Economic Precarity among Single Parents in the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic

By
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Single-parent families have historically faced greater economic precarity relative to other family types in the United States. We investigate how and whether those disparities widened after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using data on exposure to school and childcare center closures, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and frequent worrying among single-parent families versus two-parent families throughout 2020 and 2021, we find that the challenges that single parents faced prior to the pandemic generally magnified after the arrival of COVID-19. In April 2020, one in four single parents was unemployed, and unemployment rates recovered more slowly for single parents throughout 2021, perhaps in part due to their unequal exposure to school and childcare closures. The expansion of income transfers largely buffered against potential increases in poverty and hardship, but levels of worrying among single parents continued to worsen throughout 2021.

Keywords: poverty; hardship; COVID-19; single parents; economic insecurity

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Nieuwenhuis 2015; Aerts, Marx, and Parolin, this volume). Moreover, from the early 1990s through 2019, the American welfare state increasingly targeted income transfers at working parents, leaving jobless parents with few opportunities to access cash-based social assistance. In 2019, this work-oriented welfare state, combined with high levels of employment (including among single parents), contributed to a record-low poverty rate. In 2020, however, the COVID-19 pandemic sent the U.S. unemployment rate to a record high, rapidly exposing the limitations of the country’s employment-centered welfare state.

In April 2020, the same month in which unemployment climbed to 19 percent in the United States, childcare centers across the country closed, most schools turned to distance learning, and levels of poverty and hardship threatened to rise. However, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic were not shared equally across family types. This study documents how trends in economic and social insecurity varied for single-parent families relative to two-parent families throughout 2020 and 2021. Specifically, we use data from several different sources to investigate trends in five measures related to economic precarity: exposure to school and childcare center closures, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and subjective well-being.

These five indicators are closely intertwined, and they can offer a multidimensional perspective of the challenges facing families with children: school and childcare centers may contribute to declines in employment for parents with care responsibilities, a task that is already more challenging for single-parent families relative to two-parent families. In turn, school and care closures may contribute to higher rates of joblessness (or both employment and closures may simply be endogenous to the spread of COVID-19 and government-enforced mobility restrictions). Regardless, declining employment may affect poverty and food hardship. Meanwhile, frequent worrying, one dimension of subjective well-being, may be associated with poverty and food hardship; conversely, in the context of the global health crisis, frequent worrying may be detached from current economic conditions. Investigating each of these dimensions offers a broad account of the economic precarity of single parents throughout the pandemic.

Our findings lead to three broad takeaways. First, the neighborhoods with the highest shares of single parents faced greater exposure to school and childcare closures during the 2020–2021 school year. Additionally, single parents consistently faced higher rates of unemployment, poverty, food insufficiency, and frequent worrying relative to two-parent families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, we find that the strongest reductions in poverty and food hardship for single-parent families occurred after the expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) in July 2021, which provided monthly and unconditional cash support for most families with children. Specifically, the CTC payments provided monthly cash payments of $300 per child under 6, and $250 per child between 6 and 18, from July through December 2021. Thus, while single-parent families generally faced more challenges throughout the pandemic relative to other family types, the trends observed after the introduction of the CTC suggest that a sustained distribution of unconditional cash support for lower-income families could reduce economic insecurity for single parents moving forward.
Third, trends during the pandemic show notable ebbs and flows across our indicators of economic precarity for single parents: poverty and food hardship gradually increased throughout 2020 before declining in 2021, while unemployment among single parents steadily declined after April 2020, but at a slower rate than for two-parent families. Despite the improved economic conditions in 2021 for single parents, however, their levels of frequent worrying continued to climb throughout 2021 (relative to 2020 levels and relative to two-parent families), suggesting that the challenges of single parents during COVID-19 cannot be reduced solely to economic concerns.

