In 2005, men (over age 25) in full time jobs were earning \$159 more per week on average, than women of the same age, also in full time jobs (BLS, Current Population Survey, 2005, Table 37). Put another way, women's weekly earnings (\$612) were about 79% of men's weekly earnings (\$771).

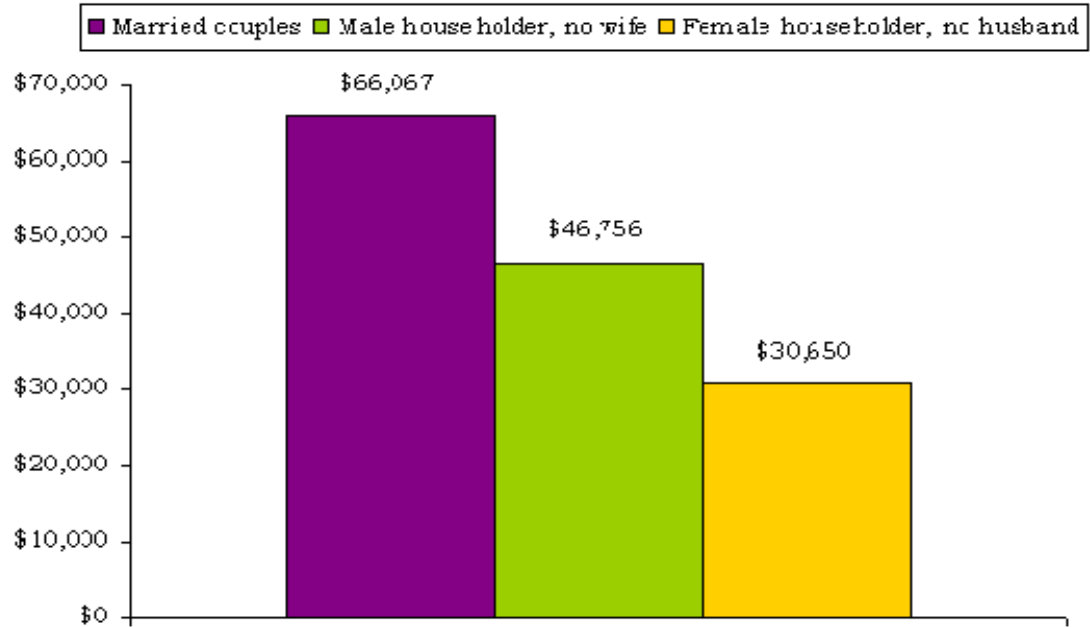
Another factor that increases the economic vulnerability of female headed households is the difficulty of enforcing child support laws, particularly for never married mothers. In 2003, about 77% of mothers who were custodial parents and to whom child support had been awarded reported receiving some amount of child support. However, less than half (45.2%) received the full amount (U.S. Census Bureau, "Custodial Mothers and Fathers and their Child Support: 2003").

These factors combine to create a substantial economic disadvantage for families headed by single mothers, as shown below. The median income¹ for female-headed families (with or without children) was just \$30,650 in 2005. The median for married couple families was more than double that amount (\$66,067).

- [Link to source document](#)

¹ Half of all families have incomes greater than the median; half have incomes less.

Median Household Income in Different Types of Families, 2005



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2005"

How Do Single Parents Fare?

Not surprisingly, families with only one parent were more likely to be poor in 2005, and poverty among single mothers was particularly high. Whereas 6.5% of married couple families (with related children under 18) and 17.6% of single fathers were living in poverty, more than one third (36.2%) of single mothers were poor.

The relationship between poverty and family structure becomes more pronounced when we focus attention the poor population, as shown in the figure below. Although only 25% of all families with related children under age 18 were headed by a woman (without a husband present), more than 60% of poor families with children were headed by single mothers in 2005. Married couple families make up more than two thirds (68.9%) of all families, but represent less than one third (31.0%) of poor families.

- [Link to data in Microsoft EXCEL format](#)

