

Motherhood is equal to partner absence as a cause of economic disadvantage in single mothers

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New research highlights the major impact of motherhood earning penalties on the economic prospects of single-mother families.

Typically, research into the economic status of single mothers has assumed that not living with a 'bread-winner' is the primary reason for economic disadvantage. However, new research by the University of Bristol has shown that loss in earnings associated with [motherhood](#) and partner absence have an equally negative impact on the economic well-being of single mothers.

Professor Susan Harkness from the University of Bristol's School of Policy Studies, analyzed 25 years of longitudinal [income](#) data from the US to identify the reasons for single mothers' economic disadvantage.

Her research, published in the journal *Demography*, describes how labor market penalties to motherhood, the cost of partner absence and child-related increases in financial needs, combine to negatively impact the income of single mothers.

"Importantly I found the transition to motherhood has just as large an impact on single mothers' income as the absence of an earning partner. When a [woman](#) becomes a mother, she is more likely than the male parent to take time out of the workforce, reduce her hours or miss out on opportunities for career progression for various reasons. These earnings penalties make women much more vulnerable financially in the event of separation or divorce."

"This research provides a compelling and urgent argument for policies that focus on maintaining female employment and earnings following childbirth, such as the provision of job-protected family leave and support for childcare. While important, interventions that focus on moving mothers into work after they become single parents are likely to arrive too late. What we really need is to address the economic disadvantage women experience when they become mothers."

Professor Harkness said married women whose household income means

they are currently 'well-off' are not immune from the impact becoming a [single parent](#) could have on their economic well-being.

"I found that becoming a single mother is a great leveler. Previously married mothers, who had been financially better off, see the largest income decline upon becoming single parents. This is partly because [married women](#) become more economically dependent following childbirth than unmarried mothers. The results suggest marriage provides very little income protection against the economic risks brought about by future divorce," said Professor Harkness.

"Overall, the economic fortune of [single mothers](#) is closely tied to that of mothers as a whole—almost all women with children, should they divorce or separate, would find themselves in a similar position."

More information: Susan Harkness, The Accumulation of Economic Disadvantage: The Influence of Childbirth and Divorce on the Income and Poverty Risk of Single Mothers, *Demography* (2022). [DOI: 10.1215/00703370-10065784](#)

Provided by University of Bristol

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