



MOMS AND JOBS: Trends in Mothers' Employment and Which Mothers Stay Home

A Briefing Paper Prepared for the
Council on Contemporary Families

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The Findings in Brief

The employment of wives and mothers rose dramatically from 1960 to about 1990, and thereafter has leveled off. There was a small dip from 2000 to 2004, but employment rates had inched back to 2000 levels by 2006, the latest figures available. Contrary to recent press accounts, there has not been an "op-out" revolution. Rather than a strong downward trend, there has been a flattening out of the trend line, so that mothers' employment has stabilized, with a majority employed. This strong upward thrust followed by a flattening of the trend holds for most groups of women.

Well educated women are especially likely to be employed, despite the fact that they generally have well educated, and thus high earning, husbands. Surprisingly, the percentage of married moms staying home doesn't go up consistently as husbands' earnings go up. In fact, it is women with the poorest husbands (in the bottom quarter of male earnings) who are most likely to stay home, followed by women with the very richest husbands (those in the top 5 percent of male earners).

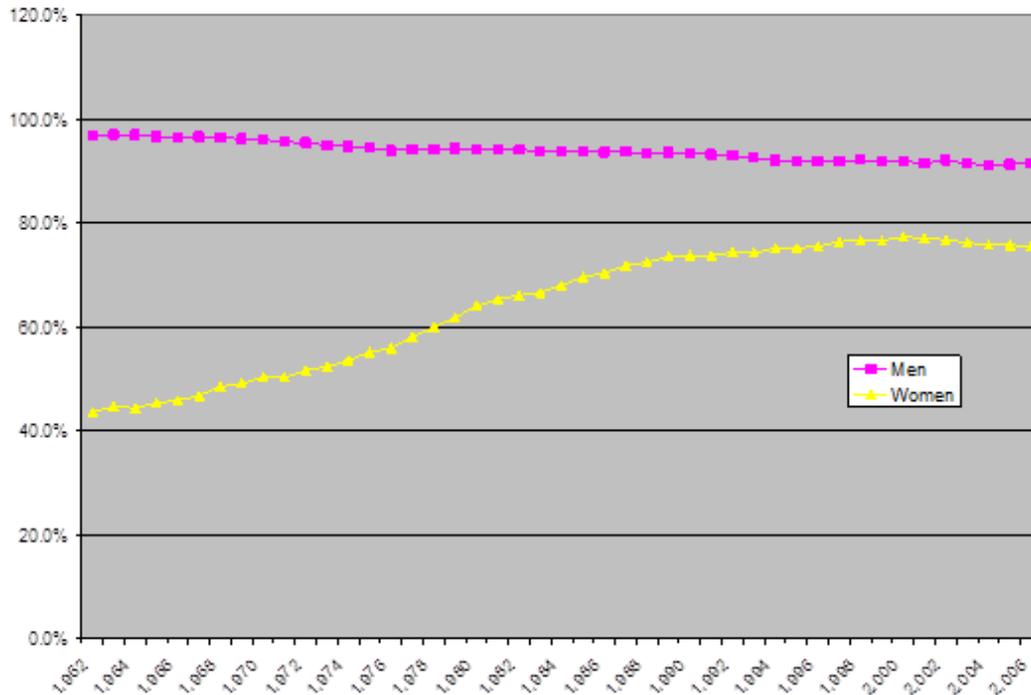
What's The Trend In Women's Employment?

Recent media reports have talked about an "opt-out revolution," reporting on a real but very small downturn in women's employment rates since 2000. These media reports have been misleading in two ways, as Figure 1 shows.

- They ignore the dramatic upsurge in mothers' employment in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.
- They focus on a small downturn since 2000, but a fairer characterization of the years since 1990 is a plateau.

Figure 1 shows trends in employment for all women and men aged 25-54. All figures in this fact sheet refer to whether women were in the labor force (which means employed or actively looking for work) any time in the last year, and refer exclusively to individuals between 25 and 54 in age. The data come from the U.S. government's Current Population Survey for each year.

Figure 1. Percent of Men and Women in the Labor Force in the last Year, 1962-2006
(for individuals 25-54 years of age)



What's The Trend For Women With Children?