Background

Economic precarity of single parents in the United States

Economic insecurity, according to Western et al. (2012), is “the risk of economic loss faced by workers and households as they encounter the unpredictable events of social life.” Rather than focusing only on the risk of economic loss, however, this study broadens its focus to economic precarity, which encompasses (1) realized economic loss, as observed through trends in unemployment, poverty, and food hardship; (2) factors exacerbating economic insecurity, such as challenges in managing the work-care nexus for families with children; and (3) the consequences of economic insecurity for subjective well-being. Put differently, we use the term economic precarity in a broad, multidimensional manner to encompass the correlated challenges of care work, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and subjective well-being facing single parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The United States has higher rates of single parenthood relative to other high-income countries (Brady, Finnigan, and Hübgen 2017). Close to one in four U.S. households with children are headed by a single parent, with 80 percent of these households headed by a woman (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018; U.S. Census Bureau 2020). Additionally, U.S. single parents are at a particularly high risk for poverty compared to single parents in other high-income Western democracies (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis 2015). According to 2019 Census data, 36.5 percent of single-parent families headed by a woman with children under the age of 18 and 16.3 percent of single-parent families headed by a man lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2019).

Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado's (2018) “Triple Bind,” which outlines the inadequacies of resources, employment, and policies for single parents, helps to explain the particularly high risk of poverty for single parents in the United States. Single-parent families tend to have fewer resources, such as lower levels of parental education and limited childcare, income, time, and flexibility, compared to coupled-parents. Despite there being a high single-parent employment rate, gendered inequality in employment and high rates of precarious employment among single parents contributes to persistent inequalities relative to other family types. Moreover, many redistributive policies and so-called “social investment” policies
are inadequate at reducing these economic inequalities, as investments into childcare and similar services often advantage multiparent families more so than single-parent families. And given that the majority of single parents are women, gender inequality also tends to exacerbate the disadvantages that single parents in the United States experience relative to two-parent families.

COVID-19 and challenges of single parents

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to widespread school closures, record levels of unemployment, and the potential for high rates of hardship in the United States. We posit, however, that the experience of economic precarity was not distributed equally across family types. Given the weak welfare state and labor market institutions supporting single parents in the United States prior to March 2020, we anticipate that the onset of the pandemic, and its correlated crises, exacerbated the challenges that single parents in the United States tend to face. We expect this to be true despite the large increase in social spending that resulted from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed in March 2020. Specifically, we investigate trends in economic precarity across five domains: school and childcare center closures, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and frequent worrying. We discuss each domain in brief.

School and childcare center closures. In April 2020, the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, forty-eight U.S. states and Washington, D.C. mandated or strongly recommended the closure of schools and childcare centers (Education Week 2020). Our research suggests that close to 90 percent of children were exposed to school closures and 70 percent of families with young children were exposed to childcare closures in April 2020 (Parolin and Lee 2021; Lee and Parolin 2021). These school and childcare closures varied by geography and disproportionately affected minority and disadvantaged populations. Single-parent families, we posit, may be more likely to be exposed to school and childcare closures, given that more single-parent families are concentrated in large, dense cities (where lockdowns were more severe) relative to rural areas. Even if exposure to school and childcare closures were to be neutrally distributed, however, they may carry greater relative consequences for single parents’ employment opportunities.

Unemployment. In April 2020, the unemployment rate in the United States climbed to 19 percent, the highest level in recorded history (since 1948) by the Current Population Survey (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020, 2022). Many more individuals, meanwhile, exited the labor force altogether; by definition, these former workers are not currently seeking work and thus would not be counted as unemployed. The closure of schools and childcare centers, a necessary step to prevent the spread of COVID-19, likely contributed to the employment crisis for parents with children, and single parents in particular. Without education and childcare services, working parents were abruptly forced to find a new family-work balance that, for many, required a reduction in paid work hours. The number
of U.S. mothers of school-age children not actively working increased by 1.4 million from January 2020 to January 2021 (Heggeness et al. 2021). Early studies suggested that the decrease in the number of employed single mothers was particularly high for those with children five years old or younger, as well as Black and Hispanic single mothers (Barroso and Kochhar 2020). The decline in employment was also strongly influenced by government-imposed lockdowns. Given that many single-parent families live in denser cities, they may face a geographic penalty, on average, relative to two-parent families when it comes to the lack of employment. Beyond geographic factors, single parents are less likely to have a college degree and, in turn, are more likely to work in the service sector, which was the hardest hit by the pandemic (Lund et al. 2020).

