

Unveiling the Burden of Solitude: A Sociological Inquest into the Root Causes and Extant Conditions Surrounding Mental Health Experiences of Single Mothers

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The mental health of single mothers is emerging as an increasingly prominent issue as decline at the aggregate and individual levels results in cascading negative effects within their children's lives. Single mothers are conventionally burdened by three leading factors: general stress levels, anxiety, and general depression. These challenges are exacerbated by environmental components such as increased financial burdens, insufficient social support, and the responsibility of isolated child-rearing expectations featuring an acute lack of critical resources. Given these challenges, the elevated incidence of mental illness and mental health struggles within this demographic cohort is unsurprising. This paper discusses personal challenges faced by single mothers and effective therapeutic interventions for the management of stress that disproportionately affects them. Individual therapies like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and teletherapy, for example, are widely considered to be very efficient in managing general depression and anxiety, as group therapy and support groups provide emotional ballast and advice where single mothers can share their experiences and lean on each other. Community-level programs can provide childcare at reduced prices and offer financial/educational aid to support primary and secondary development of single mothers' children. A multifaceted approach to single mothers' mental health needs through different levers is vital for their children, for if single mothers are mentally, financially, and physically healthy, then their children develop and grow, family ties are tightened, and the community support system is strengthened writ large. Recognizing the challenges faced by single mothers, addressing them proactively and enabling convenient access to effective mental health services is, therefore, of key importance to their well-being and, by extension, society in general.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an important part of every individual's overall well-being. Single mothers often face a unique suite of problems that negatively impact their quality of life and mental equilibrium. In addition to low morale and limited community support, single mothers must struggle through the pressures of day-to-day life and endure social stigmas alone. As a result, they are more likely to encounter increased stress factors versus their married counterparts. This results in increased anxiety, depression, isolation, potential mental illness, and health issues. In the US, an estimated 23% of children under 18 live with a single parent (as opposed to 7% worldwide).¹ A 2024 study showed that there are around eleven million single-parent households in America.² Of those, about eight million (~80%) were led by a single mother compared to three million by a single father. And while single motherhood has become a commonality in the U.S., the fact that nearly a third of single mothers live in poverty suggests a deep structural divide

between the resources these women need and our national capacity to provide them.³ These figures suggest that problems associated with single motherhood will only increase if concrete actions are taken to curb the deleterious effects of single motherhood with requisite urgency. Single motherhood can result from various circumstances including divorce, separation, widowhood, or a decision to parent alone. Regardless of the context, single motherhood often features compounded stressors that can plague mothers with trauma and fatigue. In fact, the prevalence of moderate to severe mental health issues is significantly increased in single mothers compared to partnered mothers. In one study, 28.7% of single mothers, in comparison to 15.7% of partnered mothers, had been diagnosed with mental disabilities.⁴ In addition, single mothers usually have lower quality-of-life (QOL) scores - determined by symptoms such as stress, general depression, suicidal ideation, and alcohol use - than married mothers (72.0 ± 10.6 vs. 86.9 ± 13.1).⁵ There are multiple reasons for the deteriorating mental health of single mothers; the most significant is limited access to resources which in turn relates to financial

hardships.⁶ These financial insolvencies play a pivotal role in exacerbating chronic stressors. In a study examining the relationship between self-reported stressors and depressive symptoms in Black single mothers, 56.07% of them said that financial stressors contributed to their depressed mood.⁶ As single-mother and single-parent households become more common, this evidence highlights the importance of providing support for this population while drawing attention to the consequent effects these circumstances can inflict upon impoverished and minority communities.

This article, therefore, seeks to uncover the effects of single-parent stressors (particularly regarding single mothers), highlight aspects of the emotional and mental challenges that result from raising children alone, and explore potential interventions to support single mothers' well-being. Left unaddressed, these concerns can metastasize into psychological breakdowns, general depression, and even suicide. With the rising number of single-parent households in contemporary society, our capacity to understand and advocate for single mothers' psychological, physical, financial, and emotional needs takes on elevated importance.

BARRIERS FACED BY SINGLE MOTHERS

As single mothers continue to face increased pressures, it is important to analyze root causes to facilitate social equity and community-level support.