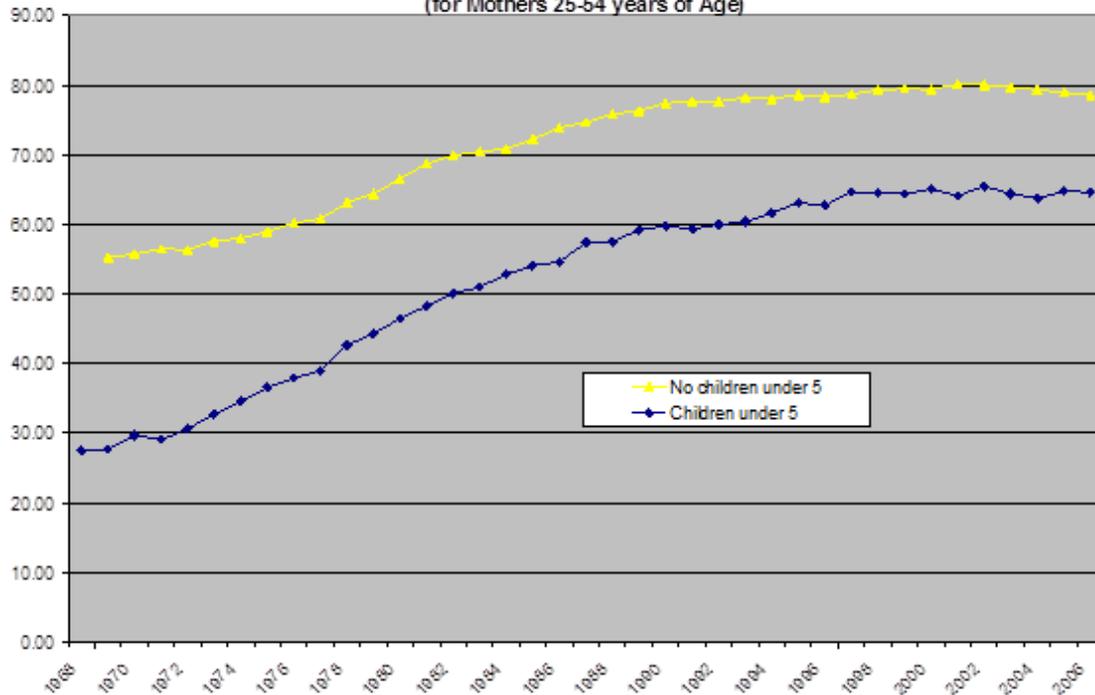
Moms with children under age 5 are most likely to stay home, but they are much less likely to do so than in the past. There was a tiny dip in their employment between 2000 and 2004, but it then inched back up to the 2000 level in 2006 (Figure 2).

In 1970, only 30% of mothers of children under 5 had been employed in the last year. But then huge increases ensued -- from 30% in 1970 to 46% in 1980, and to 60% in 1990. The next decade saw just a small increase -- from 60% to 65% between 1990 and 2000, a much slower rate of increase than previously. Moms' participation in paid labor then dropped a bit to 64% by 2004, but inched back to 65% by 2006. Up or down, the changes since 2000 are tiny. As with women overall, the big picture is dramatic increase followed by a leveling off in the rate of change -- a plateau.

Moms with no preschoolers are more likely to be working for pay than are those with preschoolers (Figure 2). But their workforce participation rates also leveled off in the past 6 years, after a substantial increase over the last several decades. The percent of these mothers employed was 56% in 1970, 67% in 1980, and 77% in 1990. After these big increases, the rate has hovered right around 79% or 80% from 2000 to 2006. Again, the picture is of dramatic increase in employment rates to 1990, followed by a leveling off.

This is hardly an "opt-out revolution." Sixty-five percent of mothers with preschoolers and 79% of mothers of older children were employed at least part of the time in 2006.

Figure 2. Percent of Mothers in the Labor Force in the Last Year, 1962-2006,
by Age of Their Children
(for Mothers 25-54 years of Age)



Why Did the Trend in Women's Employment Rates Go Up, Then Level Off?