Poverty. With high unemployment rates, the risk of poverty increased for many families during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, federal policy interventions over the course of the pandemic have significantly reduced this risk. The Families First Act, which expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and the CARES Act, which provided economic relief through stimulus checks and increased unemployment benefits, were both passed in March 2020. A model by the Urban Institute estimates that early pandemic-response policies, specifically the Families First and CARES Acts, kept 10.3 million additional people out of poverty despite the large increase in unemployment (Giannarelli, Wheaton, and Acs 2020). The CARES Act led to April and May 2020 poverty rates that were even lower than prepandemic rates (Parolin et al. 2022). In particular, the CARES Act lifted more than eighteen million people out of monthly poverty in April 2020. However, upon the expiration of the unemployment supplement in August 2020, the number of people lifted out of poverty by the CARES Act decreased to only four million individuals (Parolin et al. 2022). In March 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), implemented various antipoverty policies, including the expanded CTC. Research estimates that the ARPA lifted over twelve million people out of poverty (Parolin, Collyer, et al. 2021). While several studies have documented the estimated poverty-reduction effects of each of these policies, it remains unclear how trends in poverty for single parents have evolved throughout the pandemic. Given the higher likelihood of unemployment and exposure to school and care closures, the policies may have been particularly effective at reducing poverty among single-parent families.

Food hardship. Despite increased unemployment and widespread economic downturn, food hardship rates in 2020 were similar to those in 2019 (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021). Steady food insecurity rates were observed even with continuing grocery store closures, transportation barriers, and elevated food prices, which increased 3.8 percent in 2020 (higher than the 2 percent average increase for the past 20 years) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021). Many families were forced to reduce dietary variety and quality, as well as increase their reliance on charitable food sources (Waxman and Gupta 2021). Policies such as SNAP and the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), which provided families with
vouchers equal in value to school meals missed due to remote learning, and the CTC have likely helped to mitigate food insecurity in the United States. As was also the case before the pandemic, U.S. households at the highest risk for food insecurity included those experiencing unemployment, families with children, households headed by women, and racial/ethnic minority families (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021; Morales, Morales, and Beltran 2021).

**Stress, anxiety, and worrying.** With school and childcare closures, unemployment being at an all-time high, increased risk of poverty, and other hardships, many parents have experienced frequent stress, anxiety, and worrying, as well as other indicators of negative mental health. According to data from the Census Household Pulse Survey (hereafter “Pulse”), on average, 36 percent of adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder from April 2020 to October 2021 (Kaiser Family Foundation 2021). The share of adults experiencing these symptoms was lowest in June 2021 (29 percent) and highest in November 2021 (43 percent) (Kaiser Family Foundation 2021). In contrast, only 11 percent of adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder from January to June 2019 (National Center for Health Statistics 2021). Research suggests that parental well-being strongly correlates with the amount of hardship that a family has experienced over the COVID-19 pandemic (Gassman-Pines, Ananat, and Fitz-Henley 2020). More specifically, mothers who have taken on additional childcare responsibilities as a result of school and childcare closures have reported increased stress and anxiety (Calarco et al. 2020). Unemployment, especially for women, during the pandemic has also correlated with an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorder (Huato and Chavez 2021). Taken in full, it is likely that single parents, and especially single mothers, have experienced elevated levels of frequent worrying over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These five indicators of economic precarity: school and childcare closure, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and frequent worrying, are likely to have worsened for single parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Current literature suggests that this population is particularly vulnerable to worsening challenges, but there is limited research on how and whether disparities in these indicators have widened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Data and Methods**