FINANCIAL PRESSURES

Single moms often face financial stress due to the exclusive responsibility of provision on static or deflated incomes. As a function of this financial lack, these families also face limited access to quality healthcare and opportunities that conventionally accompany upward mobility. These obstacles can have a domino effect on their children, affecting their education, physical health, and psychological well-being. Additionally, single parents may have limited access to stable employment due to the increased responsibilities salaried jobs demand, thus exacerbating the deleterious effects of insufficient support and increasingly unaffordable childcare. These barriers effectively trap single mothers with professional aspirations in lower-income contexts, making it difficult for them to catch up with their peers.⁷

SOCIETAL STIGMA

Single moms frequently deal with societal stigma and lack of access to adequate social support systems. In fact, the term "single mother" furthers that stereotype which encourages dismissive attitudes toward these women's personal sacrifices while elevating the importance of two-parent households.⁸ Many times, they are stereotyped as tired, irresponsible, or somehow morally deficient. For example, in 2013, Richard Land, an American Baptist pastor, created an uproar when he said single moms are denying their kids "the father that God wants" and should put their kids up for adoption to be raised in a Christian home with two parents.⁹ They are also more likely to experience stigma and

emotional stress due to their relationship status, owing to the societal expectation that the female assumes primary care of any children. Single fathers also face significant challenges, but their defiance of traditional gender roles counterintuitively begets higher levels of social support and admiration for their parenting efforts.¹⁰ To mitigate the effects of societal stigma, it is critical that society commits to both direct and indirect support of this growing demographic.

INCREASED ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY FROM COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing health and social inequities for vulnerable populations – in particular, the elderly, minorities, economically uncertain, and single-parent cohorts. Millions of low-income jobs were lost, with an estimated 55% of those lost jobs belonging to women.¹¹ Circumstances were even worse for many single mothers, as most of those low-wage jobs don't afford the flexibility of working from home. Additionally, the rise in job losses, reduced work hours, and decreased flexibility exacerbated preexisting financial insecurity for this cohort. Many single mothers lost healthcare coverage, forcing them into underinsured statuses or saddling them with the steep costs of COBRA (Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act) coverage.¹² Meanwhile, the closure of schools and childcare facilities forced single mothers to manage full-time care and instructional duties. To make matters worse, social isolation exacerbated existing emotional struggles for single mothers during COVID-19.

THE IMPACT OF SINGLE MOTHERING ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT (AND VICE VERSA)

The absence of a parent – whether through death, divorce, separation, or otherwise – has several long-term impacts on children's social and behavioral development in addition to their mental and physical health. As discussed above, single mothers routinely experience multiple stressors; they often work longer hours and more stressful jobs that result in less time spent with their children. A 2020 research study showed that adolescents raised in single-parent households are more likely to engage in risky behaviors including substance abuse, smoking/vaping, and increased risk of alcohol consumption.¹³ Single parents also face more disruptive changes compared to two-parent households.¹⁴ As children often thrive in a safe environment supported by routine, such changes often leave them feeling lonely, confused, and angry. In one study, the relationship between a single mother's poverty level and her children's general depression was examined. Results showed that low income and poverty were directly proportional to increased incidence of general depression among their children. Conversely, studies also show that children's negative mental health outcomes adversely affect the mental well-being of single mothers as evidenced by increased parenting guilt and likelihood of depression.¹⁵

LIMITED ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

While stress, anxiety, and general depression are prevalent in single-mother households, single parents' access to mental health resources is less than universal. However, several new tools targeting mental and behavioral health have emerged to address this deficiency. One example of this is teletherapy: single mothers can lean on an external perspective to make better decisions, seek independent advice, and manage their mental well-being from anywhere. While some can afford this resource, for most this form of medical intervention remains out of reach given its price tag. In another study, the perceived effect of stress on job performance for single mothers working in the high-stress environment of a correctional center was investigated. Analysis showed that most of the women accepted the job due to limited employment opportunities and other pressing socioeconomic factors. In addition, failure to succeed at work, absenteeism, and work-family conflicts contributed to the stress of these single mothers.¹⁶ The societal stigmas stemming from our complex social environment with limited support structures leave many single mothers in the dark about the resources available to them. Unless effectively addressed, the psychosocial trauma that single mothers suffer is likely to persist and compound.

