

Key Findings:

- **Single parent families more likely to have female, rather than male, householders**
- **Families with single female householders experience much higher poverty rates than married-couple families**
- **Poverty in single female householder families highest in rural counties**
- **Female workers are disproportionately concentrated in industries impacted by COVID19**

The impact of the COVID19 pandemic may be felt especially strongly by a population that already faces a number of other vulnerabilities – single parents. Single parents, who have historically experienced socioeconomic disadvantages, now face new challenges to overcome in light of school and childcare closings, potential job loss, and the overall reconfiguration of life. Single parents may now have to choose between going to work or being present to take care of their children, as social interaction is discouraged and others might not be available to help (Alon et al., 2020). Many of these newfound difficulties are faced by women as they make up the majority of single parents not only across the Commonwealth, but throughout the United States.

Number of Confirmed Cases

As of June 30, 2020, the PADOH reported a total of 86,606 cases throughout all counties in Pennsylvania. This is an increase of 45,441 cases since our last brief on April 26 2020. At this time, cases range from 3 in Cameron County to 21,600 in Philadelphia County. Over 50% of confirmed cases (46,704) are still located in the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington Metropolitan Statistical Area, which includes Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties. However, at this time case growth is increasingly concentrated in the Southwestern region, particularly in Allegheny County.

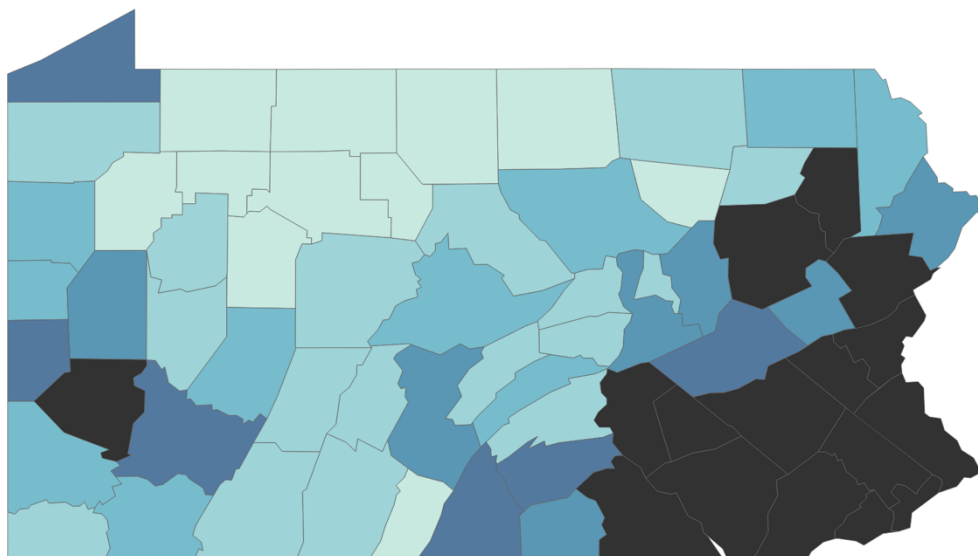
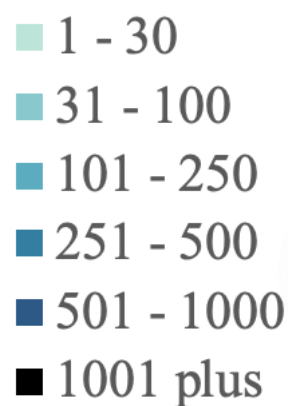


Figure 1 Confirmed Cases by County 6/30/2020

Families by Householder Type

Of all families with children under the age of 18 in Pennsylvania, those headed by a woman without a husband present make up 24%, while those headed by single men make up only 8.4% (Table DP02). And, this difference is pretty consistent across counties as demonstrated in Figure 1. The percent of families with children headed by a single man ranges from 0.1-4.2%. Elk county has the highest percentage of single male-householder families at 4.2%. All counties have higher rates of single female-householder families ranging from 1.5-10.2%, as shown in Figure 2. Erie and Philadelphia counties have the highest percentages, at 8% and 10.2%, respectively. Additional Census data show that the average family size is relatively stable across all family types, meaning that single parents generally have the same number of children as married couple families but, with fewer potential care-givers present (Table S1101).

