

# WORLD

## Single-parent poverty declines in U.S.

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February 22, 2023

The welfare reform of the 1990s helped lift more Americans out of poverty, especially single parents, according to a new study by the Cato Institute.

The study shows that single-parent poverty in the U.S. dropped by 62 percent between 1995 and 2016. The drop correlates with a slew of welfare reforms that Congress passed in 1996 and President Bill Clinton signed into law.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act transformed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program into one called the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which added work requirements and time limits. The act sanctioned states that did not prioritize work programs and individuals who refused to meet employment requirements. The vast majority of families in the program from 1967 to 1996 had one adult.

“Those are the ones we saw these improved outcomes for. They’re the ones that ... got dropped off the welfare rolls,” said Kevin Corinth, a senior fellow with the American Enterprise Institute and one of the study’s authors. “They’re also the ones where we saw these single moms going into the workforce, seeing large increases in earnings.”

From 1994 to 2005, the number of families on social welfare fell by about 60 percent. In the 1990s alone, the percentage of recipients that reported earnings jumped from 6.7 percent to 28.1 percent.

Corinth also credits Earned Income Tax Credit expansions in the 1990s. “The expansion really increased the incentive to work for single-parent families who weren’t already in the workforce,” he said. Though it didn’t specifically target single-parent families, the credit benefits low-income workers and phases out quickly once the recipient moves into a higher income bracket. Single parents were more likely to qualify.

The legislators who reorganized welfare in 1996 identified several goals for reform, including preventing and reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies and supporting two-parent families. Studies show that marriage tends to boost a family’s income and strengthen financial stability.

Corinth noted that single parenthood increased in the 1970s and 80s until it plateaued in the 1990s, at about the same time as welfare reform. But there is little evidence to suggest the reforms slowed the steady decline in marriage rates that started in the 1970s. In fact, Corinth said the reforms may have contributed to the decline in new marriages by giving single women an incentive to work and greater financial independence.

Now, about 23 percent of children in the United States live in single parent households—still the world’s highest rate. Over one-third of children in single-mother households live in poverty, compared to only 7.5 percent of children in married households. Single-mother households make up 62 percent of families with children in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps.

Some pro-life experts anticipate the number of single-mother families will climb as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision that gave states the right to protect babies from abortion. About 85 percent of women who obtain an abortion are unmarried. Currently, pro-life laws in 14 states provide protections for unborn babies in most circumstances. “What follows is if pro-life laws are effective, these babies, rather than being aborted, are now carried to term,” said Connor Semelsberger, the director of federal affairs for life and human dignity at the Family Research Council.

Single parents often also lack the relational support they need. Research shows that the instability, social isolation, and material poverty that often accompany single parenthood take a toll on a children’s emotional and behavioral health.

Ministries working with single mothers say their job hasn’t changed, arguing that a rise in income can’t fill an ongoing need for a strong community. Cathi Sudler is a case manager at Long Island Youth Mentoring, an organization that mentors children who are at risk, many of whom come from single parent households. Sudler questions a simplified, material definition of poverty. True flourishing comes down to relationships and hope, she said.

The program matches every child and adult with a case manager. “A lot of times the case management role is to form a relationship with the adults and to love them and pray with them,” Sudler said. “They begin to open up about things they’ve never really talked to anybody about. ... It always goes back to relationships, every single time.”

That’s what Yvonne Flores discovered. Flores became a single mom to her one-month-old daughter after her almost 10-year marriage ended. Then she had twin boys after a brief dating relationship. “I was alone,” she said. “I was afraid that I wasn’t going to be able to pay my rent, and the bills, and the insurance, the phone—everything.”

When faced with a long wait for government housing assistance in California, Flores rented an apartment on her own and asked relatives for help when needed. About four years later, she remarried. “He tells my kids, ‘I’m not your blood dad, but I’m your dad from my heart,’” Flores said. She supports other single mothers as a staff member at My Safe Harbor, an organization that equips mothers, often single parents, to lead Christ-centered, independent lives.

Flores said it was strong family relationships, not government assistance, that pulled her through her years as a single mom: “That’s what we try to do here with the ladies—build a good relationship.”