IMPLICATIONS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SINGLE MOTHERS

With almost 21% of single mothers in the US in 2023, almost half of them (47%) are Black and about 25% of them are Hispanic. Meanwhile, single motherhood in Asian and White populations is much lower at 14% and 8% respectively.¹⁷ The combination of ethnicity, race, and societal status creates additional roadblocks to accessing mental health resources and support. For single mothers especially, these challenges translate to heightened stress, anxiety, and depression, especially in Black and Hispanic populations. A 2022 study showed that 63% of Black and 50% of American Indian children live in single-parent households compared to 24% of White and 16% of Asian and Pacific Islander populations.¹⁸ Meanwhile, ~70% of Black single mothers report symptoms of clinical depression, which is almost nine times the rate of depression in the general U.S. population.¹⁹ Additionally, mass incarceration disproportionately affects Black communities, leading to a significant number of single-mother households.²⁰ Inequitable access to mental healthcare and lower quality of treatment for racially disadvantaged communities means these communities are also less likely to seek coping strategies or receive help compared to their non-Hispanic White counterparts.

SINGLE PARENT STRESS SYNDROME (SPSS): BALANCING THE DUAL ROLE OF CAREGIVER AND FAMILY PROVIDER

SPSS refers to the significant stress, emotional seclusion, and fatigue that single parents may experience due to the responsibilities of raising children and making decisions independently. One of the biggest challenges faced by single

mothers is the constant juggling of responsibilities. With almost 15 million single moms in the US and 78% of those mothers employed in the workforce, balancing work with personal life can become stressful.²¹ Though this article's content mainly addresses single mothers with sole custody, in a study comparing child living arrangements after separation and the mental health of parents, mothers in joint physical custody reported slightly lower mental health problems/anxiety (36.1%) relative to mothers with sole custody (36.7%). This negligible difference was most likely due to the lower cash margin accounted for by mothers with 100% custody in the study.²² Additionally, time management challenges often leave single mothers with little to no time for personal enrichment, resulting in elevated emotional strain with no one or nowhere for them to turn. If these stressors are not proactively addressed, they eventually lead to mental health problems, impacting both the parent and her children.²³

TRANSFORMING THE LIVES OF SINGLE MOTHERS

Besides the significant stress single mothers endure, many misconceptions exist surrounding their experiences and unique challenges. There are several resources and tools to support single-mother families; however, building awareness is critical to reducing social inequities.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO THERAPY

Platforms to help single mothers with the challenges of parenthood include cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and support groups. According to research, these two mechanisms are instrumental in reducing mental health problems and teaching healthy coping strategies. CBT principally involves identifying negative thoughts and behaviors and replacing these with more positive and constructive ones. This can help single mothers develop effective self-care methods, better their emotional regulation skills, and build resilience, enhancing their well-being and fortifying themselves for life's daily challenges.²⁴ In addition to CBT, support groups should provide means for linking and empowering emotional resilience among solo mothers. This safe space will allow single mothers to share experiences, receive advice, and guarantee emotional support from others with overlapping experiences. In a study researching the effect of group counseling on the mental health of single mothers, results showed significant differences in levels of self-compassion and general depression after participation in the counseling sessions compared to before. Using the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) and the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) to respectively measure depression and self-compassion, depression scores decreased from 16.22 to 10.89 and self-compassion scores increased from 3.16 to 3.31.²⁵ This communal atmosphere affords a feeling of acceptance that empowers these women to form social networks that are remarkably effective for social backup, coping skills, and mental health.²⁶

With many new breakthroughs in technology, new options such as teletherapy offer promising new avenues for catering to single mothers with multiple responsibilities. There is a clear correlation between therapy utilization and improved mental health outcomes for single mothers, with the general trend suggesting those who engage in teletherapy as less likely to experience major depressive disorder or suicidal ideation compared to their still-isolated counterparts.²⁷⁻²⁹

PROVIDING EDUCATIVE SERVICES

It is important to educate single mothers on mental health-care, substance abuse treatment, and accountability for domestic family environments. Other avenues include workshops, support group sessions, or even individual counseling to provide more family stability. For example, many community colleges have started offering programs designed to assist single-mother learners, such as the Single Mothers Network at Monroe Community College.³⁰ By advertising advisory services, we allow single mothers to become more involved in improving their mental health and that of their children.