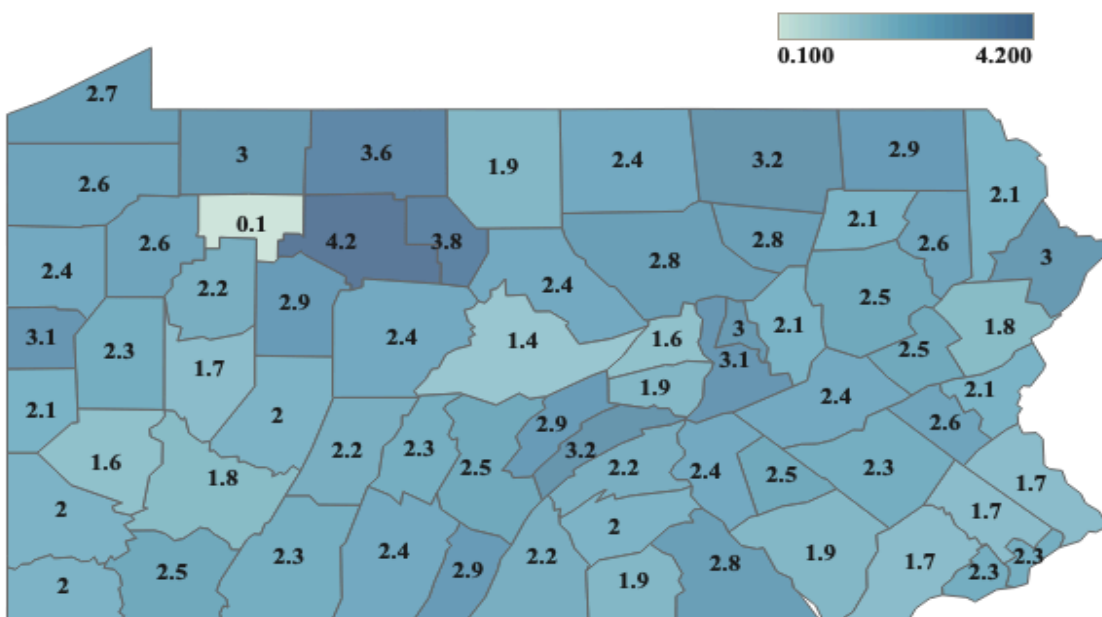


Figure 1: Percent of Single Male-Householder Families with Children Under 18, by County, PA, 2018

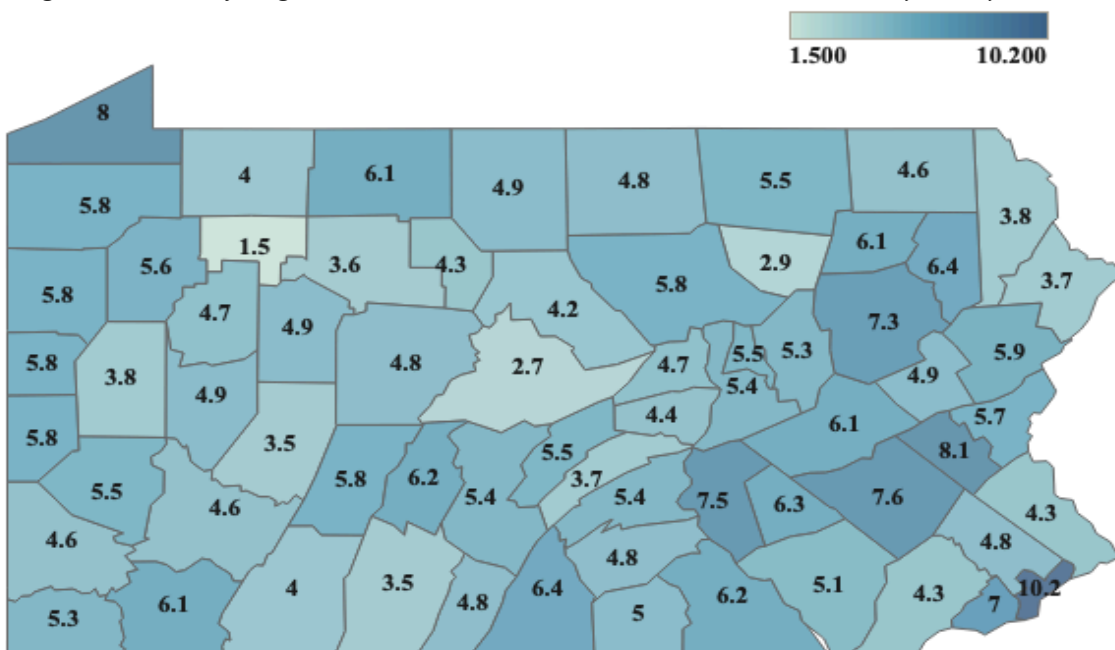


Figure 2: Percent of Single Female Householder Families with Children Under 18, by County, PA 2018

Poverty Distribution

The economic disadvantage experienced by single parents, and single mothers in particular, has been present long before the current global health crisis caused by COVID19. But there is reason to expect poverty to increase even more for these vulnerable households. Census data show that poverty rates among female-headed families are consistently higher than those headed by married householders, even prior to the pandemic. Nearly 37% of Pennsylvania single female-householder families with children under 18 are living below the poverty line, compared to only 5.3% of those headed by married-couples (Table S1702, 2018). Additionally, the overall poverty rate for all Pennsylvania families is 8.7% and 14.7% for families with children (Table S1702). There is considerable geographic variation across the Commonwealth. All five counties with the highest rates of poverty among female-headed families in Pennsylvania are rural counties. Fayette County has the highest rate of impoverished female-headed families at 55.6%. This is approximately 38% higher than the overall county poverty rate of 17.7%. Conversely, Perry County has the smallest proportion with 20.1%.