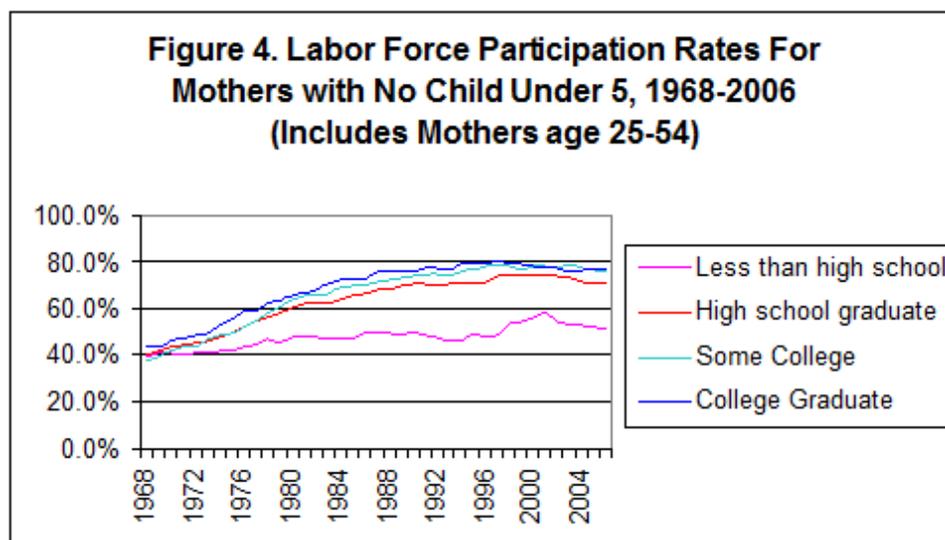
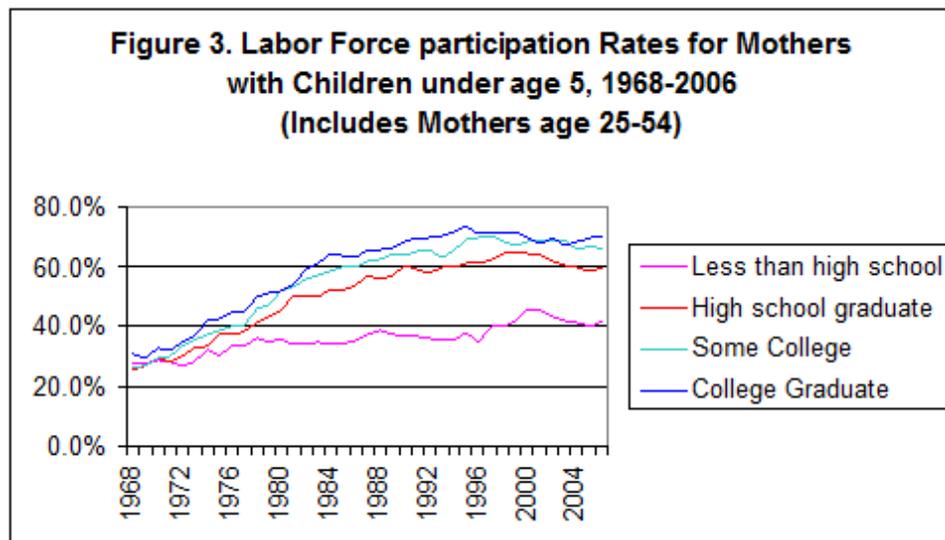
What caused the big increase in women's employment in the 60s, 70s, and 80s? Many factors contributed. Women began having smaller families. The increase in single mothers made more women absolutely need a job. The fall in men's real wages since 1980 increased the need for two earners even in married couple families. Probably even more important were increases in women's education, better job opportunities for women, and the "equal opportunity" ideology of the women's movement. All these things increased women's access to interesting and good paying jobs, raising the cost of having a woman quit work and give up that extra income. All this contributed to the dramatic upsurge of women's employment.

