Testing patch 732-20191021 Women in the labor force

January 2020 | *Report 1084*

In 2018, 57.1 percent of all women participated in the labor force. This was about the same as the 57.0 percent who participated in 2017, and still about 3 percentage points below the peak of 60.0 percent in 1999. By comparison, the labor force participation rate for men was 69.1 percent in 2018, unchanged from the previous year and 17.5 percentage points below its peak of 86.6 percent in 1948.

The rapid rise in women's labor force participation was a major development in the labor market during the second half of the 20th century. Overall, women's labor force participation increased dramatically from the 1960s through the 1980s, before slowing in the 1990s. With the dawn of the 21st century, labor force participation among women began a gradual decline, until the participation rate hit a recent low in 2015 at 56.7 percent.

Women's involvement in the labor market has changed in several notable ways over the past several decades. For example, women became much more likely to pursue higher levels of education: from 1970 to 2018, the proportion of women ages 25 to 64 in the labor force who held a college degree quadrupled, whereas the proportion of men with a college degree about doubled over that time. Women also have become more likely to work full time and year round. In addition, women's earnings as a proportion of men's earnings have grown over time: women working full time earned 62 percent of what men earned in 1979 and 81 percent in 2018. More recently, women in the baby-boom generation (defined as people born between 1946 and 1964) have begun to retire in large numbers, which has put downward pressure on their labor force participation rate over the past decade or so.

This report presents historical and recent labor force and earnings data for women and men from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a national monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unless otherwise noted, data are annual averages from the CPS. (For a detailed description of the source of the data and an explanation of concepts and definitions used, see the technical notes at the end of this report.)

Selected demographic characteristics

Women's labor force participation was 57.1 percent in 2018, little changed from 57.0 percent in 2017. Men's labor force participation, which always has been much higher than that for women, was 69.1 percent in 2018, unchanged from the previous year. (See table 2.)

In 2018, the unemployment rate for women was 3.8 percent, down 0.5 percentage point from a year earlier. The rate for men was 3.9 percent in 2018, also down 0.5 percentage point from a year earlier. Women's unemployment rates varied considerably by race and ethnicity. In 2018, Asian women had the lowest rate (3.0 percent), followed by White women (3.4 percent). Unemployment rates for Hispanic or Latino women and Black or African American women were much higher, at 5.1 percent and 6.0 percent, respectively. Men's unemployment rates exhibit a similar pattern. The rates for

Asian men (3.0 percent) and White men (3.5 percent) were well below the figures for Hispanic or Latino men (4.3 percent) and Black or African American men (7.0 percent). (See tables 2 and 3.)

Labor force participation varies by marital status and differs between women and men. Never-married women had the highest participation rate of all women at 64.5 percent in 2018. Separated and divorced women were more likely to participate in the labor force (62.7 percent and 61.2 percent, respectively) than married women (58.2 percent). By contrast, married men were more likely to participate in the labor force (73.1 percent) than separated men (70.2 percent), never-married men (67.7 percent), and divorced men (64.4 percent). Among women and men who were widowed, the labor participation rates were 19.5 percent and 24.0 percent, respectively. (See table 4.)

The labor force participation rate of all women with children under 18 years of age was 71.4 percent in March 2018, about unchanged (71.3 percent) from 2017. Among mothers, the labor force participation rate for those with children 6 to 17 years old, at 76.5 percent in March 2018, was higher than for those with younger children. The rate for those with children under 6 years old was 64.7 percent, and the rate for women with children under 3 years old was 62.0 percent. (See tables 5 and 7; data were collected in the 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS.)

Unmarried mothers are more likely to participate in the labor force than married mothers. In March 2018, 77.3 percent of unmarried mothers were in the labor force, compared with 69.0 percent of married mothers. (See table 6; data were collected in the 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS.)

Educational attainment

The educational attainment of women ages 25 to 64 in the labor force has risen substantially over the past half century. In 2018, 44 percent of women ages 25 to 64 held a bachelor's degree and higher, compared with 11 percent in 1970. In 2018, 6 percent of women in the labor force had less than a high school diploma—that is, did not graduate from high school or earn a GED—down from 34 percent in 1970. (See tables 9A and 9B.)

Occupation and industry

Women accounted for 52 percent of all workers employed in management, professional, and related occupations in 2018, somewhat more than their share of total employment (47 percent). The share of women in specific occupations within this large category varied. For example, 19 percent of software developers, 27 percent of chief executives, and 37 percent of lawyers were women, whereas 89 percent of registered nurses, 80 percent of elementary and middle school teachers, and 61 percent of accountants and auditors were women. (See table 11.)

In 2018, Asian and White women were more likely to work in higher paying management, professional, and related occupations (53 percent and 45 percent, respectively) than were Black (36 percent) and Hispanic women (27 percent). Meanwhile, Hispanic (31 percent) and Black women (28 percent) were more likely than Asian and White women (21 percent and 20 percent, respectively) to work in lower paying service occupations. (See table 12.)

Women accounted for more than half of all workers within several industry sectors in 2018: financial activities (53 percent), education and health services (74 percent), leisure and hospitality (52 percent), and other services (54 percent). (Other services includes repair and maintenance industries; personal and laundry services; membership associations and organizations; and private households.) However, women were substantially underrepresented

(relative to their share of total employment) in agriculture (26 percent), mining (14 percent), construction (10 percent), manufacturing (29 percent), and transportation and utilities (24 percent). (See table 14.)

Statistical Tables

Table 1. Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population, by age and gender, 2018 annual averages (Numbers in thousands)

Age	Civilian noninstitutional population	Civilian labor force						Not in labor force
		Total	Percentage of population	Employed		Unemployed		
				Total	Percentage of population	Total	Percentage of labor force	

See footnotes at end of table.

Age	Civilian noninstitutional population	Total	Percentage of population	Total	Percentage of population	Total	Percentage of labor force	Not in labor force
Total								
16 years and older	257,791	162,075	62.9	155,761	60.4	6,314	3.9	95,716
16 to 19 years	16,765	5,885	35.1	5,126	30.6	759	12.9	10,879
16 to 17 years	8,917	2,133	23.9	1,838	20.6	295	13.8	6,784
18 to 19 years	7,848	3,753	47.8	3,289	41.9	464	12.4	4,095
20 to 24 years	21,239	15,099	71.1	14,051	66.2	1,048	6.9	6,140
25 to 54 years	126,390	103,705	82.1	100,314	79.4	3,391	3.3	22,685
25 to 34 years	44,581	36,774	82.5	35,324	79.2	1,450	3.9	7,807
25 to 29 years	22,948	18,893	82.3	18,073	78.8	820	4.3	4,054
30 to 34 years	21,633	17,881	82.7	17,251	79.7	630	3.5	3,752
35 to 44 years	40,569	33,619	82.9	32,616	80.4	1,003	3.0	6,950
35 to 39 years	21,143	17,491	82.7	16,947	80.2	544	3.1	3,653
40 to 44 years	19,426	16,129	83.0	15,670	80.7	459	2.8	3,297
45 to 54 years	41,240	33,311	80.8	32,373	78.5	938	2.8	7,929
45 to 49 years	20,504	16,873	82.3	16,412	80.0	461	2.7	3,631
50 to 54 years	20,736	16,438	79.3	15,961	77.0	477	2.9	4,298
55 to 64 years	42,114	27,354	65.0	26,565	63.1	789	2.9	14,760
55 to 59 years	21,677	15,679	72.3	15,226	70.2	453	2.9	5,998
60 to 64 years	20,437	11,675	57.1	11,339	55.5	336	2.9	8,762
65 years and older	51,283	10,032	19.6	9,705	18.9	327	3.3	41,251
65 to 69 years	16,961	5,592	33.0	5,417	31.9	175	3.1	11,369
70 to 74 years	13,393	2,615	19.5	2,525	18.9	90	3.4	10,778
75 years and older	20,929	1,826	8.7	1,764	8.4	62	3.4	19,103
Women								
16 years and older	133,112	75,978	57.1	73,063	54.9	2,916	3.8	57,134

Table 1. Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population, by age and gender, 2018 annual averages (Numbers in thousands)

Age	Civilian noninstitutional population	Civilian labor force							Not in labor force
		Total	Percentage of population	Employed		Unemployed			
				Total	Percentage of population	Total	Percentage of labor force		
16 to 19 years	8,272	2,977	36.0	2,639	31.9	338	11.3		5,295
16 to 17 years	4,390	1,130	25.7	991	22.6	139	12.3		3,260
18 to 19 years	3,882	1,847	47.6	1,648	42.5	198	10.7		2,035
20 to 24 years	10,600	7,312	69.0	6,861	64.7	452	6.2		3,288
25 to 54 years	64,096	48,264	75.3	46,641	72.8	1,623	3.4		15,831
25 to 34 years	22,376	16,985	75.9	16,298	72.8	687	4.0		5,391
25 to 29 years	11,476	8,825	76.9	8,433	73.5	392	4.4		2,651
30 to 34 years	10,900	8,160	74.9	7,865	72.2	295	3.6		2,740
35 to 44 years	20,637	15,497	75.1	15,008	72.7	488	3.2		5,140
35 to 39 years	10,730	8,009	74.6	7,751	72.2	258	3.2		2,721
40 to 44 years	9,907	7,488	75.6	7,258	73.3	230	3.1		2,419
45 to 54 years	21,083	15,783	74.9	15,335	72.7	448	2.8		5,300
45 to 49 years	10,474	7,981	76.2	7,756	74.1	225	2.8		2,493
50 to 54 years	10,608	7,801	73.5	7,579	71.4	223	2.9		2,807
55 to 64 years	21,851	12,918	59.1	12,564	57.5	354	2.7		8,933
55 to 59 years	11,158	7,380	66.1	7,175	64.3	205	2.8		3,778
60 to 64 years	10,692	5,538	51.8	5,389	50.4	149	2.7		5,155
65 years and older	28,295	4,508	15.9	4,358	15.4	150	3.3		23,787
65 to 69 years	8,995	2,598	28.9	2,514	27.9	85	3.3		6,397
70 to 74 years	7,194	1,137	15.8	1,098	15.3	39	3.4		6,057
75 years and older	12,105	772	6.4	746	6.2	26	3.4		11,333
Men									
16 years and older	124,678	86,096	69.1	82,698	66.3	3,398	3.9		38,582
16 to 19 years	8,493	2,909	34.2	2,487	29.3	422	14.5		5,585
16 to 17 years	4,527	1,003	22.1	847	18.7	156	15.5		3,524
18 to 19 years	3,967	1,906	48.1	1,640	41.4	266	13.9		2,061
20 to 24 years	10,639	7,786	73.2	7,190	67.6	596	7.7		2,853
25 to 54 years	62,294	55,440	89.0	53,673	86.2	1,768	3.2		6,854
25 to 34 years	22,205	19,789	89.1	19,027	85.7	763	3.9		2,416

Table 1. Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population, by age and gender, 2018 annual averages (Numbers in thousands)

Age	Civilian noninstitutional population	Civilian labor force							Not in labor force
		Total	Percentage of population	Employed			Unemployed		
				Total	Percentage of population		Total	Percentage of labor force	
25 to 29 years	11,472	10,069	87.8	9,640	84.0		428	4.3	1,403
30 to 34 years	10,733	9,721	90.6	9,386	87.4		335	3.4	1,013
35 to 44 years	19,933	18,123	90.9	17,608	88.3		515	2.8	1,810
35 to 39 years	10,413	9,482	91.1	9,196	88.3		285	3.0	932
40 to 44 years	9,519	8,641	90.8	8,412	88.4		229	2.7	878
45 to 54 years	20,157	17,528	87.0	17,038	84.5		490	2.8	2,629
45 to 49 years	10,029	8,892	88.7	8,655	86.3		236	2.7	1,137
50 to 54 years	10,128	8,637	85.3	8,383	82.8		254	2.9	1,491
55 to 64 years	20,263	14,436	71.2	14,001	69.1		435	3.0	5,827
55 to 59 years	10,519	8,299	78.9	8,051	76.5		248	3.0	2,220
60 to 64 years	9,744	6,137	63.0	5,950	61.1		187	3.0	3,607
65 years and older	22,988	5,525	24.0	5,348	23.3		177	3.2	17,464
65 to 69 years	7,966	2,993	37.6	2,903	36.4		90	3.0	4,972
70 to 74 years	6,199	1,478	23.8	1,427	23.0		51	3.4	4,721
75 years and older	8,824	1,054	11.9	1,018	11.5		36	3.4	7,770

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

Technical Notes

The estimates in this report were obtained from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a national monthly sample survey of approximately 60,000 eligible households that provides a wide range of information on the labor force, employment, and unemployment. The survey is conducted for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) by the U.S. Census Bureau, using a scientifically selected national sample with coverage in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Information in this report will be made available upon request to individuals with sensory impairments. Voice phone: (202) 691-5200. Federal Relay Service: 1-800-877-8339. Material in this report is in the public domain and may be reproduced without permission.

Percentage:The formula for the percentage of employees with a given characteristic out of all employees in the domain is

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{I}\sum_{g=1}^{G_i} OccFW_{ig} \times X_{ig} \times Z_{ig}}{\sum_{i=1}^{I}\sum_{g=1}^{G_i} OccFW_{ig} \times X_{ig}} \times 100$$

Average (mean) The formula for the average value of a quantity for a characteristic is

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{I}\sum_{g=1}^{G_i} OccFW_{ig} \times X_{ig} \times Z_{ig} \times Q_{ig}}{\sum_{i=1}^{I}\sum_{g=1}^{G_i} OccFW_{ig} \times X_{ig} \times Z_{ig}}$$