

# Single moms feel forced to choose between succeeding financially or being a present parent. Is better paid leave and accessible child care the solution to achieving both?

By: Roo Moody

Jacqueline Bearden had 20 minutes to escape her abusive partner, and she made the most of each second.

Bearden scooped up her 7-month-old baby from his crib, grabbed her other son, sprinted to her neighbor's house and asked him to take her away. From there, she met her mother at a Starbucks and found a shelter she could stay at with her two boys.

At the shelter, Bearden saw syringes and needles littered on the ground and was given a broken wooden crib for her baby to sleep in. She stayed there for one night before calling her cousin and temporarily moving in with her.

Natalie Jones, a 35-year-old single mother from a small town in Kansas, woke up one day and realized she was done.

She was exhausted from working 60 hours a week and trying to find someone to watch her 2-year-old daughter every day. She's the type of person who sets her mind on something and sees it through.

A few months later, Jones rented a U-Haul trailer, packed up all her things, buckled her daughter in her SUV, and drove 20 hours down to Florida.

While the stories of these two women are unique in their own way, they encapsulate the intense pressure many single mothers feel to create a happy and healthy childhood. They demonstrate the many obstacles single mothers face just to provide for their families, and reflect areas in the American workforce that need improvement.

These stories also reveal the resources that can help single mothers thrive.

"It's a decision that single mothers have to make," said Jones, the mother to 6-year-old Realynn. "Do you work all the time to be in a nicer place to live and have a nicer vehicle but there's someone else who is with your kid more than you, or do you work a job

where you can bring your kid and get paid less and not have a vehicle, but you have the luxury of being with your kid for every important thing in their life?”

Jones decided to work at a children’s consignment store that pays less, but where she can bring Realyann to work with her. She said she would make the same decision over and over again, but she still advocates for much-needed reform.

In 2022, 28% of single mothers in the United States fell beneath the poverty line, according to the [Center for American Progress](#). Only 15% of single fathers fell beneath the line, supporting the center’s claim that single mothers have a more difficult time finding financial stability in the American workforce than single fathers.

The center found poverty rates to be highest for single Black mothers (31%) and single Hispanic mothers (33%), with single white mothers at 24%.

As single moms become more vocal about their disadvantages, two resources are more popular than the rest: better paid leave and more accessible child care options.

## The advantages of paid leave

According to research from the National Partnership for Women & Families, mothers who take a paid leave of absence (which is often weeks long) after giving birth are more likely to stay in the workforce and are 54% more likely to report wage increases.

Paid leave can give single mothers the job security and financial stability they need to stay home with their babies postpartum and spend time recovering instead of looking for a new job.

Another benefit of paid leave is closing the wage gap. In 2024, women in the United States were [paid 78 cents for every dollar a man makes](#).

Some researchers believe [the motherhood penalty](#) plays a large part in this gap. The motherhood penalty is a term used to describe the backlash mothers face when they return to the workforce after welcoming a child.

“The motherhood penalty comes with an assumption that mothers are less committed or competent, which implies promotion delays, limited career options, or the need to make potentially career-harming decisions to meet children’s needs,” according to a [study published](#) in the National Library of Medicine.

A [report published](#) by the partnership laid out the long-term consequences of the gap: “By the time they reach retirement age, women typically receive about 20 percent less in Social Security retirement benefits than men, and simultaneously have lower private retirement savings, leaving them more likely to live in poverty and making Social Security a vital source of retirement income.”

Jones believes part of the wage gap issue can be traced to outdated stereotypes. “Back in the day, it was always the father bringing in the money and the mother taking care of the family in the household,” she said. “And subconsciously, whether people realize that or not, it's still kind of like that state of mind.”

Bearden said the postpartum experience also affects the wage gap.

“I think the wage gap plays a part that adds up,” she said. “Single dads don't really need to recover from birth, and they're not pumping or nursing ... even though (employers) say you can pump, sometimes it's a lot harder than just doing that.”



Jacqueline Bearden and her two boys, RJ (right) and Nathan (middle).  
(Photo provided by Jacqueline Bearden)

Traces of these stereotypes can still be seen in the U.S. workforce today. [Reporting from The 19th\\*](#) revealed “the United States is the only industrialized country without a federal family and medical paid leave policy.”



There are government programs that assist with the costs of childcare, such as vouchers issued by the Department of Social Services. But Anna Dodge, a single mother of two in North Carolina, found it usually isn't that simple.

