POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

Population characteristics describe the diverse social, demographic, and economic features of the Nation's population. There were more than 157 million females in the United States in 2010, representing slightly more than half of the population.

Examining data by demographic factors such as sex, age, and race and ethnicity can serve a number of purposes for policymakers and program planners. For instance, these comparisons can be used to tailor the development and evaluation of policies and programs to better serve the needs of women at higher risk for certain conditions.

This section presents data on population characteristics that may affect women's physical, social, and mental health, as well as access to health care. Some of these characteristics include age, race and ethnicity, education, poverty, employment, household composition, and participation in Federal nutrition programs. The characteristics of incarcerated women are also reviewed and analyzed. The population characteristics and health status of rural and urban women and women veterans are examined as special population features.

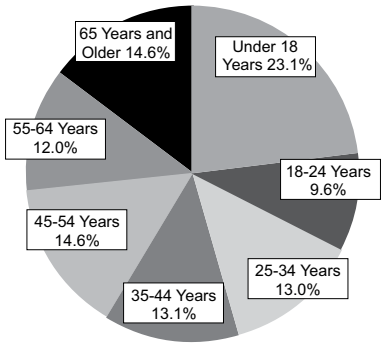
U.S. POPULATION

In 2010, the U.S. population was more than 308 million, with females comprising 50.8 percent of the total population. Females younger than 18 years accounted for nearly one-quarter of the 157 million U.S. females, while women aged 18–34 years accounted for 22.6 percent, those aged 35–64 years accounted for 39.7 percent, and women aged 65 years and older accounted for 14.6 percent.

The distribution of the population by sex was fairly even across younger age groups; however because women have longer life expectancies, they represented a greater proportion of those aged 65 years and older. Women accounted for 56.9 percent of all individuals aged 65 years and older, 60.8 percent of individuals aged 75 years and older, and over two-thirds of individuals aged 85 years and older (data not shown).

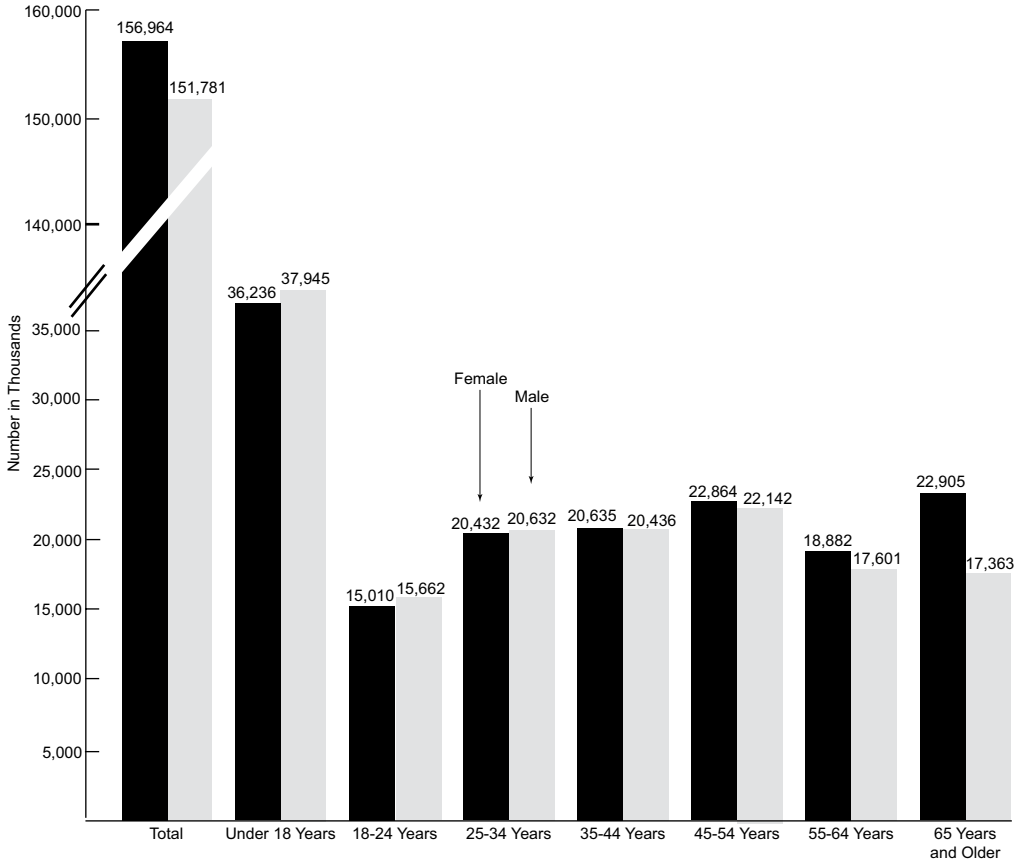
U.S. Female Population, by Age, 2010

Source I.1: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census



U.S. Population, by Age and Sex, 2010

Source I.1: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census



U.S. FEMALE POPULATION

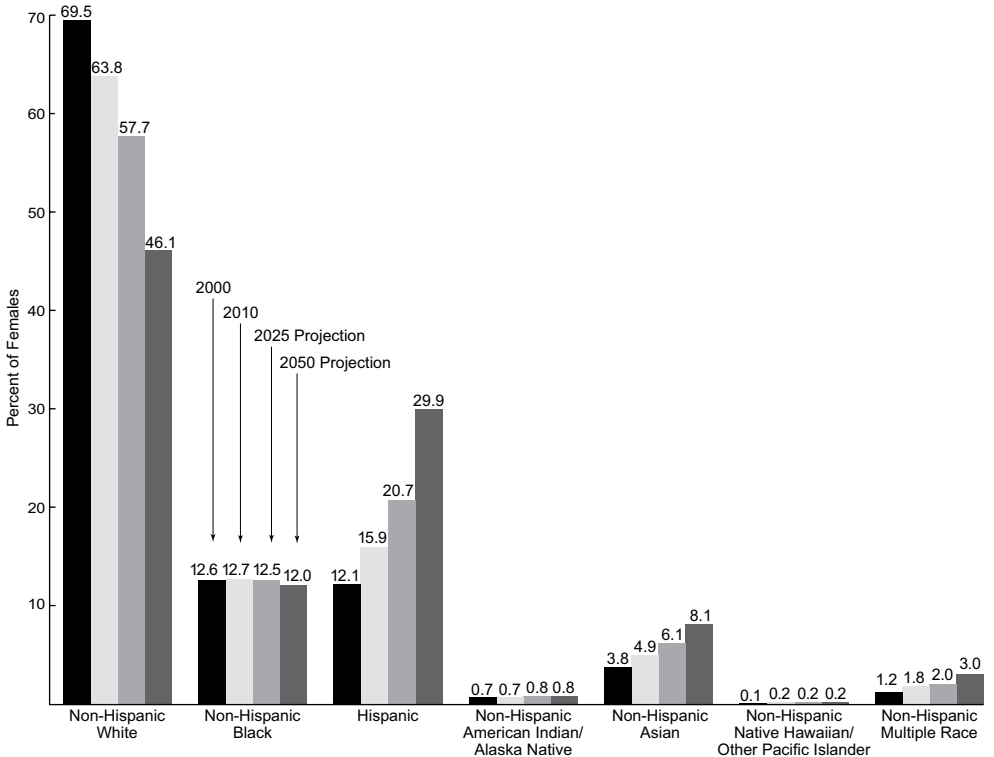
In 2000, more than two-thirds of the total female population was non-Hispanic White (69.5 percent), followed by non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic females (12.6 and 12.1 percent, respectively). By 2010, the proportion of the female population that was non-Hispanic White dropped to 63.8 percent and the proportion Hispanic increased to 15.9 percent. By 2025, non-Hispanic White females are projected to account for 57.7 percent of the female population and by 2050 they are projected to no longer be the majority (46.1 percent). By 2050, the proportions of females who are Hispanic, non-Hispanic Asian, and non-Hispanic multiple race are expected to double or triple compared to the start of the millennium.

The increasing diversity of the U.S. population is a function of different fertility, mortality, and migration patterns according to race and ethnicity. The younger female population (under 18 years) is significantly more diverse than the older female population (data not shown). In 2010, 53.4 percent of females under 18 years of age were non-Hispanic White, while 23.2 percent of that group were Hispanic. In contrast, among women aged 65 years and older, 79.3 percent were non-Hispanic White and only 7.0 percent were Hispanic.[1]

The increasing diversity of the U.S. population underscores the importance of promoting racial and ethnic equity in health and health care. Significant racial and ethnic disparities persist in health status and access to health care which can be attributed to a variety of social, behavioral, environmental, and biological determinants.[2] The future health of America will greatly depend on using a multifaceted approach to improving the health of racial and ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups.

U.S. Female Population (All Ages), by Race/Ethnicity, 2000–2050*

Source I.2, I.3: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division



Totals may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding, and the exclusion of non-Hispanic females of other races.

HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

In 2011, 48.5 percent of women aged 18 years and older were married and living with a spouse; this includes married couples living with other people, such as parents. About 13 percent of women over age 18 were the heads of their households, meaning that they have children or other family members, but no spouse, living with them. Women who are heads of households include single mothers, single women with a parent or other close relative living in their home, and women with other household compositions. More than 17 percent of women lived alone, 15.5 percent lived with relatives, and 5.5 percent lived with non-relatives.

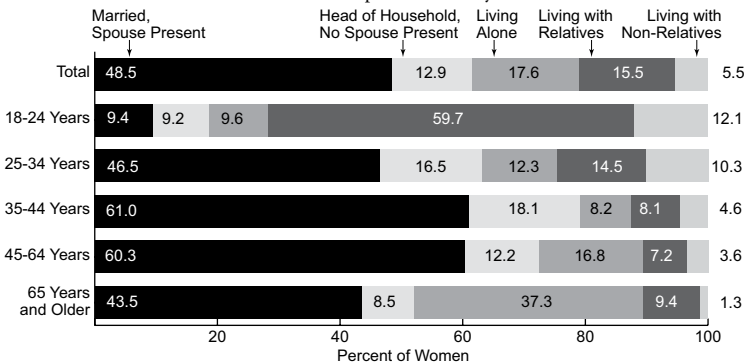
Household composition varies significantly by age. Young women aged 18–24 years were most likely to be living with relatives (59.7 percent) and with non-relatives (12.1 percent). About 60 percent of women aged 35–44 and 45–64 were living with a spouse. Being a head of household with no spouse present was most common among women between the ages of 25 and 44. Older women, aged 65 and above, were most likely to be living alone (37.3 percent) with another 43.5 percent living with a spouse.

In 2011, non-Hispanic Black women were most likely to be single heads of households with family members present (27.5 percent), while non-Hispanic Asian and non-Hispanic White women were least likely (7.5 and 9.4 percent, respectively). Over 30 percent of female single heads of households with family members had household incomes below the poverty level (see Women in Poverty).

Same-sex couples accounted for 646,464 households in 2010, representing an 80.4 percent increase since the 2000 Census.[3] However, same-sex couples still account for fewer than 1 percent of all households (0.6 percent). Female couples comprised 51.5 percent of same-sex households.[4] Almost one-quarter of female same-sex couple households contained children (23.9 percent) compared to 10.0 percent of male same-sex couple households and about 40 percent of opposite-sex couple households (data not shown).[3,4]

Women Aged 18 and Older,* by Age and Household Composition, 2011

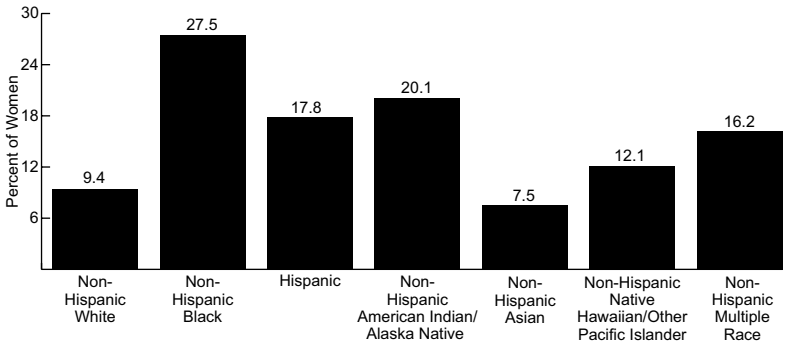
Source I.4: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey



*Includes the civilian, non-institutionalized population. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Women Aged 18 and Older Who Are Heads of Households with Family Members,* by Race/Ethnicity, 2011

Source I.4: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey



*Includes the civilian, non-institutionalized population; includes those who are heads of households and have children or other family members, but no spouse, living in a house that they own or rent.

WOMEN AND POVERTY

In 2010, more than 46 million people in the United States lived with incomes below the poverty level, representing 15.1 percent of the U.S. population.[5] More than 17 million of those were women aged 18 and older, accounting for 14.5 percent of the adult female population. In comparison, 11.2 percent of adult men lived in poverty (data not shown). With regard to race and ethnicity, non-Hispanic White women were least likely to experience poverty (10.4 percent), followed by non-Hispanic Asian women (12.2 percent). In contrast, about one-quarter of Hispanic, non-Hispanic Black, and non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native women lived in poverty.

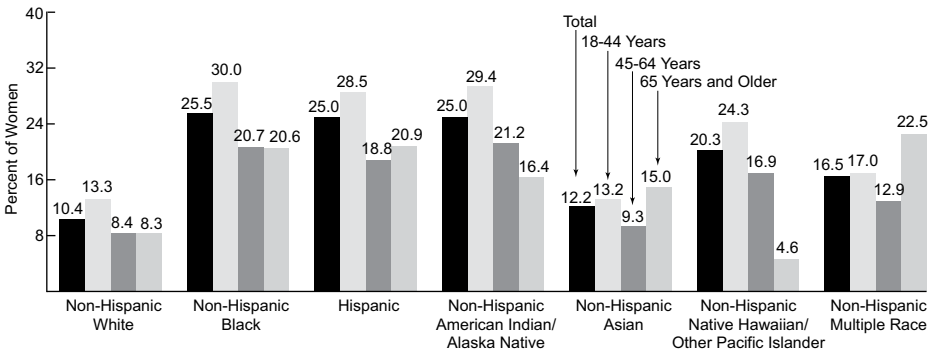
Poverty status varies with age. Among women of each race and ethnicity, those aged 45–64 years and 65 years and older were less likely to experience poverty than those aged 18–44. For instance, 30.0 percent of non-Hispanic Black women aged 18-44 were living in poverty in 2010, compared to approximately 20 percent of those aged 45 years and older.

Poverty status also varies with educational attainment. Among women aged 25 years and older in 2010, one-third (33.2 percent) of those without a high school diploma were living in poverty, compared to 15.6 percent of those with a high school diploma or equivalent, 10.5 percent of those with some college and 4.6 percent of those with a Bachelor's degree or higher (data not shown).

In 2010, 11.7 percent of families—a group of at least two people related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together—were living in poverty. Married-couple families were least likely to be poor (6.2 percent). Among single-headed households with no spouse present, those headed by an adult female were twice as likely to be poor as those headed by an adult male (31.5 versus 15.6 percent). Overall, women in families were more likely than men to be poor (11.5 versus 7.9 percent; data not shown).

Women Aged 18 and Older Living Below the Poverty Level,* by Race/Ethnicity and Age, 2010

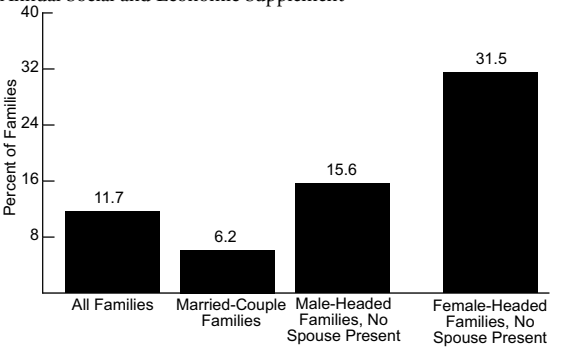
Source I.5: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement



Poverty level, defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, was $22,314 for a family of four in 2010.

Families* Living Below the Poverty Level, by Household Type, 2010**

Source I.5: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement



**Families are groups of at least two people related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together. **Poverty level, defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, was $22,314 for a family of four in 2010.*

FOOD SECURITY

Food security is defined as having access at all times to enough nutritionally adequate and safe foods to lead a healthy, active lifestyle.[6] Food security status is assessed based on individuals' responses to questions such as whether an individual worried that food would run out before there would be money to buy more; whether an individual or his/her family cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food; and whether an individual or his/her family had ever gone a whole day without eating because there was not enough food.

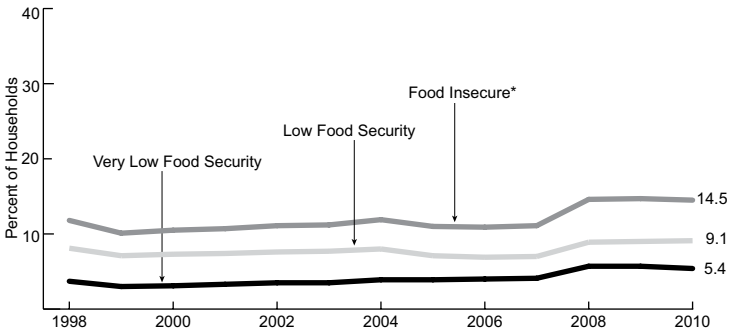
Households or persons experiencing food insecurity may be categorized as experiencing "low food security" or "very low food security." Low food security generally indicates multiple food access issues, while very low food security indicates reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns due to inadequate resources for food. Periods of low or very low food security are usually recurrent and episodic rather than chronic. Nonetheless, nutritional risk due to poor dietary quality can persist across periods of food insecurity, and may increase the risk of nutritional deficiencies and diet sensitive conditions like hypertension and diabetes.[7]

In 2010, an estimated 17.2 million or 14.5 percent of all households experienced food insecurity among one or more household members at some point in the past year; this rate has not changed significantly since 2008 and remains at the highest level documented since measurement began in 1998.[8] However, the prevalence of very low food security declined slightly from 5.7 percent in 2009 to 5.4 percent in 2010.

Food security status varies by household composition. While adult men and women living alone had similar rates of food insecurity in 2010, female-headed families with no spouse present were more likely than male-headed families with no spouse present to experience food insecurity (35.1 versus 25.4 percent, respectively). Female-headed families were also more likely than male-headed families to experience very low food security (10.8 versus 6.7 percent, respectively).

Household Food Insecurity, 1998–2010

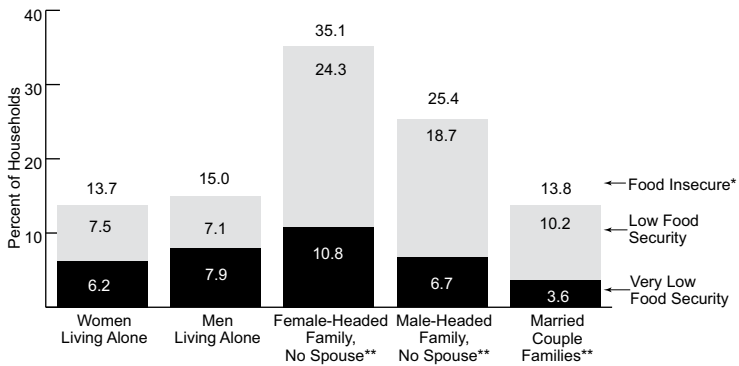
Source I.6: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Food Security Supplement



*Food insecure includes very low and low food security. Percentages may not add to totals due to rounding.

Food Security Status, by Household Composition, 2010

Source I.6: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Food Security Supplement



*Food insecure includes very low and low food security. Percentages may not add to totals due to rounding. **Family defined as a household with children less than 18 years old.

WOMEN AND FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

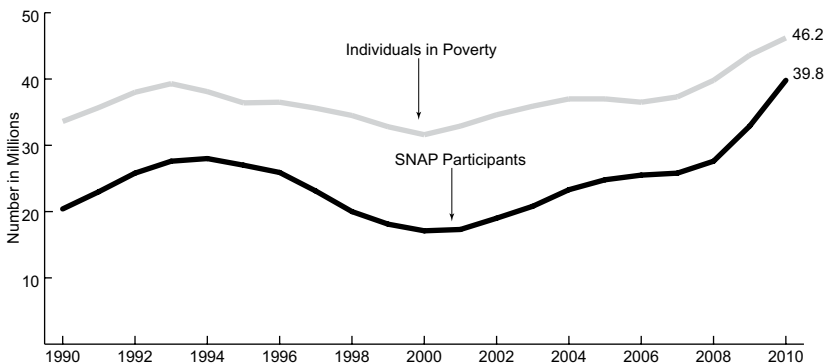
Federal programs can provide essential help to low-income women and their families in obtaining food and income support. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Federal Food Stamp Program, helps low-income individuals and families purchase food. In 2010, following an economic recession, the number of people served by SNAP hit a record high of 39.8 million per month, on average. Of the 21.2 million adults served, over 13 million (62.8 percent) were women (data not shown).[9] Between 1990 and 2010, the number of people served by SNAP tracked strongly over time with the number of people in poverty, demonstrating the critical role of SNAP in responding to need. In 2010, 1.7 million children and 2.2 million adults, 61 percent of whom were women, were lifted above the poverty line after adding the value of SNAP benefits to household income.[10]

Among the households that relied on SNAP in 2010, 4.6 million (25.2 percent) were female-headed households with children, accounting for 51.8 percent of all SNAP households with children (data not shown).[9]

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) also plays an important role in serving low income women and families by providing supplementary nutritious foods, nutrition education, and referrals to health and other social services. WIC serves pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, as well as infants and children up to age 5. In 2011, more than three-quarters of all individuals receiving WIC benefits were infants and children (76.6 percent); however, the program also served nearly 2.1 million pregnant women and mothers, representing 23.4 percent of WIC participants. In contrast to SNAP, WIC is not an entitlement program that guarantees benefits to all eligible applicants. However, funding for WIC has increased over the years, and the number of women, infants, and children served by WIC has increased by over 100-fold between 1974 and 2011, from 88,000 to 8.9 million (data not shown).[11]

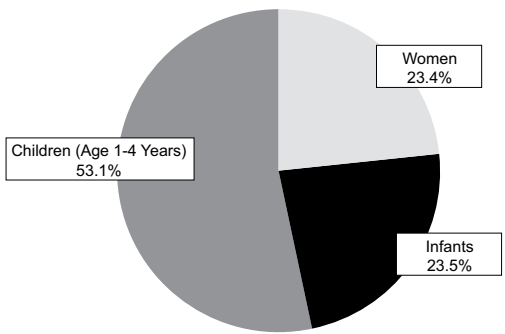
SNAP Participants and Individuals in Poverty, 1990–2010

Sources I.7: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Stamp Quality Control Sample; U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement



Participants in WIC, 2011*

Source I.8: U.S. Department of Agriculture, WIC Program Participation Data



Based on Federal Fiscal Year (October to September)

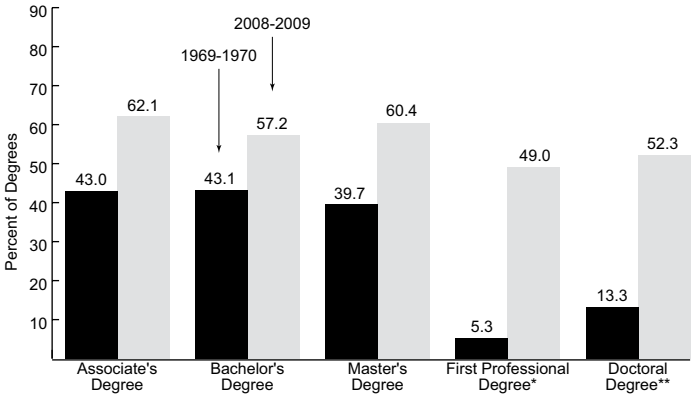
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In 2009, 89.8 percent of female and male young adults aged 18–24 had earned a high school or general equivalency degree; this is an increase from the 1972 level of 82.3 percent (data not shown).[12] While there has not been a sex disparity in high school educational attainment, a large disparity in post-secondary educational attainment has been eliminated or reversed over the last four decades. In 1969–1970, men earned a majority of every type of post-secondary degree, while in 2008–2009, women earned more than half of all associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, and nearly half of all first professional degrees. The most significant increase has been in the proportion of first professional degree earners who are women, which jumped from 5.3 percent in 1969–1970 to 49.0 percent in 2008–2009. Although the sex disparity in degrees awarded has disappeared or reversed, there are still disparities by discipline. For example, women are underrepresented in science and technology and overrepresented in education and nursing.[13]

There are also racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment. Although slightly more than one-third of all young adult women had a college degree in 2008–2010, this ranged from 15 percent or less of Hispanic, non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander women to more than 60 percent of non-Hispanic Asian women. Hispanic and non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native young adult women were most likely to lack a high school diploma (27.6 and 14.9 percent, respectively). Education confers great benefit to health status both through greater knowledge of risk and protective factors, as well as the economic resources to facilitate healthy behaviors.[14] Increasing educational attainment will depend, in part, on improving school quality and the affordability of college.

Degrees Awarded to Women, by Type, 1969–1970 and 2008–2009

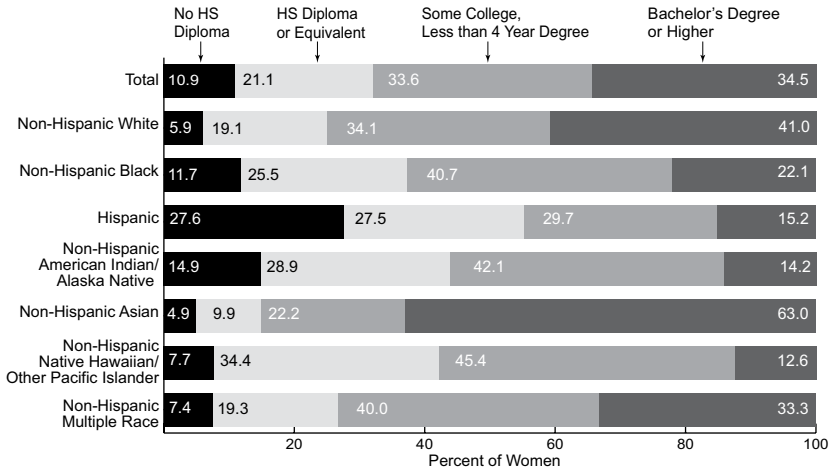
Source I.9: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics



**Includes fields of dentistry, medicine, optometry, osteopathic medicine, pharmacy, podiatry, veterinary medicine, chiropractic, public health, law, and theological professions. **Includes Doctor of Philosophy degree and degrees awarded for fulfilling specialized requirements in professional fields such as education, musical arts, and engineering. Does not include first professional degrees.*

Educational Attainment Among Women Aged 25–29, by Race/Ethnicity, 2008–2010

Source I.10: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey



WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE

In 2010, 58.6 percent of women aged 16 and older were in the labor force (either employed or not employed and actively seeking employment) compared to 72.3 percent of men.[15] Between 1970 and 2000, women's participation in the labor force increased from 43.3 to approximately 60 percent, and has remained relatively stable over the last decade. Among mothers with children under 18 years of age, 71.3 percent were in the labor force in 2010, up from 47.4 percent in 1975 (data not shown). Labor force participation is higher among mothers with older children and those who are unmarried or separated.[15]

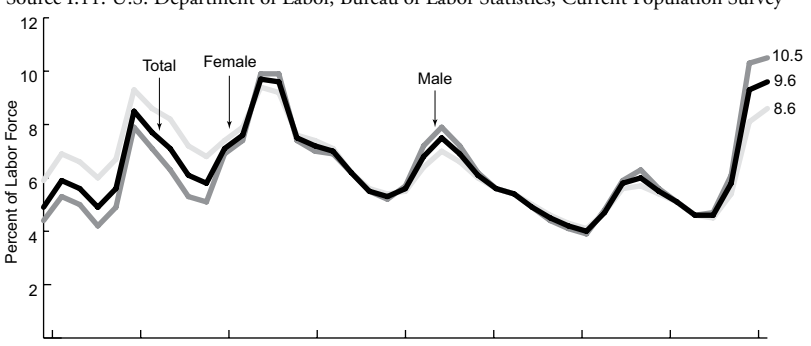
Following the recession of 2007–2009, the average annual rate of unemployment (not employed and actively seeking employment) for persons aged 16 and older in 2010 was 9.6 percent, reaching the highest level since 1983. The unemployment rate was lower among women than men in 2010 (8.6 versus 10.5 percent, respectively) and during the previous three recessions. Women's employment has been less sensitive to recent recessions because of their greater representation in growing occupations, such as health care.[13]

Although women had lower levels of unemployment in 2010, the median weekly earnings of full-time workers aged 25 and older was $170 more for men than women ($874 versus $704). Earnings rise dramatically with increasing education but the gender gap in earnings persists with female full-time workers earning about 75 cents for every dollar earned by male full-time workers at every level of education. For example, while women with a high school diploma or equivalent earned a weekly average of $543 in 2010, their male counterparts earned an average of $710. Only about half of the gender pay gap can be explained by differences in industry and occupation.[16]

Despite the gender gap in earnings, families are increasingly dependent on the employment and income of women. From 1967 to 2008, the number of families with mothers serving as breadwinners increased from 11.7 to 39.3 percent.[17] Breadwinner mothers include single mothers who work and married mothers who earn as much as, or more than, their husbands.

Annual Average Unemployment* Rate Among Workers Aged 16 and Older, by Sex, 1970–2010

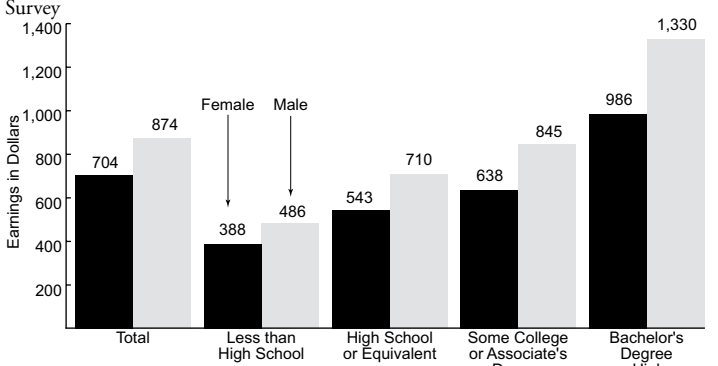
Source I.11: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey



*Not employed and actively seeking employment.

Median Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Workers* Aged 25 and Older, by Education and Sex, 2010

Source I.11: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey



*Full-time work is defined as 35 or more hours per week.

INCARCERATED WOMEN

In 2010, there were a total of 1,612,395 prisoners serving sentences of more than a year under the jurisdiction of State or Federal correctional authorities in the United States. This includes 1,499,573 men and 112,822 women, resulting in incarceration rates of 943 and 67 per 100,000, respectively. While men are more likely to be incarcerated than women, women have seen a greater incarceration rate increase than men from 2000 to 2010 (13.6 versus 4.3 percent, respectively; data not shown).[18]

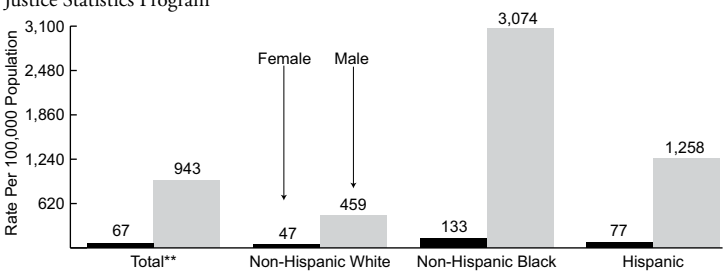
Among both women and men, there continue to be substantial racial and ethnic disparities in incarceration. For example, non-Hispanic Black women are more than twice as likely to be incarcerated as non-Hispanic White women (133 versus 47 per 100,000 women, respectively). Rates also vary with age, peaking among women aged 30–34 years at 175 per 100,000 (data not shown).

Compared to their male counterparts, female prisoners serving State sentences of more than a year were more likely to be incarcerated for property and drug-related offenses and less likely to be incarcerated for violent crimes. In 2009, nearly 30 percent of women prisoners were incarcerated for property crimes, including burglary and fraud, and 25.7 percent were incarcerated for drug offenses, while less than 20 percent of men were incarcerated for either type of offense. By contrast, over half of male prisoners (54.4. percent) were serving sentences for violent crimes including murder, manslaughter, or assault, compared to 35.9 percent of female prisoners.

Incarcerated women often enter the criminal justice system either already suffering from, or at risk for, a wide range of chronic physical, mental, and behavioral health challenges including sexually transmitted infections and HIV, substance abuse disorders, and depression. Further, a majority of female prisoners are of reproductive age and may be pregnant or parenting when incarcerated. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that incarcerated females be treated according to the same standards of care for non-incarcerated individuals with an emphasis on identifying and treating infectious diseases and mental health needs.[19]

Incarceration Rate* Under State and Federal Jurisdiction, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, 2010

Source I.12: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Prisoner Statistics Program and Federal Justice Statistics Program



*Based on prisoners with a sentence of more than 1 year; includes persons under the age of 18 years. **Includes American Indians/Alaska Natives, Asians, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islanders, and persons identifying two or more races.

Offenses of Sentenced Prisoners* Under State Jurisdiction, by Sex, 2009

Source I.12: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Prisoner Statistics Program, National Corrections Reporting Program and National Inmate Survey

*Counts based on prisoners with a sentence of more than 1 year; percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding. **Includes weapons, drunk driving, court offenses, commercialized vice, morals and decency offenses, liquor law violations, and other public-order offenses. †Includes juvenile offenses and other unspecified offense categories.