Why did the trend level off? Social scientists really aren't sure. One possibility is that women's employment, which has gotten much closer to men's, can't move all the way to parity with men's unless men take on a more equal share of child rearing, and unless employers or the state adopt policies making it easier for parents to combine work and family. Men have increased the time they spend caring for children and doing housework, but nowhere near enough to offset women's increased employment. And the U.S. lags way behind other countries in family leave, child care provision and other policies that make it easier for people to be parents and workers. Perhaps a cultural backlash to the women's movement is a factor as well.

What does the future hold? We do not know if the trend in moms' employment will turn up again, go down a bit more, or stay stable. It is too early to tell. But it seems extremely unlikely that it will go down significantly. What is clear is that, as in most affluent nations, women's employment in the U.S. is at high levels, with about 80% of all American mothers and 64% of even women with preschoolers in the workforce last year.

Education Encourages Women's Employment

Which moms are working for pay and which are working as full-time homemakers? Moms are much more likely to be working for pay if they have more education, as Figures 3 and 4 show, separately for those with pre-schoolers and for those with only older kids.



In 2006, among mothers with no pre-schoolers at home, Figure 4 shows that 77% of mothers with a college degree were employed, 71% of those who had just finished high school, but only 51% of those who hadn't finished high school. The figures are lower for moms with kids under 5, but they show an even stronger relationship between education

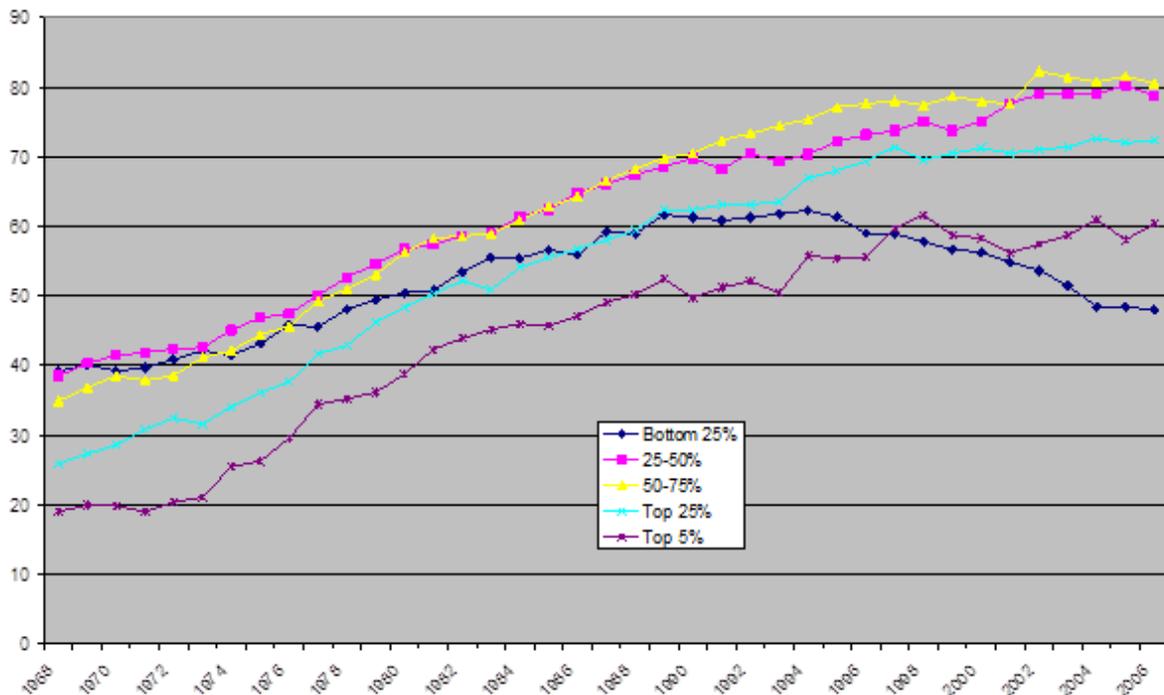
and employment. The employment gap between the most and least educated moms was smaller in the 1970s than it has been since 1980.

Why do more educated moms work for pay more? In one sense it isn't surprising that well educated moms are working; after all, many of them got that education to pursue the career they are in. Education improves access to well-paying and interesting jobs that make employment more worthwhile. Women with low education may not be able to make enough to pay for the child care required when they go to work. But what makes the higher employment of well educated women a challenge to conventional wisdom is that they tend to be married to well-educated and high-earning men.