ENABLING SUPPORT & STIGMA REDUCING INTERVENTIONS FOR SINGLE MOTHERS

Therapy is not the only path to improving a single mother's mental health. Single parents often juggle multiple responsibilities, making access to stigma-reducing services vital. Relieving a single mother's burden via readily available and easily accessible resources (specifically daycare, early childhood education, and affordable housing) will allow these mothers to reduce their daily stress while also providing stability for their kids. In 2024, the Jeremiah Program supported ~725 single moms through their post-secondary education, while investing over \$50K in child-care support to allow single mothers the time and energy to focus on their future.³¹ Additionally, poverty mitigation programs and tax benefits for single-mother households like expanding child tax credit and low-income housing tax credit programs can be effective mechanisms for supporting these households.^{32,33} Another intervention is the shift to move food stamps from visibly irregular tender to an electronic card system, which can help reduce the stigma associated with food stamps while ensuring the same level of access to nutritional benefits for these families.

BUILDING STRATEGIES FOR SELF-CARE

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, single mothers should focus on promoting their overall well-being and developing healthy, active lifestyles. This includes time management, balanced diets, adequate sleep, self-care, and family/friend reliance.^{34,35} Time management is one of the most critical personal traits for a single mother, as it allows her to balance professional and custodial obligations. By including kids in daily routines like cooking, exercise, and household chores, families can transform menial chores into bonding opportunities. Having "me" time is important,

as single mothers must take care of themselves so they can be emotionally available for their children. Fortifying relations with family and friends can also help provide a sense of community and support. A study by Kim et al. (2023) among divorced single mothers found a negative correlation between self-esteem and mental health issues ($B=-0.46$, $p < 0.001$) and a positive relationship between self-stigma (internalized shame) and mental health distress ($B=0.11$, $p < 0.001$).³⁶ While asking for help is difficult, it is also a healthy sign of strength and humanity. This can be in terms of babysitting or homework help, cooking meals, play dates, or something as simple as having someone listen compassionately. With research showing single mothers to be three times more likely to experience psychological stress compared to their married counterparts, it is important that single mothers learn to forgive themselves and know that it's okay to make mistakes.³⁶ Implementing healthy life choices and self-care routines, and relying on their support systems can, on the whole, significantly improve the well-being, resilience, and quality of life for single mothers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, single mothers have their fair share of problems: raising their children alone, financial instability, and chronic feelings of incompetence that can escalate into mental health issues. Poverty complicates these mental health challenges, and financial instability is often a source of chronic stress that contributes to limited access to mental health resources.³⁷ Despite all these challenges, there is a lack of awareness about the needs of single mothers and available support that can help them, especially when single-parent households are rapidly increasing. Teletherapy, CBT, and support groups are considerably powerful interventions that can support single mothers with effective coping mechanisms. Studies have demonstrated that, following the death of a partner, psychotherapy can enable single mothers to work through their grief and regain stability.³⁸ Emerging approaches like teletherapy open promising avenues for support by providing convenient mental health care that can help single mothers juggle multiple responsibilities. In addition to therapy, the combination of healthy routines and life choices can propel single mothers toward more fulfilling lives.³⁹

Supporting single-mother households from an economic lens requires advocacy at the state and federal levels. Policy levers include increasing access to workplace opportunities, expanding healthcare and tax benefits, and providing affordable housing, financial education, and childcare subsidies. In today's political and economic climate, it is important to ensure this vulnerable population is supported given increased pressure to cut spending (ex: reduced Medicaid funding), retire diversity, equity & inclusion (DE&I) initiatives, and adopt punitive or regressive tariffs.⁴⁰

This research contributes to existing research by illustrating the way race, ethnicity, and structural inequalities variously shape the mental health trajectories of single mothers, and by providing realistic recommendations based

on culturally responsive care. Future research must continue to gather longitudinal and participatory data that centers on lived experience, especially from marginalized populations, to more specifically target and enhance interventions. Additionally, strategies supporting single mother's economic well-being should be explored further using a comprehensive framework that focuses on policy innovation and reform.

Overall, improving the lives of single mothers from a social, economic, and mental health perspective is paramount to disrupting the cycle of poverty and enabling them to not just survive, but thrive. In doing so, we confirm our commitment to today's unsung heroes and tomorrow's leaders through approaches that keep the material concerns of both groups at the forefront.

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Mia Jose is a sophomore at Carroll High School in Southlake, Texas. As the daughter of a single (widowed) parent, she is interested in highlighting and researching the mental well-being of marginalized populations and how it affects adolescent mental health and well-being. After high school, she intends to pursue a psychology or biology major.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Author Biography

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