



'Mancession' No More

Women have been among the hardest hit during the economic downturn.

BY KATE NISWANDER

The national unemployment rate remains at a staggering 9.6 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But for women nationwide, this number represents the tip of the iceberg: Emerging research shows that two specific groups—single female heads of households and women of color—have been hit hardest during the economic downturn and its aftermath.

In the beginnings of the recession in 2008, The Women and Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania (WGF), an independent foundation whose mission is

to achieve equity for women and girls in its region, noticed a growing trend in the media. According to WGF Executive Director Heather Arnet, the media was framing the crisis as a “mancession” and focusing solely on the downturn’s effect on men.

“The President talked about investing in ‘shovel ready,’ ‘hard hat’ jobs,” Arnet says. “We were concerned those investments would have little impact in alleviating female poverty across the nation, and within our own state.”

Propelled by the need for state-specific

research, WGF partnered with the Institute for Women’s Policy Research to explore the impact of the recession on the women of Pennsylvania. Its February 2010 report, *The Female Face of Poverty and Economic Insecurity: The Impact of the Recession on Women in Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh MSA*, shows that unemployment for single mothers in Pennsylvania jumped from 5 to 11 between 2007 and 2009—double the rate of their male counterparts. Poverty rates for single-mother households increased 15 percent between 2007 and 2008.

“Because of historical and labor market inequities, female minorities are less likely to have the economic resources to support themselves and their families when they lose their jobs.”

“To see unemployment rates for single female heads of households at twice the rate of their male counterparts [in our state and metro area] was a real call to action,” Arnet says.

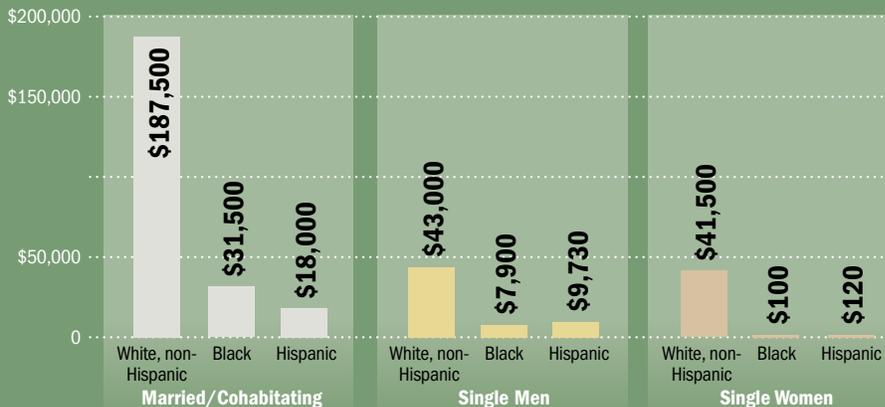
These women are not the only group to face disproportionate disadvantages during the economic crisis. A study released in March by The Insight Center for Community Economic Development brings attention to the current “wealth gap” for women of color. While wealth disparities affect all women, according to *Lifting as We Climb: Women of Color, Wealth and America’s Future*, single black and Hispanic women have just one penny of wealth for every dollar owned by their male counterparts. Further, nearly half of all single and black Hispanic women have zero or negative wealth, meaning their debts are of greater value than their assets.

The fact that women of color are likely to have greater debt or are less likely to own assets make the current unemployment crisis all the more devastating, according to Dr. Mariko Chang, the study’s author. “As the current economic crisis has shown us, when one loses access to income—as so many have during this crisis—it’s wealth [cash in savings accounts and other assets] that allows people to make ends meet and remain financially stable,” Chang says. “Because of historical and labor market inequities, female minorities are less likely to have the economic resources to support themselves and their families when they lose their jobs.”

Solutions will need to take the long view, according to both reports. WGF recently presented its research at a Congressional briefing and offered policy recommendations for this issue, including training employers on best practices to recruit and retain women workers and promoting family-friendly work policies. For female minorities in particular, Chang’s report encourages the creation of more subsidies and incentives to save, more support for self-employment and microenterprise, and improving data collection on minorities.

Both reports also stress that creating better employment opportunities for women and minorities will stimulate better overall economic growth. For the currently

Racial Differences in Median Wealth (excluding vehicles) by Household Type, Ages 18-64, 2007



Unemployment Rates by Marital/Household Status, Pennsylvania 2007-2008



SOURCE: IWPR ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY, 2007-2009

unemployed, Arnet recommends programs aimed at training women for new energy or green careers, while those new to the work force should consider careers in engineering. “We have to think about how state and federally funded and created jobs will be

especially targeted, marketed, and designed to be family-friendly jobs where women can succeed and thrive,” Arnet says. ♀

Kate Niswander is a coordinator for the Alliance for Women in Media.

Resources

To read *The Female Face of Poverty and Economic Insecurity: The Impact of the Recession on Women in Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh MSA*, visit www.iwpr.org/pdf/R345PApoverty.pdf. *Lifting as We Climb: Women of Color, Wealth and America’s Future* is available at <http://www.insightccd.org/uploads/CRWG/LiftingAsWeClimb-WomenWealth-Report-InsightCenter-Spring2010.pdf>.

