



Breadwinning Mothers, Then and Now

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June 2014

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

The movement of women out of the home and into the paid labor force has changed the way families live and work today. The role of working mothers as breadwinners has received increased media and scholarly attention since the Center for American Progress first released “The New Breadwinners,” a chapter in 2009’s *The Shriver Report: A Woman’s Nation Changes Everything*.¹ Through groundbreaking research, economist Heather Boushey empirically illustrated how women’s labor-force participation has grown dramatically over the past 50 years and that mothers are more likely to provide significant financial support to their families than ever before.

In this report, we update Boushey’s analysis using the most recent data available on the status of working mothers as breadwinners or co-breadwinners.² We offer new insights into the demographics of mothers whose earnings help keep their families afloat. We find that the trends first identified in “The New Breadwinners” remain in effect but that breadwinning mothers are not all cut from the same cloth. We compare mothers who are single breadwinners, married breadwinners, married co-breadwinners, and married with no earnings along a number of demographics in order to better understand the patterns and context within which mothers combine wage earning with caregiving. We find notable differences among the groups in terms of family income, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, age, and the age of the youngest child.

Despite these nuances and differences, one striking fact remains: The days of the full-time, stay-at-home mom are long in the past for most families, and there is no indication that patterns will revert back to those of the 1960s. The fact that so many women are economically responsible for themselves and their families shows how far women have come in terms of education, career advancement, and their own economic independence. But we still have a long way to go.

Programs that would provide universal access to workplace policies such as paid sick days and paid family and medical leave would help ensure that working mothers have the necessary tools to support their families economically while still being able to provide care. Passing legislation such as the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, or FAMILY Act—which would create a federal paid family and medical leave social insurance program—and the Healthy Families Act—which would guarantee workers the right to accrue paid sick days—would be an important way to begin updating our labor standards for the 21st century.

Understanding who breadwinning mothers are and what their families look like is an important first step to work toward a better future, one in which our policies align with the lives of working families.