Husbands' Earnings and Married Mothers' Employment

The conventional wisdom is that married women with kids stay home when the family can afford for them to, and work for pay mainly when the family needs the money. If this were the main factor, we'd expect that the higher their husbands' income, the lower women's employment. But Figure 5 shows that the conventional wisdom is wrong.

Figure 5. Married Mother's Labor Force Participation by Husband's Earnings, 1968-2006
(Includes Married Mothers age 25-54)



As Figure 5 shows, over the last 15 years, the largest group of stay-at-home mothers is found among wives whose husbands are in the lowest 25 percent of the male earnings distribution. (Cutting points for each quartile and the top 5% were established separately for each year, using the earnings distribution of married men with children for that year.) The next largest group of stay-at-home mothers is found among women married to men

who are in the highest 5 percent of the income distribution. Oddly enough, then, the two groups of married moms with the lowest employment rates are those with both the poorest and the richest husbands!

If we look at what Figure 5 shows for the most recent year, 2006, less than half (48%) of mothers with husbands in the bottom quarter of the male earnings distribution were employed. Among married moms whose husbands were in the very highest 5% of earnings, 60% were employed. These two groups probably have different reasons for their relatively low employment rates. Moms with the highest earning husbands have little economic need to be employed. Moms with the poorest husbands have great economic need for a job, but they often have low education and earning potential themselves, so they may not be able to earn enough above child care costs to make a job pay.

The highest employment rates were among mothers whose husbands had earnings toward the middle of the pack -- between the 25th percentile and the 75th percentile. Approximately 80 percent of mothers married to husbands in these groups were employed in 2006.

So contrary to the idea that men's earnings predict whether their wives will stay home, the poorest men are most likely to have stay-at-home wives, the very richest men are the next most likely, and the men earning middle-range earnings are the least likely. These findings complicate our analysis of why families make the decisions they do and what social support systems they need.

Appendix

Below are additional figures (Figures 6-11) showing more detail on which groups of women are in the workforce, and trends in these patterns.

Figure 6. Ratio of Women's to Men's Labor Force Participation in the last year, 1962-2006
(Includes Individuals 25-54 years of age)

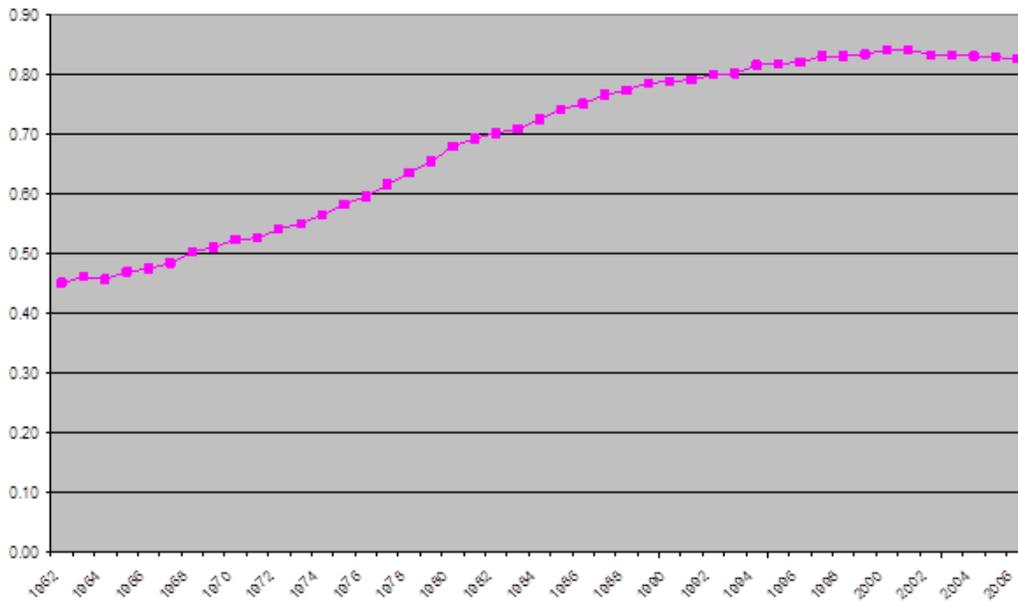


Figure 7. Percent of Mothers in the Labor Force, by Marital Status, 1962-2006
(Includes Mothers 25-54 years of age)