"We don't get the help that we need, especially when it comes to childcare or daycare or even trying to get through DSS to get a voucher. Some people are approved for it, some people aren't. It's very hard to find some daycares that accept the vouchers, and then there are some daycares too, where you have to pay straight out," she said.

Government resources falling short seems to be a common occurrence for single mothers.

WIC, a supplemental nutrition program provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for women, infants, and children, often adds unnecessary obstacles. To ensure your WIC funds get reloaded, mothers must often visit their WIC office for an appointment every three months, or sometimes more frequently.

Jones used WIC to afford formula for her daughter. She said it's better than nothing, but still troublesome for single mothers.

"You have all those steps, and you have to take off work to go to those appointments, and the embarrassment that some mothers face from using those cards and those benefits, and people look at you like, oh, that's where my tax dollars are going. Some people face actual verbal confrontation from people whenever they're checking out in line," she said.

When asked about her experience using WIC, Bearden started to tear up. She recalls holding up grocery store lines as she pulled out voucher after voucher to hand the cashier.

Bearden was so uncomfortable with the WIC process she decided not to go through it again with her second son.

While affordability is crucial, single mothers also need child care to be accessible. Jones described how strict work hours would conflict with her pick-up times.

"I can't drop off my kid until 8 a.m., but I have to be at work at 8 a.m., so what do I do now?" she said. "Oh, daycare closes at 6 p.m., so I can't work till 6 p.m. I had to leave early every day."



Natalie Jones and her 6-year-old daughter, Realynn.  
(Photo provided by Natalie Jones)

In the U.S., 43% of children have a parent that works non-traditional hours, but only [8% of child care centers](#) provide care before 7 a.m. and after 6 p.m., according to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

Similarly, Dodge described balancing a job and single motherhood as “really hard and really stressful.” She was out of work for eight months until she found a job that didn’t require her to work weekends.

The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit national newsroom that focuses on education, found that the military “created [the best child care system in the nation](#).”

The nonprofit and the Institute for Women’s Policy reported that as an employer, the military supports families’ need for non-traditional child care hours. Research showed

this change helped [reduce the motherhood penalty](#) and improved gender and racial equity in the military.

## The solution in action

A [report published by the national partnership](#) in August 2024 stated, “By enacting a national paid leave program along with affordable child care, the United States could add an estimated 5 million working people to its labor force.”

Gracewood, a nonprofit located in Houston that provides support to single mothers in crisis, served [73 mothers and children](#) last year. 87% of those mothers were gainfully employed or actively pursued higher education after joining the program.



A painted mural showing some of the single mothers and children Gracewood served. (Photo provided by Gracewood)

Gracewood’s President Vi White said the high success rate can be attributed to the amount of quality resources invested in the program. Tuition for higher education is fully funded for up to 10 semesters, and the organization pays for the cost of child care.

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“Now, I'm very aware most organizations aren't able to invest at that level. But for us, the model has and always will be a smaller number of people with a larger impact,” White said.

Raising the minimum wage and closing the wage gap would provide more income on a smaller but still significant scale, but what would it look like to invest in single mothers at a federal level?

One country that is praised globally for its parenting resources is Norway. Norway is known to have one of the best government-mandated paid leave programs in the world, with 49 weeks of parental leave at full pay, or [59 weeks at 80% pay](#).

Norway also has a transitional benefit for single parents that provides income for up to three years when the parent is responsible for at least 60% of the child's care. There are certain conditions and exceptions that apply, one being that the child must be under 8.

The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs said the [purpose of the program](#) is to “cover subsistence expenses for single parents during a transitional period and provide them with help for self-help so that they are able to support themselves through their own work.”

A [study published](#) in the Scandinavian Journal of Economics found that when Norway reduced the amount of benefits given in the program between 1998-2008, the poverty rate of single mothers doubled in the long term.

The research in the study showed that while reducing benefits to single parents promotes job growth in the short term, it causes serious harm in the long run, especially to groups that are already marginalized.

From a global perspective, the U.S. is drastically behind in medical and paid leave. Some politicians are trying to close the gap.

Introduced in the Senate and in the House of Representatives on May 17, 2023, the [FAMILY Act](#) would address the lack of rights Americans have in the workforce when it comes to taking time off.

Under the act, workers would be able [to take up to 12 weeks](#) of medical or parental leave and be protected from discrimination or retaliation for taking leave. The act has not been reintroduced in the current 119th Congress.

For single moms in the U.S., this could be the difference between staying in the workforce and being a present parent or filing for unemployment.

“Something has got to change,” said Bearden. “There’s gotta be some major system changes. I would love to be a part of that.”