

RESEARCH

FOR THE WORLD

How can the US learn from Europe and beyond to improve its support for single-parent families?

Published 23 March 2023



Dr Amanda Sheely is Associate Professor in the Department of Social Policy at LSE. Her research focuses on social assistance programmes for lone mothers, with a primary focus on the United States. She is particularly interested in how devolution shapes policy implementation, the relationship between social assistance programmes and low wage employment, and how the interaction between social assistance and criminal justice systems shapes outcomes among economically disadvantaged mothers.

In the United States, single-parent families are much more likely to be poor compared to families with two parents, with one in three single-mother families living in poverty. **Amanda Sheely, Janet C Gornick** and **Laurie C Maldonado** have been looking to other high-income countries to find what policy lessons the US can learn and implement to better support single-parent families.

The United States has the [highest rate in the world](#) of children living in a single-parent household, with the majority of these families headed by women. Single-parent families headed by women are more likely to live in poverty, experience food insecurity and live in precarious housing situations.

For many single-parent families, these challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw lost or reduced household earnings and more demands on parents' time because of [school and childcare closures](#). In 2021, President Joe Biden [commented](#) that in the past, as a single parent supporting two children, he "could not afford childcare", and in March 2022, in his first [State of the Union](#) address to Congress, Biden announced a plan to reduce childcare costs.

It's clear that single-parent families in the United States need greater assistance, yet the conversation in the US focuses almost primarily on the heavily stigmatised policy of providing cash assistance. To push the debate forward, in a new special issue of [The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science](#), we brought together 30 researchers from the US and other high-income countries to examine a range of policy options available to improve the economic wellbeing of these vulnerable families. What can the US learn from this research? And, more importantly, is it possible to enact these policies in the US? We think it's possible.



Professor Janet C Gornick

is Director of the Stone Center on Socio-Economic Inequality and Professor of Political Science and Sociology at The City University of New York. Most of her research is comparative and concerns social welfare policies and their impact on gender disparities in the labour market and/or on income inequality.



Dr Laurie C Maldonado is Assistant Professor of Social Work at Molloy University and a lecturer at the Columbia University School of Social Work. A social worker, educator and international scholar on single-parent families, her research aims to inform policies and programmes to improve the lives of single parents and their children in the US and across different countries.



Policy debates have tended to attribute single parents' higher rates of poverty to the single parents themselves. ”

Single-parent families are not all the same – and this matters for policy

American policymakers have tended to think of single-parent families as being very alike; often single parents are thought of being either never married or permanently without a partner, with both circumstances never changing. This isn't backed up by the evidence. For [example](#), a lack of formal child support received by custodial mothers does not mean that fathers are not involved in their children's lives. Single parents are diverse in their [race](#), ethnicity, [migration status](#), education, partnership histories, sexuality, age, family size, and work history. And many single-parent families have diverse relationships with other caregivers, including extended families.

This view of single-parent families as a monolithic group has informed American policymakers' approach for the last 50 years. Policy debates have tended to attribute single parents' higher rates of poverty to the single parents themselves. Single parents are poor, the argument has gone, because of their own decisions and behaviours; if they made different decisions, then they could overcome poverty. This view has meant a move away from more supportive policies for single-parent families towards those that include work requirements, promote marriage, and the scaling down or complete elimination of direct cash transfers to those who need them the most.

Looking at how other countries support single-parent families gives us a window to how US policymakers can break out of their focus on the individual, and potentially move to policies that have positive outcomes for single-parent families which are supported by the evidence. US audiences are unlikely to be interested in policy lessons which are more general or simply "European style". To get the greatest traction in the US, the focus for our case studies was on taking lessons on how specific policies are designed, and how that in turn shapes outcomes.

Work in this special issue can be broken into two categories: describing the characteristics and experiences of single families in Europe, the UK, US, and other high-income countries; and assessing policy options which could be adopted in the US to better support single-parent families.

What do we know about single-parent families and their incomes, in the US and elsewhere?



Dr Isabel Shutes is Associate Professor in the Department of Social Policy at LSE. Her research interests focus on citizenship, migration, care, inequality and social policies; social divisions and inequalities relating to citizenship and immigration status and the implications for care, employment, social rights and social provision.



Dr Thomas Biegert is Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Policy at LSE. His research focuses on welfare states and labour markets and how they shape social inequalities, with particular interest in social mechanisms of cumulative inequality. He is currently conducting research on household joblessness during the economic crisis in the US, labour market transitions of younger and older workers, and the question of how we can analyse the interplay of different policies and institutions.



Gaps between single and partnered mothers vary depending on whether a country's policies are designed to protect the economic security of vulnerable mothers at the bottom of the distribution or to promote economic opportunity by supporting single mothers in full-time employment. ”

Research from this volume clearly shows that single-parent families overall are economically disadvantaged in terms of income, wealth, and material hardship. However, looking more closely, we also see that the income disadvantage faced by these families are fundamentally tied to the policies that countries adopt.

Isabel Shutes of LSE's Department of Social Policy [found](#) that in the UK, requirements for legal residency and social benefits – such as the need to be a worker or to be married or in a legal partnership – have negative consequences for migrant single parents in terms of their ability to work, as well as their ability to exit relationships.

Janet C Gornick gives “A comparative perspective on policies to support single-parent families” at this Brookings Institute event.

Reinforcing that single-parent families are diverse, a [quantitative study of single-parent families](#) in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and US, found that these families were at a significant disadvantage in their household wealth compared with dual-parent households – but that the magnitude of that disadvantage varies sharply across countries.

Also studying poverty among single-parent families in 18 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, Rense Nieuwenhuis of Stockholm University [found](#) that in countries that have less public spending on childcare and income support policies, and which have a larger share of dual earner households (which are linked to higher living standards), the threshold of what is considered to be poverty is higher. This means that it becomes more difficult for single-parent families to reach this threshold and to participate fully in society even if their incomes remain the same.

In her study of the incomes of single mothers in 12 rich countries, Susan Harkness of the University of Bristol, [found](#) striking variation between countries. Compared to households with children headed by couples, single motherhood is linked to reduced incomes, and the difference is the starkest for the US. She argues that gaps between single and partnered mothers vary depending on whether a country's policies are designed to protect the economic security of vulnerable mothers at the bottom of the distribution or to promote economic opportunity by supporting single mothers in full-time employment.



US and European data [shows] no link between how generous public income support programs are and the employment outcomes of single mothers. ”

Employment protections and income supports can bolster incomes and help protect families from poverty

Drawing on the idea that poverty rates among single parents are not the same across countries, Elise Aerts, Ive Marx, and Zachary Parolin [compared](#) income support policies in Europe and the US. They find that both employment protections – including minimum wage policies - and income supports such as child benefits, are needed to bolster incomes and protect both working and jobless single parents from poverty. They also find that programmes which target specific vulnerable groups within the umbrella of universal benefits are the most successful.

US welfare reforms of the past three decades have been about incentivising single mothers to find work by cutting support. Using US and European data, Thomas Biegert of LSE's Department of Social Policy, and co-authors, find that there is no link between how generous public income support programs are and the employment outcomes of single mothers.

Using data from 27 European countries, Alzbeta Bartova, Adeline Otto, and Wim Van Lancker, [determine](#) that parental leave policies that are designed to be generous, and inclusive can facilitate single parents in maintaining employment and enable non-working single parents to enter the labour market.

Child support policies can also play a role in the wellbeing of single mothers and their families. Comparing child support policies in the US and Europe, Mia Hakovirta, Laura Cuesta, Mari Haapanen and Daniel R Meyer [argue](#) that child support amounts in the US may be set too high and should be reset to levels at which fathers can realistically meet payment requirements. They believe policymakers should consider guaranteeing a modest amount of public support to single-parent households.

Lessons from our research, and prospects for reforming US single-parent policies

In our research, we argue that policymakers should work towards two goals: reducing economic hardship for single-parent families; and minimising the disparities between single parent families. With these goals in mind, we have four lessons for policymakers in the US:

1. Policies to allow single parents to reconcile their work and family lives are crucial for securing single parents' employment and incomes. Publicly supported childcare, and parental and family leave rights and benefits, are especially important.
2. Shoring up earned income—by strengthening and stabilising single parents' employment rates and paid work hours—is necessary but not enough to ensure economic security for many single-parent families. Publicly provided income support adds a further layer of crucial support.
3. Strengthening income among single-parent families is crucial, but other goals matter, especially enabling the accumulation of various forms of wealth.
4. Most single-parent families need public support, but some are particularly vulnerable. Policies can be designed to include and protect those single parents and their children who are especially at risk.

Our work shows just how far behind the US is in its support for single-parent families, compared to Europe and other high-income countries. And while many of the US' weaknesses in this area are down to a lack of political will – one that is informed by fiscal conservatism and a focus on the individual – rather than a lack of knowledge, the situation is not completely bleak, and there are some possible openings for policy reform in the US in the medium and long term.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that it is possible for legislators and policymakers to react to a problem with a wide array of new and increased support, both quickly and with public backing. Unlike the UK and some European countries, the US federal system allows for extensive policymaking autonomy at the state level, and some states have already implemented some of the policies we looked at, such as childcare, paid leave, child support policies, and more targeted income support. If they have positive outcomes, it may be easier for these policies to “trickle-up” to the national level, although efforts to enact policies at the national level are also important to reduce inequalities between states.

With public opinion on single parenting growing more favourable, we may yet see “American pragmatism” provide an opening for US policymakers to learn from elsewhere and make positive reforms to support single-parent families. ■

Chris Gilson of LSE's Phelan United States Centre assisted in writing up this LSE Research Showcase. This research was supported by the [Phelan United States Centre](#).

The special issue of The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science on [“Single-Parent Families and Public Policy: evidence from high-income countries”](#) is edited by Amanda Sheely, Janet C Gornick and Laurie C Maldonado.

Subscribe to receive articles from LSE's online social science magazine.

lse.ac.uk/rftw