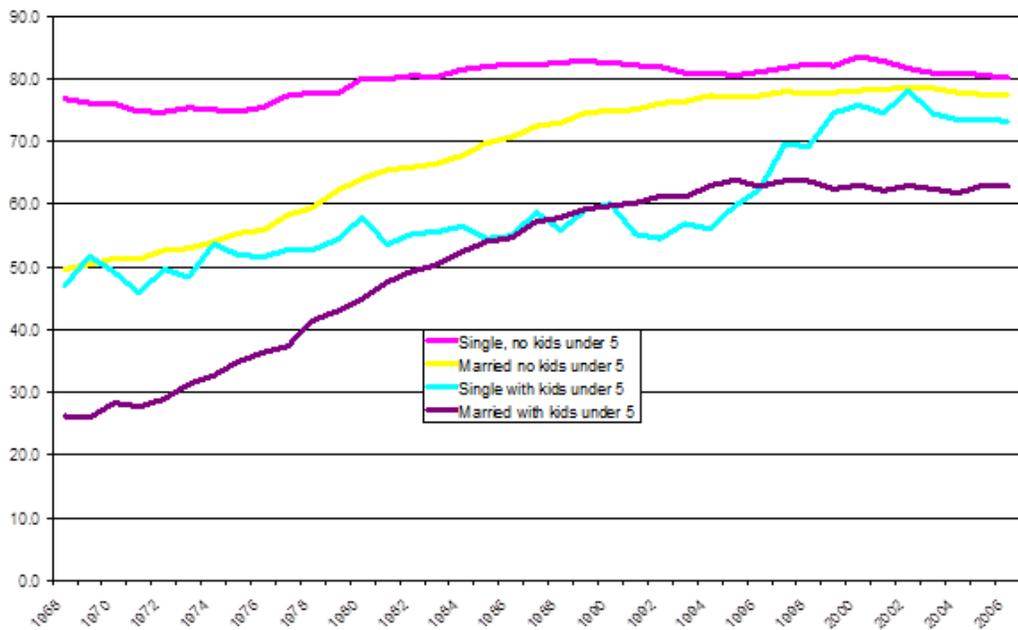


Figure 9. Percent of Women in the Labor Force by Age of Youngest Child, 1968-2006
(Includes Women 25-54 of age)

