

# Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns of First-Time Mothers: 1961–2008

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## INTRODUCTION

The labor force participation of mothers has increased dramatically over the last 3 decades, and women have become more likely to work continuously over their life cycle. Almost two-thirds of American women (62 percent) with a birth in the last year were in the labor force in 2008.<sup>1</sup> A child's birth may also require changes in a mother's work schedule to accommodate the demands of raising young children. This report examines trends in maternity leave and the employment patterns of women who gave birth to their first child between January 1961 and December 2008.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis primarily uses retrospective fertility, employment, and maternity leave data from the 2008 Panel of the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), conducted in 2008.<sup>3</sup> Previously published results based

<sup>1</sup> Jane Lawler Dye, *Fertility of American Women: June 2008*, Current Population Reports, P20-563, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2010, Table 3.

<sup>2</sup> The estimates in this report (which may be shown in text, figures, and tables) are based on responses from a sample of the population and may differ from the actual values because of sampling variability or other factors. As a result, apparent differences between the estimates for two or more groups may not be statistically significant. All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> The data in this report were collected from January through April 2009 in the second wave (interview) of the 2008 SIPP; from June through September 2004 in the second wave of the 2004 SIPP; from June through September 2001 in the second wave of the 2001 SIPP; from August through November 1996 in the second wave of the 1996 SIPP; from January through April 1986 in the fourth wave of the 1985 SIPP; and from January through March 1986 in the eighth wave of the 1984 SIPP. The population represented (population universe) is the civilian noninstitutionalized population living in the United States.

on similarly collected information from the 1984, 1985, 1996, 2001, and 2004 SIPP Panels are also included.<sup>4</sup>

The report first analyzes trends in women's work experience prior to their first birth and the factors associated with employment during pregnancy. Changes are placed in the historical context of the enactment of family-related legislation during the last quarter of the twentieth century. The next section identifies the maternity leave arrangements used by women before and after their first birth and the shifts that have occurred in the mix of leave arrangements that are used. The final section examines how rapidly mothers return to work after their first birth and the factors related to the length of time they are absent from the labor force.

In addition to updating childbearing, employment, and maternity leave trends through the 1990s, the report provides details on changes many new mothers experience in the number of hours worked, pay level, and job-skill level after the first birth. These changes are examined in relation to whether a woman returned to the same employer she had during pregnancy or changed employers

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the previously published reports, see Martin O'Connell, "Maternity Leave Arrangements: 1961–85," *Work and Family Patterns of American Women*, Current Population Reports, P23-165, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 1990; Kristin Smith, Barbara Downs, and Martin O'Connell, *Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 1961–1995*, Current Population Reports, P70-79, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2001; Julia Overturf Johnson and Barbara Downs, *Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 1961–2000*, Current Population Reports, P70-103, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2005; Tallese D. Johnson, *Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns of First-Time Mothers: 1961–2003*, P70-113, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2008.

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By  
Lynda Laughlin

after the birth of the child. This report also examines how various social and economic factors are related to the timing of new mothers returning to work.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF MOTHERS AT FIRST BIRTH

Social and economic changes that have occurred among women since 1961 have been noted to be associated with changes in families, child bearing, and work. At the same time, the demographic picture of new mothers has also changed.<sup>5</sup> This section analyzes some of these events and shows how the characteristics of first-time mothers have changed over time.

### Age and Educational Attainment of First-Time Mothers

Young women who give birth in their late teens and early twenties are beginning to start families at ages when other women are completing high school and entering college. Women who have delayed childbearing until their late twenties and thirties are more likely to have completed their schooling and to have accumulated more years of work experience than their younger counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Education and experience can influence income levels and job security, which may in turn influence their decisions about working during pregnancy and how soon to return to work after their first birth.

Age at first birth and the educational attainment of new mothers have changed over time. Data from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) show that the mean (average) age at first birth increased 3.6 years from 1970 to

<sup>5</sup> Lynne M. Casper and Suzanne M. Bianchi, *Continuity and Change in the American Family*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Barrow, "An Analysis of Women's Return-to-Work Decisions Following First Birth," *Economic Inquiry*, July 1999, pp. 432–451.