We now discuss how we measure and track trends in each of these domains of economic precarity for single parents throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Measuring economic precarity**

We use three sources of data to investigate our five domains of economic precarity (school and care closures, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and
subjective well-being) on a monthly basis throughout 2020 and 2021. The measures we operationalize across each domain have precedent in recent academic literature; thus, we primarily summarize the measures here and refer to the online appendix for in-depth detail on methodologies underlying each measure. We emphasize, however, that this article is the first to summarize trends in economic precarity across each of these five domains and also the first to focus on trends specifically for single parents in the United States. Table 1 summarizes our five measures and their underlying data sources.

Measuring single parenthood

We measure single parenthood as a parent with children (under age 18) who does not live with other adults. We recognize that this definition does not identify all nonpartnered parents. For example, a nonpartnered parent with children who lives with his or her parents (i.e., grandparents of child) would not classify as a single parent in our definition, as there are multiple adults in the household who increase the earnings potential of the resource-sharing unit. The consequence of our decision is that we capture a slightly more vulnerable group of single parents relative to adopting a broader definition. For example, the 2019 poverty rate for this group of single parents was 26.7 percent, compared to 24.5 percent if we included single parents who lived in the same resource-sharing unit as other adults. In practice, however, our results suggest that adopting either definition demonstrates similar levels and trends in our outcomes relative to two-parent families. We identify 5.4 percent of the U.S. population living in single-parent families (using the 2019 Current Population Survey). We also recognize that there exists large heterogeneity among single-parent families. Among our single parents, 83 percent are women, 56 percent are non-White (31.4 percent are Black and 19.7 percent are Hispanic), and 40 percent do not have more than a high school degree (compared to 26 percent with a college degree). We focus on single-parent families at large in our primary analyses, while acknowledging that many of our outcomes may vary notably among single-parent families.

Findings

We present our findings in five steps, covering single parents’ exposure to school closures and childcare closures, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and frequent worrying, in that order. Figure 1 presents a binned scatterplot documenting how the share of single parents in a given school district or census tract (or “neighborhood”) is associated with the likelihood of school closures or childcare center closures.

The left panel of Figure 1, documenting exposure to school closures, shows a nonlinear relationship between the share of children in single-parent households and exposure to school closures. In the schools with the smallest share of students in single-parent homes (the leftmost point in the left panel), the mean rate of
closures was 48 percent over the time span we examined. In schools with roughly average shares of single parents, the mean was lower at around 42 percent. However, the schools with the largest share of single parents were most exposed to school closures, with a mean of 52 percent. These statistics focus on rates of exposure, but evidence also suggests that even if rates of exposure were equal for single parents and other family types, it is the former who would likely struggle more in adapting to the challenges of distance learning and school closures. Consider, for example, that distance learning often requires an adult to be at home with the student throughout the day, a task that was likely particularly challenging for single-parent families.

The right panel of Figure 1 documents exposure to childcare center closures. The nonlinear curve largely mirrors the relationship for school closures, although with slightly higher levels of closures for all groups. The census tracts with the highest share of single-parent families had the highest rate of childcare center closures (or strongly reduced capacity) at roughly 58 percent between September 2020 through May 2021. Again, focusing on exposure is useful for understanding

| Domain and Childcare Center Closures | Definition | Data Source, Dates | Precedent(s) |
|--------------------------------------|------------|-------------------|--------------|
| School and childcare center closures | The share of schools (or formal childcare centers) in the family's census tract experiencing a 50%+ decline in in-person visits relative to the same month in 2019 | U.S. School Closure & Distance Learning Database; U.S. Database of Child Care Closures during COVID-19, Sept. 2020–May 2021 | Parolin and Lee (2021); Lee and Parolin (2021) |
| Unemployment | Whether the adult was active in the labor market but not working in the prior week | U.S. Current Population Survey, Jan. 2020–Dec. 2021 | (Many) |
| Poverty | Monthly poverty rates using Supplemental Poverty Measure framework | U.S. Current Population Survey, Jan. 2020–Dec. 2021 | Parolin et al. (2022) |
| Food hardship | Whether the family “sometimes” or “often” did not have enough to eat in the last 7 days | Census Household Pulse Survey, Apr. 2020–Dec. 2021 | Schanzenbach and Pitts (2020); Parolin, Ananat, et al. (2021) |
| Frequent worrying | The respondent reports “not being able to stop or control worrying” for more than half the days or nearly every day in the prior week. | Census Household Pulse Survey, Apr. 2020–Dec. 2021 | Parolin, Ananat, et al. (2021) |
differential access to formal care centers during the pandemic, but these statistics are only part of the story: even if single parents were exposed equally to care closures, it is likely that they would face more challenges than two-parent families (or childless families) in adapting to the challenges that the closures present. Without access to childcare centers, and/or with a need to remain at home to be with a child who is in distance learning, single parents are less likely to be able to combine care responsibilities with formal employment.

This leads to our next indicator of interest: unemployment. Figure 2 displays rates of unemployment from January 2020 through December 2021 for single parents (dashed gray line) and all adults (solid black line). In January 2020, prior to the onset of the pandemic, the unemployment rate among single parents was 6.3 percent, compared to 4.4 percent among two-parent families. Put differently, single parents had an unemployment rate that was 1.9 percentage points higher than adults in two-parent homes.

In April 2020, however, unemployment rates spiked to 18.3 percent for two-parent families and 23.6 percent for single parents. In this month, single parents
had an unemployment rate that was 5.3 percentage points higher than adults in two-parent homes. Thus, not only was the unemployment rate high for single parents, but it increased (in absolute terms) more steeply than for the adult population overall. This was also true for rates of joblessness (not depicted, but which includes both the unemployed and those who are not employed but not active in the labor market): joblessness was lower among single parents in January 2020 relative to parents in two-parent homes, but climbed higher in April 2020 (35.8 percent, up from 22.1 percent in January 2020, for single parents).

Throughout the rest of 2020, unemployment rates declined for all, dropping to 8.3 percent for single parents and 6.8 percent for two-parent families in December 2020. In 2021, however, unemployment rates increased again for single parents, coinciding with a new wave of COVID-19 cases. With ebbs and flows throughout the year, unemployment among single parents reached 5.7 percent in December 2021, compared to 3.7 percent for adults in two-parent homes. Put differently, the unemployment rates in December 2021 for parents in both family types had fallen back down to prepandemic levels.

The spikes in unemployment threatened to increase rates of poverty and hardship, our next two indicators of interest. Importantly, the federal government also introduced a large set of income transfers in the form of stimulus checks and expanded unemployment benefits, which are known to have reduced the national U.S. poverty rate (Parolin et al. 2022). Was this also true for single parents? Figure 3 documents trends in poverty for single parents (gray lines) and the
population at large (black lines) before and after accounting for COVID-19-related relief. Specifically, we present estimates using a monthly version of the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which includes all taxes and transfers and adjusts the poverty threshold according to local living costs. The SPM is the preferred measure of poverty among most academic researchers and policymakers today in the U.S. context.

In January 2020, the monthly SPM poverty rate was 34.6 percent for single-parent families, but 14.2 percent for two-parent homes. In April 2020, the month in which we saw large spikes in unemployment, the monthly SPM poverty rate for single parents climbed to 42.5 percent before accounting for COVID-19-related transfers, and to 21.7 percent for two-parent homes. When accounting for stimulus checks and expanded unemployment benefits, however, the story is different: the poverty rate in April 2020 when taking these benefits into account actually declined for single parents (to 32.1 percent) relative to prepandemic levels, as well as for two-parent homes (to 11.3 percent). When the $600 per week unemployment supplement expired in July 2020, however, poverty rates

**FIGURE 3**

Trends in Monthly SPM Poverty before and after Accounting for COVID-19-Related Income Transfers (January 2020–December 2021)

NOTE: COVID-19-related income transfers include those passed in the CARES Act (expansion to unemployment benefits and stimulus checks) and those from the ARPA (expansion to unemployment benefits and monthly CTC payments). The large declines around March largely represent the payment of once per year refundable tax credits.
began to increase for both groups. By December 2020, single-parent families had a poverty rate of 34.7 percent (nearly identical to pre-pandemic levels), while two-parent families had a poverty rate of 15.1 percent (2.2 percentage points higher than the pre-pandemic level).

Throughout 2021, poverty rates were volatile primarily due to two more rounds of stimulus payments (around January and March), refundable tax credit payments (around March), and the introduction of the monthly CTC payments (July onward). The end result, however, was large reductions in poverty, particularly for single parents. In December 2021, the monthly poverty rate for single-parent families was 21.9 percent, nearly a 13-percentage-point decline from pre-pandemic levels. This decline can be attributed to income transfers, and the CTC payments in particular, given that the poverty rate before accounting for the COVID-19-related transfers was near its pre-pandemic level. For two-parent families, the poverty rate in December 2021 was 9.6 percent, 4.6 percentage points lower than the January 2020 poverty rate.

Do trends in food hardship align closely with trends in monthly poverty rates? Figure 4 presents evidence of this from April 2020 (the first month for which Pulse data is available) through December 2021. In April 2020, 21 percent of single parents experienced food insufficiency, compared to 12.6 percent of adults in two-parent homes. Rates of food insufficiency increased for both groups throughout 2020, aligning with the rise in poverty rates after the withdrawal of the $600 weekly unemployment benefit supplement in July 2020, as observed in Figure 4. By December 2020, food hardship had climbed to 26.9 percent for single parents (5.9-percentage-point increase from April) and to 17.8 percent for adults in two-parent homes (5.2-percentage-point increase from April).

In 2021, however, levels of food insufficiency declined, particularly for single parents. This is consistent with the decline in poverty rates in Figure 4 after the introduction of the monthly CTC payments. In September 2021, 14.7 percent of single parents experienced food insufficiency, a 6.3-percentage-point decline from April 2020, while 11 percent of adults in two-parent homes experienced food insufficiency, a 1.6-percentage-point decline from April 2020. Put simply, our findings suggest that the expanded CTC payments contributed to notable declines in both poverty and food hardship for all families with children, but especially for single-parent families.

Our final indicator of economic precarity focuses on one dimension of subjective well-being: frequent worrying. We view this measure as both (1) a subjective dimension of insecurity, in contrast to the economic measures presented before; and (2) an indicator that likely captures the combined stress of each of the challenges documented before (school and care closures, unemployment, poverty, and hardship), in addition to the health threat of the pandemic more broadly. Figure 5 presents these trends.

In April 2020, 29.2 percent of single parents reported frequent worrying, compared to 25.4 percent of adults in two-parent homes. This rate climbed to 36.4 percent for single parents in December 2020, and to 31.5 percent for adults. In the early part of 2021, however, frequent worrying declined for both groups, although there was another slow rise in the latter half of 2021. By December
levels of frequent worrying reached 31.9 percent for single parents, 2.7 percentage points higher than in April 2020; and 23 percent among adults in two-parent homes, a 2.4-percentage-point decline relative to April 2020. Although poverty and food insufficiency had declined from prepandemic levels by late 2021, frequent worrying had not among single parents, emphasizing that the toll of the pandemic on subjective well-being cannot be reduced purely to economic outcomes. Single parents, more so than other adults, appear to face particularly high and increased levels of worrying despite the average increase in their economic well-being throughout 2021.

**Conclusion**

Well before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, single parents in the United States faced particularly high rates of economic precarity relative to other family types. This study uses data from multiple sources to investigate how single parents compared with the general population throughout the COVID-19 pandemic on five measures related to economic precarity: exposure to school and childcare center closures, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and frequent worrying.
Our findings suggest that the challenges that single parents faced prior to the pandemic only magnified after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit with notable month-to-month variation throughout 2020 and 2021. In April 2020, one in four single parents was unemployed, perhaps in part due to their unequal exposure to school and childcare center closures, as well as the greater difficulty in balancing work and care responsibilities when formal childcare is not available, or when a young student needs to attend school virtually from home. These high rates of unemployment could have led to high rates of poverty and hardship; however, the federal government intervened and distributed large levels of income support throughout 2020 and 2021, as documented in Table 2.

The large distribution of income transfers in spring 2020 largely buffered against the risks of spikes in poverty and hardship: poverty rates briefly declined for single parents relative to prepandemic levels, but steadily increased again as the $600 weekly unemployment top-up expired. In 2021, however, two new rounds of stimulus checks, another expansion of unemployment benefits, and the introduction of the monthly, nonrefundable CTC payments led to strong declines in poverty and food insufficiency among single parents, both relative to two-parent families and the prepandemic poverty rate for single parents. The strong reduction effects of the CTC provide a clear policy takeaway: monthly, unconditional cash support appears to go a long way in improving the living standards for
single parents. Continuing the monthly cash payments for low-income families with children would bring the United States in line with other high-income countries with child allowances (see Aerts, Marx, and Parolin, this volume) and would help reduce the comparatively high poverty rates in the United States.

Despite the economic buffers, however, single parents’ levels of frequent worrying remained high throughout the pandemic and increased to around one in three single parents in late 2021 despite the economic improvements. The mismatch between rising levels of frequent worrying and declining poverty and hardship serves as a reminder that the challenges that single parents, in particular, face during the pandemic cannot be reduced simply to economic well-being.

This study is unique in combining several sources of timely data to present a multidimensional portrait of economic precarity among single parents throughout 2020 and 2021. That said, our study has limitations that future research could build on.

First, due to space constraints and data limitations, we focus on single parents at large despite notable heterogeneity among single parents. Our expectation is
that single parents facing more layers of disadvantage (and, often, discrimination) face even greater risks than the averages we presented in this study. In particular, single parents who have low levels of education and/or who are racial/ethnic minorities are likely to have faced even greater challenges during COVID-19 than the present study documents. Second, our study exclusively uses quantitative data, but we recognize the value-add that qualitative accounts of the challenges of single parents during COVID-19 would bring to this research. Qualitative research, for example, could more clearly elucidate the mismatch between declining levels of hardship and poverty for single parents and rising levels of frequent worrying throughout 2021. Third, and last, there is likely vast regional variation across the United States in the challenges that single parents face. This variation can be due to differential exposure to the spread of COVID-19, different subnational policy regimes, and much more. Moving forward, scholars can build on this work to help make sense of different patterns of economic insecurity among single parents in different parts of the United States.

Despite these limitations, the present study makes clear that the disadvantages that single parents faced in the United States relative to other family types prior to the pandemic only worsened after the arrival of COVID-19. New income support policies, such as the expanded CTC, helped to reduced poverty and hardship among single parents, but were not sufficient to reduce levels of frequent worrying among single parents in 2021, suggesting that the challenges of single parents during COVID-19 cannot be reduced solely to economic concerns.

**Note**

1. A binned scatterplot is a version of a scatterplot that is useful when plotting relationships with a very large number of observations. Rather than displaying a hundred thousand points in the scatterplot, we present ten points, with each point representing a decile value of the share of single parents in the area (X-axis) and the mean value of closures for all units within that given decile (Y-axis).

**Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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