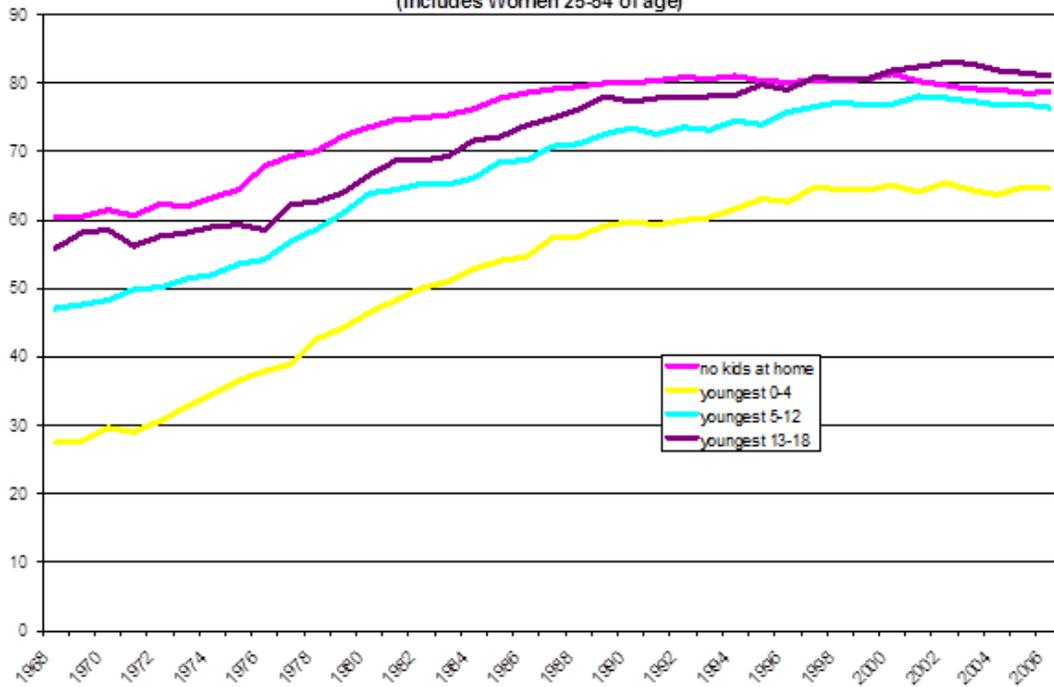


Figure 10. Percent of Women in the Labor Force, by Race/Ethnic Group
(Includes Women 25-54 years of age)

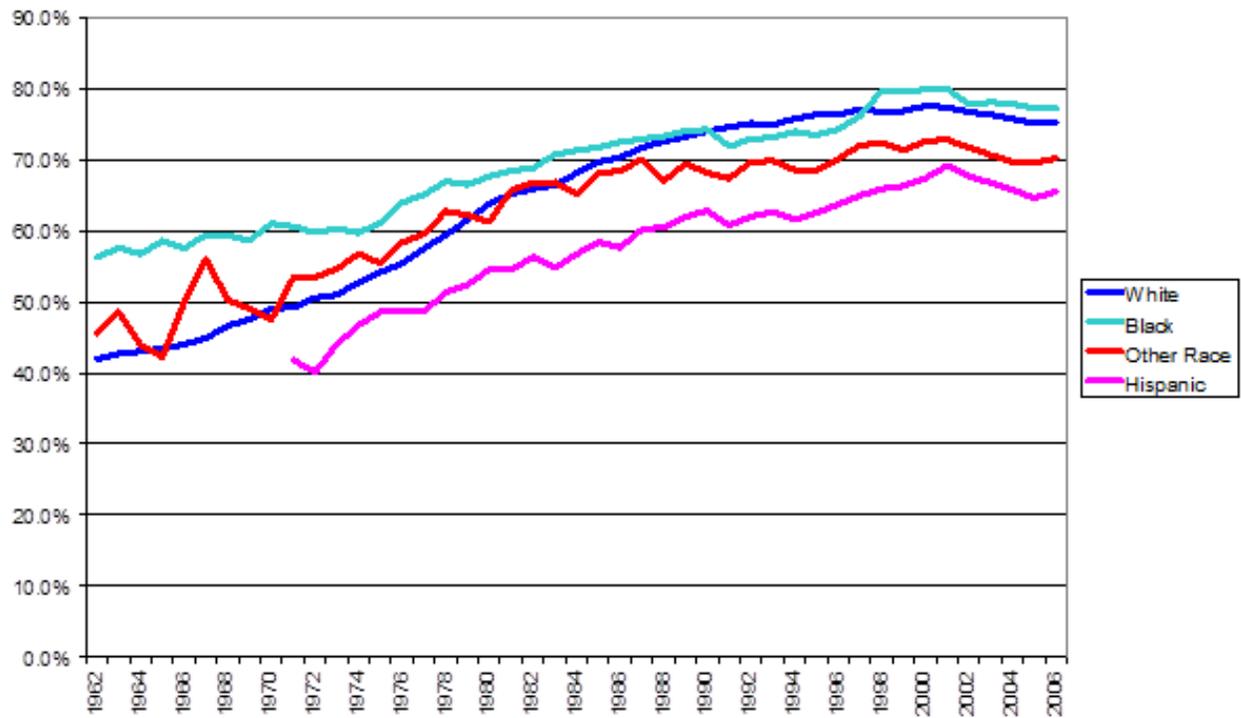
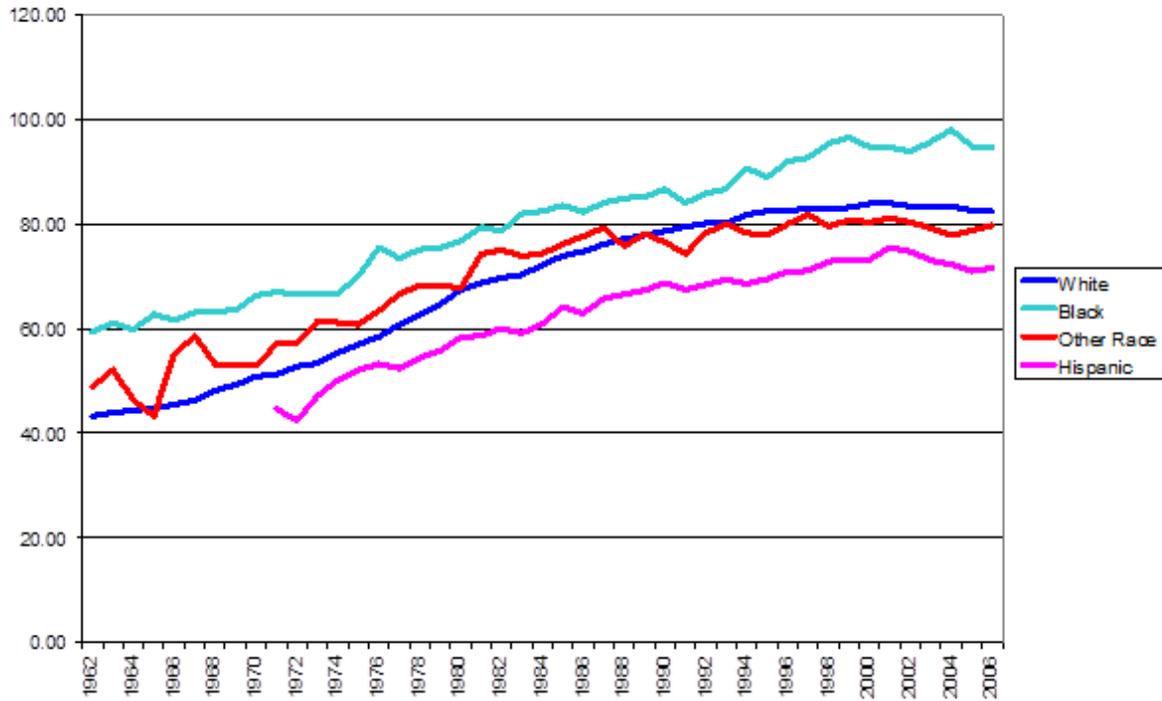