## SIPP FERTILITY, EMPLOYMENT, AND MATERNITY LEAVE DATA

The 2008 panel of the nationally representative SIPP included a fertility topical module in the second wave of interviews conducted in January–April 2009. Information was collected on the birth dates of the first and last children born to all women aged 15 to 64 at the time of the survey. Women whose first child was born between 1991 and the survey date were also asked a series of questions concerning their employment history before and after the birth, as well as their receipt of maternity leave benefits. Data from this survey were used in combination with similar information collected in the 1984, 1985, 1996, and 2001 SIPP panels to provide an extended series of employment and maternity leave data between 1961 and 2008.

The most recent data shown in this report, generally for the time period 2006–2008, are from Wave 2 of the 2008 SIPP. In previous reports, data for prior decades were often generated retrospectively from the most recent survey. For this report, data presented from 1961–2000 were obtained from earlier maternity leave reports produced by the U.S. Census Bureau or were retabulated and the most recent time period was generated by the survey year closest to that period. Data from 1961–1965 to 1981–1985 are from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, Series P23-165 (Work and Family Patterns of American Women); data from 1986–1990 to 1991–1995 are from P70-79 (Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 1961–1995); and data from 1996–2000 are from P70-103 (Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 1961–2000). For this reason, some of the data for prior survey years shown in this report may not be identical to those published in previous reports for similar time periods.

2007, from 21.4 to 25.0 years.<sup>7</sup> The percentage of first births that were to women aged 35 and over increased nearly eight times between 1970 and 2006, from 1 percent to 8 percent. At the same time, the percentage of first births that were to women under 20 years of age dropped from 36 percent to 21 percent. Although not available by birth order, educational attainment among all mothers has also increased since 1970. In 2007, 24 percent of mothers had completed a bachelor's degree or more, compared with 9 percent in 1970.

<sup>7</sup> T.J. Matthews and B.E. Hamilton, "Delayed Childbearing: More Women Are Having Their First Child Later in Life," *NCHS Data Brief*, Vol. 21, NCHS, Hyattsville, MD, 2009. J.A. Martin and B.E. Hamilton, et al., "Births: Final Data for 2007," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 58, No. 24, NCHS, Hyattsville, MD, 2010, Tables 2 and 10.

Among mothers aged 30 to 34, the proportion completing 16 or more years of education increased from 15 percent to 43 percent.<sup>8</sup>

During this time, an increasing proportion of women 25 to 34 years old continued their education beyond high school. The proportion who had completed 4 or more years of college approximately doubled from 12 percent in 1970 to 23 percent by 1990. By 2007, the proportion with a bachelor's degree or more education had reached 34

<sup>8</sup> Data for 1970 are from the NCHS, *Vital Statistics of the United States*, Vol. 1, "Natality," U.S. Government Printing Office, Rockville, MD, 1975. Data for 2007 are from J.A. Martin and B.E. Hamilton, et al., "Births: Final Data for 2007," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 58, No. 24, NCHS, Hyattsville, MD, 2010, Table 1.

percent.<sup>9</sup> The age and educational attainment of first-time mothers as related to their work history around the time of their child's birth are examined in ensuing sections of this report.

### Factors Related to Employment and Maternity Leave

During the past 40 years, the way families approach work and child rearing has dramatically changed. In the 1970s, the common expectation that women would leave work upon becoming pregnant began to change.<sup>10</sup> Another change during the 1970s was an increase in the proportion of families with a second income. More mothers, to maintain economic well-being and for other reasons, began to enter and stay in the workforce, resulting in an increase in homes where both spouses worked.<sup>11</sup>

Legislative, judicial, and regulatory changes related to maternal employment were enacted in the 1970s and 1980s that affected employer practices during an employee's pregnancy and after giving birth, and revised policies on child care support. For example, in 1976 the federal tax code was changed to permit working families with a dependent child to take a tax credit for child care costs. The affordability of child care services may be an issue for many women in deciding whether and when

to return to work.<sup>12</sup> In 1978, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act was passed, which prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of pregnancy or childbirth. This act covered hiring and firing policies as well as promotions and pay levels.

