CHILD CARE & EARLY LEARNING
NEARLY ONE IN FIVE WORKING MOTHERS OF VERY YOUNG CHILDREN WORK IN LOW-WAGE JOBS
KAREN SCHULMAN, JASMINE TUCKER & JULIE VOGTMAN

Despite an improving economy, millions of women—disproportionately women of color—struggle to make ends meet. Women continue to be vastly overrepresented in low-wage jobs1—and for women with children, especially very young children, low-wage work can severely undermine their efforts to support and care for their families.

The nearly 1.3 million mothers of very young children (ages 3 and under) who work as cashiers, personal care aides, maids, restaurant servers, and in other demanding low-wage jobs face particular challenges as breadwinners and caregivers. For the children who depend on their income, the first three years of life are especially critical due to the rapid brain development and skill formation that occur during this time.2 But low-wage work often makes it exceptionally difficult for parents to meet their children’s basic needs. In addition to inadequate pay, low-wage jobs often entail unstable, unpredictable schedules over which workers have little control, along with little (if any) paid sick or family leave. With limited incomes and volatile schedules, parents in low-wage jobs also have tremendous difficulty finding and affording high-quality early care and education—and child care assistance and other federally and state-funded early childhood programs are often unavailable for these parents or not designed to meet their needs. The conditions of low-wage work thus can keep parents from being consistently available when their children need them, and can make it hard to access the high-quality child care that children need to be successful in school and beyond.3

Working mothers with very young children are more likely than workers overall to be in low-wage jobs. More than half of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage jobs are raising children on their own; four in ten are working full time; and nearly one-third are poor. They are disproportionately Black, Latina, and immigrant women.4 They are also less likely to have a college education than workers overall.

KEY FACTS
• Close to 1.3 million mothers with very young children—nearly one in five—work in low-wage jobs.
• Women of color make up more than half of mothers with very young children in low-wage jobs.
• Almost one-third of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage jobs are poor.
• About four in ten mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage jobs are employed full time.
Finally, these mothers—and their children—are particularly vulnerable due to current threats to funding for programs that provide child care assistance, health care, housing, education, and other essential supports for women and their families; actions that harm immigrant women and their families; and steps to undo important workforce protections, placing women at greater risk of unsafe working conditions, unfair pay practices, and discrimination in the workplace.

A new National Women’s Law Center analysis of Census data shows that:\(^5\)

- Close to 1.3 million mothers with very young children (children ages 3 and under) work in low-wage occupations (those that typically pay $10.50 or less per hour).
- Nearly one in five (18.3 percent) working mothers of very young children are employed in low-wage occupations; in comparison, about one in seven (14.5 percent) of all workers are employed in low-wage occupations. These shares are largely unchanged from NWLC’s 2014 analysis of these trends.\(^6\)
- In nearly every state, working mothers of very young children are disproportionately represented in low-wage occupations.\(^7\)
- Nearly one-third (32.6 percent) of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage occupations are poor, compared to just 5.8 percent of all workers and 13.0 percent of all working mothers with very young children.
- Over half (56.5 percent) of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage occupations are supporting their families without a spouse; among all working mothers with very young children, about one-third (33.1 percent) are unmarried.

![Share of workers in low-wage occupations](chart.png)

Source: NWLC calculations based on Current Population Survey 2016 using Sarah Flood et. al., IPUMS-CPS. Mothers of very young children are those who have at least one child age 3 or younger at home. Figures are for all employed workers.
• 20.8 percent of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage occupations are Black and 30.4 percent are Latina; in comparison, 11.6 percent of all workers are Black and 16.5 percent are Latinx.

• More than one-quarter (26.5 percent) of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage occupations are immigrant women, while immigrants represent less than one-fifth (18.3 percent) of all workers.

• Only 9.7 percent of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage occupations have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 36.4 percent of all workers and 42.8 percent of all working mothers with very young children.