Figure 11. Ratio of % of Women to % of Men in the Labor Force by Race/Ethnic Group, 1962-2006 (Includes Individuals 25-54 years of age)



For Further Information

See Joan Williams "'Opt Out' or Pushed Out?: How the Press Covers Work/Family Conflict." Center on Work Life Law, University of California Hastings School of the Law, available at http://www.uchastings.edu/site_files/WLL/OptOutPushedOut.pdf.

See Chinhui Juhn and Kevin M. Murphy. 1997. "Wage Inequality and Family Labor Supply." *Journal of Labor Economics* 15:72-79; Barbara Bergmann, 2005. *The Economic Emergence of Women*. Second Edition. New York: Basic Books.

See Suzanne Bianchi, John P. Robinson, and Melissa A. Milkie. 2006. *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

See Joan Williams "'Opt Out' or Pushed Out?: How the Press Covers Work/Family Conflict." Center on Work Life Law, University of California Hastings School of the Law, available at http://www.uchastings.edu/site_files/WLL/OptOutPushedOut.pdf and Janet Gornick and Marcia K. Meyers. 2005. *Families That Work: Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment*. New York, Russell Sage Foundation.

For trends in attitudes to gender issues, see David A. Cotter, Joan M. Hermsen, and Reeve Vanneman. 2004. *Gender Inequality at Work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation and Population Reference Bureau.

See Mare, Robert D. 1991. "Five Decades of Educational Assortative Mating." *American Sociological Review* 56:15-32.

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