



Trends in Parents' Economic Hardship

by Sandi Nelson

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About half of low-income parents reported some food hardship in 2002. Although the strong economy helped ease food hardship among low-income parents between 1997 and 1999, that gain was erased over the succeeding three years. Housing hardship among all parents did not diminish between 1997 and 2002, even though overall family income improved somewhat. Moreover, low-income single parents reported significant increases in housing hardship, particularly between 1999 and 2002. These findings reflect the difficulties parents have in stretching their incomes to cover the food and housing needs of their families, especially when the economy is weak and housing costs are rising.

The 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) asked adults under age 65 if they or anyone else in their families had worried that food would run out before they got money to buy more, had actually run out of food, or had eaten less or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money to pay for food. Families that experienced one or more of these situations in the previous 12 months were considered to have food hardship. In addition, the survey asked whether adults had been unable to pay their mortgage, rent, or utility bills at any time during the previous 12 months. This Snapshot reports on the trends in these two hardship indicators and in the poverty and low-income rates among single and married parents in the three rounds of the NSAF.¹

Income Status

The share of parents living in poor and low-income families dropped significantly between 1997 and 2002 (table 1). In 1997, 13.9 percent of parents were living in families with incomes below the federal poverty thresholds, but by 2002 that share had fallen to 10.5 percent. Similarly, 34.4 percent of parents were living in low-income families in 1997, but by 2002 only 29.3 percent were.

Both single and married parents experienced declines in poverty and low-income status between 1997 and 2002. Still, the majority of single parents were in low-income families in 2002, compared with less than one-quarter of married parents.

Food Hardship

Food hardship declined among single and married parents alike between 1997 and 2002 (table 2). This finding generally tracks the trends reported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for adults and households with children (Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2003).² Most of the decline in food hardship found by the NSAF occurred between 1997 and 1999; the measure did not change significantly for either group of parents between 1999 and 2002.

For low-income parents, the pattern was different. Overall, the share reporting one or more food-related problems declined between 1997 and 1999 but rose again after 1999. Hardship is generally more pervasive among single parents than married parents, however, reflecting the difference in number of adults contributing to family income.³ Nearly 60 percent of single low-income parents reported some food hardship in 2002, while less than half of married low-income parents did. Although both groups reported declines in food hardship from 1997 to 1999, single low-income parents saw no significant change between 1999 and 2002, whereas married parents saw food hardship rise again to the 1997 level.

Housing Hardship

Housing hardship was unchanged between 1997 and 2002, regardless of income (table 2). In all three years, about 15 percent of all parents and 28 percent of low-income parents reported having experienced housing hardship in the previous 12 months.

Marital status made a difference in low-income families' experience of housing hardship. More than one-third of single low-income parents reported housing hardship in 2002, compared with less than one-quarter of their married counterparts. Moreover, hardship rose among single low-income parents, from 32.0 percent in 1997 to 35.4 percent in 2002, while it fell among married low-income parents, from 25.8 percent in 1997 to 23.1 percent in 2002. Most of the increase in housing hardship among single parents occurred between 1999 and 2002.

DATA AT A GLANCE

IN 2002, FOOD HARDSHIP AFFECTED 51 PERCENT OF LOW-INCOME PARENTS.

HOUSING HARDSHIP AMONG SINGLE, LOW-INCOME PARENTS INCREASED FROM 32 PERCENT IN 1997 TO 35 PERCENT IN 2002.



Table 1. Income of Parents, 1997–2002 (percent)

	All Parents	Single Parents ^a	Married Parents
Poor^b			
1997	13.9	38.7	8.6
1999	11.2*	33.9*	6.6*
2002	10.5*†	28.8*†	6.6*
Low-income^b			
1997	34.4	64.9	27.6
1999	31.5*	62.2*	24.8*
2002	29.3*†	57.3*†	22.8*†

Sources: 1997, 1999, and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Notes: Estimates for 1997 and 1999 use weights based on the 2000 Census and may differ from previously published estimates using weights based on the 1990 Census. All differences between single and married parents are statistically significant at the .01 level.

^a "Single parents" does not include cohabiting adults.

^b Data on poor parents (with incomes below the federal poverty thresholds) and low-income parents (with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds) are for 1996, 1998, and 2001.

* Difference from the 1997 percentage is significant at the .10 level.

† Difference from the 1999 percentage is significant at the .10 level.

Table 2. Food and Housing Hardship of Parents, 1997–2002 (percent)

	All Parents	Single Parents ^a	Married Parents
Food Hardship			
<i>All incomes</i>			
1997	27.5	50.3	22.2
1999	24.9*	46.8*	19.6*
2002	25.7*	45.7*	20.6*
<i>Low-income^b</i>			
1997	51.4	62.4	45.8
1999	47.4*	58.3*	41.4*
2002	51.3†	59.4	46.4†
Housing Hardship			
<i>All incomes</i>			
1997	15.6	26.8	12.9
1999	14.9	26.5	12.1
2002	15.3	28.4†	11.9*
<i>Low-income^b</i>			
1997	28.3	32.0	25.8
1999	28.3	32.8	25.2
2002	28.2	35.4*†	23.1*

Sources: 1997, 1999, and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Notes: Estimates for 1997 and 1999 use weights based on the 2000 Census and may differ from previously published estimates using weights based on the 1990 Census. All differences between single and married parents are statistically significant at the .01 level.

^a "Single parents" does not include cohabiting adults.

^b Data on low-income parents (with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds) are for 1996, 1998, and 2001.

* Difference from the 1997 percentage is significant at the .10 level.

† Difference from the 1999 percentage is significant at the .10 level.

Conclusion

Food and housing hardship are important indicators of well-being. Patterns in these indicators drawn from the three rounds of the NSAF indicate that food hardship among low-income parents is likely to increase during weaker economic times. Housing hardship rates appear less sensitive than food hardship rates to economic fluctuations overall, but housing hardship increased for single parents during the recent downturn. Low-income single parents are especially vulnerable to food and housing hardship because their wages must cover all of their families' costs—a difficult feat with one paycheck.

Reference

Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson. 2003. "Household Food Security in the United States, 2002." Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 35. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Food and Rural Economics Division.

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Endnotes

¹ Poverty and low-income rates are calculated by comparing a family's total prior-year income to the federal poverty thresholds, using a broad definition of

family that includes all persons related by blood, marriage, adoption, or cohabitation. Poverty is defined as a prior-year income below the federal poverty thresholds; low-income is a prior-year income below 200 percent of federal thresholds. Note that poverty and low-income rates are calculated using prior-year income, but the measures of food and housing hardship refer to the previous 12 months. A change in food or housing hardship, therefore, does not necessarily reflect a change in income status.

² The USDA measures food security using a battery of questions from the Current Population Survey food security surveys. NSAF uses a subset of the food security questions to measure food hardship.

³ Results for cohabiting adults showed no significant changes in either hardship indicator across any of the time periods (although poverty and low-income rates of cohabiting adults did decline between 1997 and 2002). However, hardship rates for this group were generally similar to the rates for single adults.

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SNAPSHOTS
of America's Families



Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families

(NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/anf>.

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