• About four in ten (43.0 percent) of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage occupations are employed full time, compared to 73.9 percent of all workers and 62.5 percent of all working mothers with very young children.

Supporting Parents in Low-Wage Jobs and Their Children: An Agenda for Action

Parents in low-wage jobs work hard, making sacrifices because they want better lives for their children. Yet the very nature of those jobs and the financial insecurity that goes with them can create tremendous stress for parents, which can affect their relationship with their children and the home environment and put their children at risk of falling behind even before they enter school.8

With low-wage jobs projected to account for much of the job growth in our economy over the next ten years,9 it is crucial that lawmakers adopt policies that can help parents in low-wage jobs gain more financial security, reduce their stress, and support their children’s successful development.10 These policies include:

• Raising the minimum wage, including the wage for tipped workers.

• Establishing fair scheduling practices that allow employees to meet their caregiving responsibilities and other obligations outside of work.

• Increasing investments to make child care assistance available to more low-income families and their children, raise provider payment rates and compensation, and strengthen the quality and supply of care.

• Providing paid family leave and paid sick days.

• Enforcing and strengthening laws prohibiting pregnancy and caregiver discrimination.

• Strengthening and expanding supports such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) that help parents working in low-wage jobs care for their families and pull them out of poverty.

These measures would greatly bolster the ability of hard-working parents with low-wage jobs to ensure the well-being of their young children—and this investment in children’s successful growth and development will ultimately help strengthen our nation’s economy.11

* * *

The following tables show national and state data on mothers who have very young children and who are employed in low-wage occupations. This analysis focuses on children ages 3 and younger because high-quality child care is particularly important during the early ages of children’s growth and development, yet often unaffordable—care for infants and toddlers costs more than care for older children—and very difficult to find in many communities.12
## TABLE 1. Working mothers of very young children (0-3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All workers</th>
<th>Working mothers of very young children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>97,284,020</td>
<td>64.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>17,498,807</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>24,864,021</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>9,666,179</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immigrant Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Born</td>
<td>122,981,379</td>
<td>81.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Born</td>
<td>27,575,500</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full-/Part-Time Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>111,441,382</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time for any reason</td>
<td>34,921,449</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT for economic reasons</td>
<td>6,122,000</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT for non-economic reasons</td>
<td>28,799,449</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>79,757,017</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single*</td>
<td>71,004,686</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poverty Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below poverty</td>
<td>8,806,063</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above poverty</td>
<td>141,955,640</td>
<td>94.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Attainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>13,335,458</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>38,981,870</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college/associate's degree</td>
<td>43,557,470</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree or higher</td>
<td>54,886,906</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes those who are married but their spouse is absent.

**Notes:** Mothers of very young children are those who have at least one child age 3 or younger at home. Figures are for all employed workers. “Low-wage” occupations are those with median hourly wages of $10.50 or less per hour.

## TABLE 2. Mothers of very young children (0-3) in low-wage occupations, state by state

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Share of workforce that is comprised of mothers of very young children</th>
<th>Share of workers who are in low-wage occupations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Low-wage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes: Mothers of very young children are those who have at least one child age 3 or younger at home. Figures are for all employed workers. “Low-wage” occupations are those with median hourly wages of $10.50 or less per hour.


Endnotes


4 “Black women” refers to those who identified themselves in a U.S. Census Bureau survey as Black or African American. “Latinas” refers to women of any race who identified themselves to be of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.


7 The exceptions are Delaware (14.5 percent of all workers and 14.1 percent of working mothers with children ages 0-3 hold low-wage jobs), Rhode Island (14.3 percent of the total workforce as well as working mothers of children ages 0-3 hold low-wage jobs), and South Dakota (15.8 percent of all workers and 15.3 percent of working mothers with children ages 0-3 hold low-wage jobs). In Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York, the difference between the share of all workers and the share of mothers with very young children in low-wage jobs is less than one percentage point. See Table 2.

8 See generally Vogtman & Schulman, supra note 3.