Flexible work schedules, employment-based child care benefits, and maternity leave emerged as issues during the 1980s at about the same time that birth rates among women 30 and older began to increase steadily in the United States.<sup>13</sup> A U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1987, *California Federal Savings and Loan Association v. Guerra*, upheld a California law requiring most employers to grant pregnant women 4 months of unpaid disability leave and the right to return to their same job. At the federal level, The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) mandates up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for childbearing or family care over a 12-month period for eligible employees. Studies have found little evidence so far that such laws have increased the amount of leave women take by any considerable amount.<sup>14</sup>

### EMPLOYMENT HISTORY BEFORE THE FIRST BIRTH

The last 3 decades have seen major changes in the work patterns of expecting mothers. This section describes overall trends in women's

employment history from 1961–1965 to 2006–2008 and the characteristics of women who worked during their first pregnancy.

### Overall Trends: 1961–1965 to 2006–2008

In the Fertility History portion of the SIPP, all mothers are asked if they ever worked for pay for at least 6 consecutive months before their first birth and if they worked for pay at a job at any time during the pregnancy leading to their first birth.<sup>15</sup> The categories do not necessarily overlap, as new mothers may have worked for a few months during their pregnancy while never having worked for 6 months in a row.<sup>16</sup> Other mothers may have worked for 6 consecutive months but quit working before they got pregnant. The results presented in this report generally refer to the time period or years when the woman had her first birth.

Table 1 shows that for mothers who had their first child between 2006 and 2008, 72 percent had worked for at least a 6-month period in their lives. This percentage had increased since the early 1960s, when it was 60 percent of new mothers. Most of the increase since 1961–1965 occurred by 1986–1990, when the percentage reached 76 percent. Since then, the percentage of mothers who worked 6 or more months has decreased from a high of 76 percent in 1986–1990 to a low of 72 percent in 2006–2008. Age is related to whether women have worked before having their first child. For women 30 years and older, 8 out of 10 women who had a first birth in 2006–2008 had worked for at least

<sup>9</sup> *Educational Attainment Historical Tables: Table 1*, Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2007. <[www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2007/tables.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2007/tables.html)>. Prior to 1992, educational attainment was measured by years of schooling completed. Four or more years of college is equivalent to a bachelor's degree or more education.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Levy, *The New Dollars and Dreams, American Incomes and Economic Change*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Daphne Spain and Suzanne Bianchi, *Balancing Act: Motherhood, Marriage, and Employment Among American Women*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Harriet B. Presser, "Can We Make Time for Children? The Economy, Work Schedules, and Child Care," *Demography*, Vol. 26, 1989, pp. 523–543. See Historical Fertility Tables, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2005, Table H3. <[www.census.gov/population/socdemo/fertility/tabH3.xls](http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/fertility/tabH3.xls)>.

<sup>14</sup> Wen-Jui Hen and Jane Waldfogel, "Parental Leave: The Impact of Recent Legislation on Parent's Leave Taking," *Demography*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2003, pp. 191–200. Jacob Klerman and Arleen Leibowitz, "Job Continuity Among New Mothers," *Demography*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1999, pp. 145–155.

<sup>15</sup> For the remainder of this report, the term "pregnancy" is used to refer to the pregnancy preceding the first birth.

<sup>16</sup> Working for 6 consecutive months is a standard labor force indicator that measures the likelihood of a serious commitment to the labor force.

Table 1.

**Employment History of Women Before First Birth: 1961–1965 to 2004–2008**(For information on sampling and nonsampling error, see [www.census.gov/sipp/sourceac/S&A08\\_W1toW3%28S&A-12%29.pdf](http://www.census.gov/sipp/sourceac/S&A08_W1toW3%28S&A-12%29.pdf))

Year of first birth	Number of women with a first birth (thousands)	Women with a first birth who—							
		Ever worked for 6 or more months continuously <sup>1</sup>		Worked during pregnancy		Worked full-time during pregnancy <sup>2</sup>		Worked part-time during pregnancy <sup>2</sup>	
		Percent	Margin of error <sup>3</sup>	Percent	Margin of error <sup>3</sup>	Percent	Margin of error <sup>3</sup>	Percent	Margin of error <sup>3</sup>
1961–1965 . . . . .	6,306	60.0	2.0	44.4	2.0	39.7	2.0	4.7	0.9
1966–1970 . . . . .	6,956	66.4	1.8	49.4	1.9	44.2	1.9	5.2	0.9
1971–1975 . . . . .	6,920	68.9	1.8	53.5	1.9	47.6	2.0	5.9	0.9
1976–1980 . . . . .	7,192	73.1	1.7	61.4	1.9	53.1	1.9	8.3	1.1
1981–1985 . . . . .	8,129	75.2	1.4	64.5	1.5	54.0	1.5	10.5	0.8
1986–1990 . . . . .	8,568	75.5	1.3	67.2	1.4	58.3	1.5	8.9	0.9
1991–1995 . . . . .	8,599	73.8	1.6	66.8	1.8	54.5	1.8	12.2	1.0
1996–2000 . . . . .	8,558	74.0	1.6	67.2	1.7	56.6	1.8	10.6	1.1
2001–2005 . . . . .	8,215	75.0	1.4	69.2	1.5	58.7	1.6	10.6	1.0
2006–2008 . . . . .	5,127	72.3	2.5	65.6	2.7	56.1	2.8	9.5	1.6

<sup>1</sup> At any time before first birth.<sup>2</sup> Full-time/part-time status refers to last job held before first child's birth.<sup>3</sup> The margin of error, when added to or subtracted from the estimate, provides the 90 percent confidence interval around the estimate.

Source: 1961–1965 to 1981–1985: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, Series P23-165 (*Work and Family Patterns of American Women*), Tables C and B-2; 1986–1990 to 1991–1995: P70-79 (*Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 1961–1995*), Table A; 1996–2001: P70-103 (*Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 1961–2000*), Table 1; P70-113 (*Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 2000–2003*), Table 1; and 2006–2008: Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2008 Panel, Wave 2.

6 consecutive months, compared with 43 percent of women under 22 years of age.<sup>17</sup>

The percentage of new mothers who worked at all during their pregnancy in 2006–2008 increased by 22 percentage points since 1961–1965. Forty-four percent of women who had their first birth between 1961 and 1965 worked while pregnant. For women who had their first birth in 2006–2008, 66 percent worked while pregnant, not different from the proportions working while pregnant since 1986–1990.<sup>18</sup>

Fifty-six percent of first-time mothers in 2006–2008 worked at full-time jobs during their pregnancy (35 hours or more per week, Table 1). The proportion of first-time mothers working full-time during pregnancy was 40 percent in 1961–1965, increased to over

<sup>17</sup> Separate analysis, not shown in tables.

<sup>18</sup> Overall labor force participation rates for women, regardless of pregnancy status, were as follows: 32 percent in 1960, 43 percent in 1970, 52 percent in 1980, 58 percent in 1990, and 57 percent in 2008. See the Bureau of Labor Statistics Web site at [www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook2009.htm](http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook2009.htm).

50 percent by the late 1970s, and stayed above 50 percent through 2008. The proportion of first-time mothers working part-time during pregnancy in 1961–1965 was 5 percent. The percentage increased to 11 percent in 1981–1985 and has remained between 9 percent and 12 percent since then. Subsequent sections of this report will show the extent to which weekly hours worked while pregnant and the amount of leave taken from the workforce around the time of a first birth are related to the type of maternity benefits received.

### Women Who Worked During Pregnancy

Table 2 summarizes trends in women's work experience during pregnancy in 2006–2008. Overall, 66 percent of mothers who had their first birth in 2006–2008 worked during pregnancy. First-time mothers under age 22 had lower rates of employment during pregnancy than older first-time mothers (ages 22 and older). Among women at the ends of the age spectrum, 15 percent of new mothers under age 18 worked while

pregnant, compared with 80 percent of mothers 30 and older.

Among the racial groups shown, non-Hispanic White women had the highest percentage (75 percent) that worked during their first pregnancy.<sup>19</sup> Sixty-one percent of Asian women worked during

<sup>19</sup> Federal surveys now give respondents the option of reporting more than one race. Therefore, two basic ways of defining a race group are possible. A group such as Asian may be defined as those who reported Asian and no other race (the race-alone or single-race concept) or as those who reported Asian regardless of whether they also reported another race (the race-alone-or-in-combination concept). The body of this report (text, figures, and tables) shows data for women who reported they were the single race White and not Hispanic, women who reported the single race Black, and women who reported the single race Asian. Use of the single-race populations does not imply that it is the preferred method of presenting or analyzing data. The U.S. Census Bureau uses a variety of approaches.

For further information, see the Census 2000 Brief, *Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2000* (C2KBR/01-1) <[www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/briefs.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/briefs.html)>. Hispanics may be any race. Data for the American Indian and Alaska Native population are not shown in this report because of their small sample size in the SIPP. Based on the population of women who had a first birth between 2001–2003 surveyed in the 2004 SIPP, 3.2 percent of the single-race Black population and .54 percent of the single-race Asian population were also Hispanic.

Table 2.

## Work History of Women During Pregnancy Preceding First Birth by Selected Characteristics: 2006–2008

(For information on sampling and nonsampling error, see [www.census.gov/sipp/sourceac/S&A08\\_W1toW3%28S&A-12%29.pdf](http://www.census.gov/sipp/sourceac/S&A08_W1toW3%28S&A-12%29.pdf))

Characteristic	Number of women with a first birth (thousands)	Percentage who worked during pregnancy	Among women who worked while pregnant, percentage who were working—	
			Less than 3 months before child's birth	Less than 1 month before child's birth <sup>1</sup>
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>5,127</b>	<b>65.6</b>	<b>88.1</b>	<b>64.6</b>
<b>Age at First Birth</b>				
Under 18 years .....	314	14.9	63.3	31.9
18 and 19 years .....	619	41.9	85.9	54.1
20 and 21 years .....	702	56.0	84.1	60.8
22 to 24 years .....	959	69.8	84.9	57.0
25 to 29 years .....	1,255	77.7	89.3	69.7
30 years and over .....	1,277	79.8	92.3	70.3
<b>Race and Hispanic Origin</b>				
White alone .....	3,971	68.3	89.2	66.6
Non-Hispanic .....	3,162	74.8	89.6	68.9
Black .....	696	52.0	85.1	53.9
Asian .....	292	61.1	86.2	59.1
Hispanic (any race) .....	914	42.0	85.5	50.4
<b>Timing of First Birth<sup>2</sup></b>				
Before first marriage .....	2,162	51.8	82.7	58.6
Within first marriage .....	2,721	75.3	91.0	67.5
After first marriage .....	244	79.8	89.4	68.1
<b>Educational Attainment</b>				
Less than high school .....	650	28.3	80.4	43.2
High school graduate .....	1,204	50.0	82.2	56.0
Some college .....	1,621	70.7	86.7	63.4
Bachelor's degree or higher .....	1,653	86.6	92.7	71.8

<sup>1</sup> Includes women who responded that they never stopped working during their pregnancy.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to marital status at time of first birth. Before first marriage includes never-married women. After first marriage includes first births outside marriage or within second or subsequent marriages.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2008 Panel, Wave 2.

pregnancy, followed by 52 percent of Black women, and 42 percent of Hispanic women.<sup>20</sup>

Women who had their first child before their first marriage rather than within or after their first marriage were less likely to have worked during pregnancy (52 percent, 75 percent, and 80 percent, respectively). This difference by marital status in terms of employment during pregnancy has been consistently noted since 1966–

1970.<sup>21</sup> Women who have their first child prior to marriage are generally younger, more likely to be a minority race or Hispanic, and to have lower levels of education. All of these factors are related to lower levels of employment during pregnancy.<sup>22</sup> Women who have their first birth during or after their first marriage are more likely to be older

and already in the labor force at the time they become pregnant.<sup>23</sup>

A mother's educational level is also associated with the probability that she worked during her first pregnancy. Table 2 shows that for new mothers in 2006–2008, those with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to have worked during pregnancy (87 percent) than women with less education (28 percent to 71 percent of women in other educational categories).

Figure 1 shows the percentage of women who worked during pregnancy preceding first birth by age at first birth and educational

<sup>20</sup> The proportion of women who worked during pregnancy is not statistically different between Asian women, Black women, and Hispanic women.

<sup>21</sup> Kristin Smith, Barbara Downs, and Martin O'Connell, *Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 1961–1995*, Current Population Reports, P70-79, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2001. O'Connell, op. cit., 1990, pp. 14–15.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, Downs, and O'Connell, op. cit., 2001, Tables C and E. These differences by marital status were also found to persist in being related to employment levels in a multivariate analysis controlling for many socioeconomic factors.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, Downs, and O'Connell, op. cit., pp. 6–7.





































