American Children's Family Structure: Single-Parent Families

Recent trends in nonmarital childbearing and divorce over the past half century have resulted in an increase in children living with single parents (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004). Single-parent families were the second-most common living arrangement of minor children in 2016, with just over 20 million children living with a single mother or father (U.S. Census, 2016). Using recent data from the 2016 Current Population Survey (CPS), this third and final profile in a series on children’s family structure (see also, FP-17-15 on two-biological parent families and FP-17-16 on stepparent families) focuses on children living with single parents.

- About one-quarter (24%) of children were living with a single parent in 2016 (Figure 1).
- Of the 24% of children living in a single-parent family, only 3% were living with a single father.

Parental Educational Attainment

- A slight majority of all children living in a single parent family had parents who reported having some college education or more in 2016.
  - Fewer single mothers than fathers reported having at least a Bachelor’s degree (18% compared to 23%).
- The share of single mothers without a high school degree was slightly higher than single fathers.

Racial & Ethnic Composition

- In 2016, the racial and ethnic composition of children living in single-mother and single-father families differed.
  - Almost equal shares of children living with single mothers identified as White or Black (33% and 32%), while a majority of children living with single fathers identified as White (56%).
  - Over twice as many children living with single mothers identified as Black than children living with single fathers.
Measures of Poverty

- The majority of children in single-parent families were living above the official poverty line in 2016.
- Compared to children living with single fathers, the share living in poverty (based on the official indicator) in single-mother families was twice as high (19% and 39%, respectively).
- Using the supplemental poverty measure (U.S. Census Bureau)-which accounts for noncash benefits and is represented by the dotted line-the share of children in single-mother families living in poverty in 2016 fell to 31%, while the share of children in single-father families living in poverty increased slightly to 22%.

Health Insurance Coverage

- In 2016, the vast majority of children living with single parents were covered by health insurance. The levels were only slightly lower among single mothers than fathers.
- Just over one-third (35%) of children living with single mothers were covered by private health insurance, compared to about half (54%) of children living with single fathers. About three in five (59%) children living with single mothers were covered by public insurance.

*For more information on the history of the poverty measure, please visit the United States Census Bureau's website link.

Data Sources:

References:
U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). Living arrangements of children under 18 years old: 1960 to present, Table CH-1.

Suggested Citation: