Families, Children, and Inequality in the United States: A 2022 Overview

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This handout examines how marital status and family structure influence household finances using data from the 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF). It highlights differences in earnings, income, and wealth across family types, with particular attention to gender differences among single households and the relationship between children and economic outcomes.

Single Households: Dependents and Gender

The study distinguishes between singles with and without dependents. Singles with dependents represent a financially vulnerable group. Despite household sizes approaching those of married couples, they possess substantially fewer resources across all measures. These households receive 20% of their income from transfers, double the rate of married households.

Table 1: Marital Status Partition of the 2022 Sample

	Averages (x 10^3 USD)			Income Sources (%)				
Marital Status	E[a]	Y[b]	W[c]	L[d]	K[e]	B[f]	Z[g]	O[h]
Married	143.0	196.1	1513.5	61.8	12.7	13.7	10.5	1.3
Single	38.2	69.0	445.3	46.7	17.1	10.6	22.9	2.7
Single w/ Dep.	38.9	55.3	265.0	63.8	4.9	8.1	20.1	3.1
Male	42.5	64.5	433.0	56.2	10.9	11.9	19.6	1.5
Female	37.5	51.5	197.6	67.7	1.9	6.2	20.4	3.9
Single w/o Dep.	37.8	76.3	540.7	40.1	21.8	11.6	24	2.6
Male	48.7	99.1	618.3	37.7	31.7	14.1	15.4	1.1
Female	29.6	59.2	482.3	43.1	9.2	8.4	34.8	4.5
Total	98.4	142.0	1059.0	58.7	13.6	13.1	13.1	1.6

Abbreviations: [a] Earnings; [b] Income; [c] Wealth; [d] Labor; [e] Capital; [f] Business; [g] Transfers; [h] Other

Among singles without dependents, significant gender disparities emerge. Male-headed households possess approximately 50% more earnings, income, and wealth than their female counterparts. Income composition reveals further differences: single males derive 32% of income from capital sources, while single females receive 35% from transfers. This pattern likely reflects demographic differences, including greater longevity among women resulting in more widows.

Family status, Children and Income Distribution

The SCF also records children not living in the household. This additional information allows us to consider households with and without children regardless of whether those children still live at home.

Table 2: Income Distribution by Family Status

	Average	Quintiles				
Family Status	(x 10^3 USD)	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Married	196.1	35.4	71.0	107.4	159.8	606.5
w/ Children	204.5	36.2	70.5	107.0	162.8	645.8
w/o Children	153.1	31.4	73.8	109.1	149.0	400.6
Single	69.0	13.0	26.0	40.8	60.8	204.6
w/ Children	61.9	14.0	26.0	40.4	59.7	169.0
w/o Children	81.3	11.3	25.8	41.3	62.7	264.8

Table 2 summarizes the differences in income of different family types. Married households with children have higher incomes than married households without children but the reverse is true for single households. These differences are mostly the result of differences in the top quintile where those with children have 60 percent higher income than those without.

Number of Children by Quintile and Age

Table 3 reports the average number of children across income and wealth groups while accounting for differences in age.

Table 3: Avg. Number of Children by Quintile and Age

(a): Income Distribution

	Quintiles					
Age	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	All
40-50	2.30	2.52	2.33	1.99	2.21	2.27
50-60	2.07	2.18	3.01	2.24	2.52	2.40
60+	2.49	2.41	2.57	2.28	2.43	2.44

(b): Wealth Distribution

	Quintiles					
Age	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	All
40-50	2.69	2.49	1.88	2.11	2.19	2.27
50-60	2.32	2.53	2.61	2.18	2.39	2.40
60+	2.67	2.57	2.34	2.32	2.29	2.44

The top panel of Table 3 shows no clear relationship between income and the number of children once age is taken into account. The relationship with wealth is slightly different. Households higher in the wealth distribution tend to have somewhat fewer children on average. One reason for lower positions in the wealth distribution for households with more children could be financial investments in children.

Takeaway: Marital status is closely linked to financial outcomes. Married households hold roughly three times the resources of single households, with large differences in earnings, income, and wealth. Single households, especially those headed by women or raising dependents, face the greatest financial challenges. While married households with children appear to have higher incomes than those without children, this relationship largely disappears once differences in age are taken into account.

For more information visit the Macro Inequality Lab: At the Macro Inequality Lab, we study how markets function, how institutions shape market outcomes, and how these forces interact to create or reduce inequality. Our research asks fundamental questions on the causes and consequences of inequality (http://macro-inequality-lab.net).

References

Kuhn, Moritz, and José-Víctor Ríos-Rull (May 2025). *Income and Wealth Inequality in the United States: An Update Including the 2022 Wave.*