Table 1: Counties with Highest Poverty Rates for Female-Headed Households, PA, 2018

County (Percent Poverty)
Fayette (55.6%)
Mercer (52.2%)
Cambria (51.8%)
Huntingdon (51.5%)
Union (50.7%)

To illustrate the vulnerability of families with single female-householders Figure 3 displays the difference in the poverty rate of married couple families to single female families in the same county. Although female householders have higher poverty rates across all counties, their disadvantage compared to coupled families ranges from a low of 5.1% in Forest County to a high of 48.2% in Fayette County. Bucks, Cumberland, Pike, and Perry Counties comprise the other counties with the smallest difference in poverty rates between the two types of families.

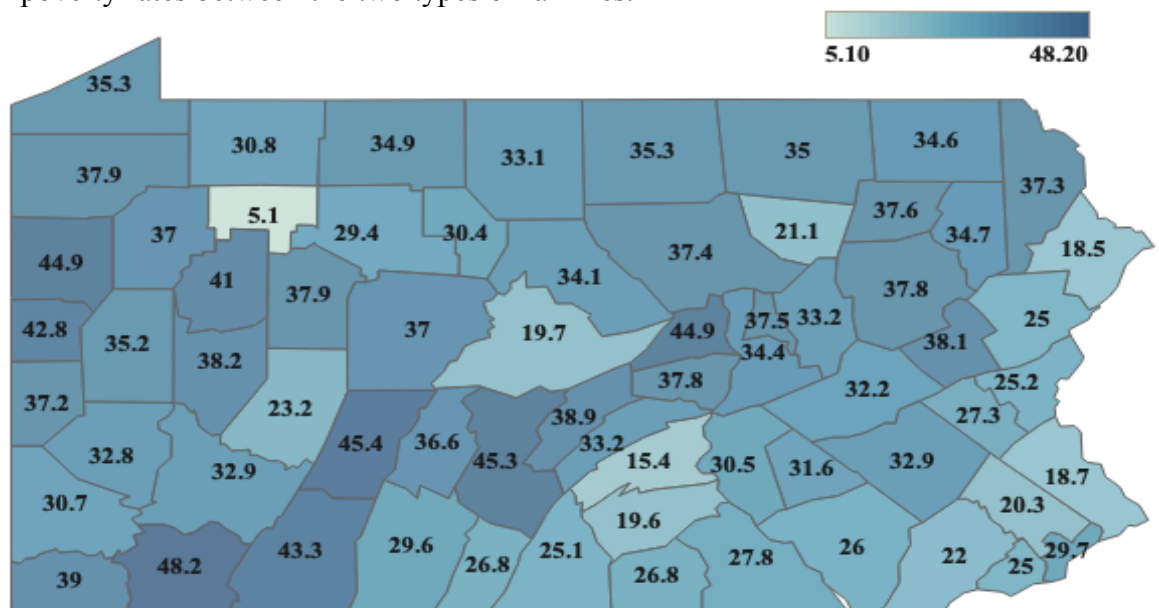


Figure 3: Difference in Female-Headed and Married Family Poverty, by County, PA 2018

Employment Sectors

Some of the disparities in poverty rates likely stem from employment factors, like certain industries adhering to more stringent gender roles. Some industries have been disproportionately impacted during the COVID19 pandemic. As businesses shut their doors, unemployment rates in Pennsylvania rose to a high of 16.1% in April 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). Some of the hardest impacted sectors have been food services and personal care industries where women make up 61.7% and 78.5% of the labor force, respectively (Norwood, 2020; Table S2401). Income loss from closures in these industries is a direct threat to food and housing security and may have serious implications for access to healthcare.

Because women are disproportionately represented across employment sectors, the impact of COVID19 on their households is also likely to be disproportionate. For example, across Pennsylvania, women make up between 42.2% and 82.1% of all employees within food service as shown in Figure 4 below. Montour County has the lowest percentage of women working in this employment sector, highlighting a higher male presence in these types of jobs. Conversely, Forest County has the highest percentage of food service employees that are women at 82.1%. This could be due in large part to the size of Forest County, as it only boasts a population of a little over 7,000 people. Women also occupy a higher percentage of jobs in the personal services sector – making up anywhere between 50 and 96.3% of employees across Pennsylvania (see Figure 5). In Elk County, almost all of these positions are held by female employees (96.3%). On the other hand, Forest County displays an even split between men and women in these types of jobs, where each hold 50% of employment.

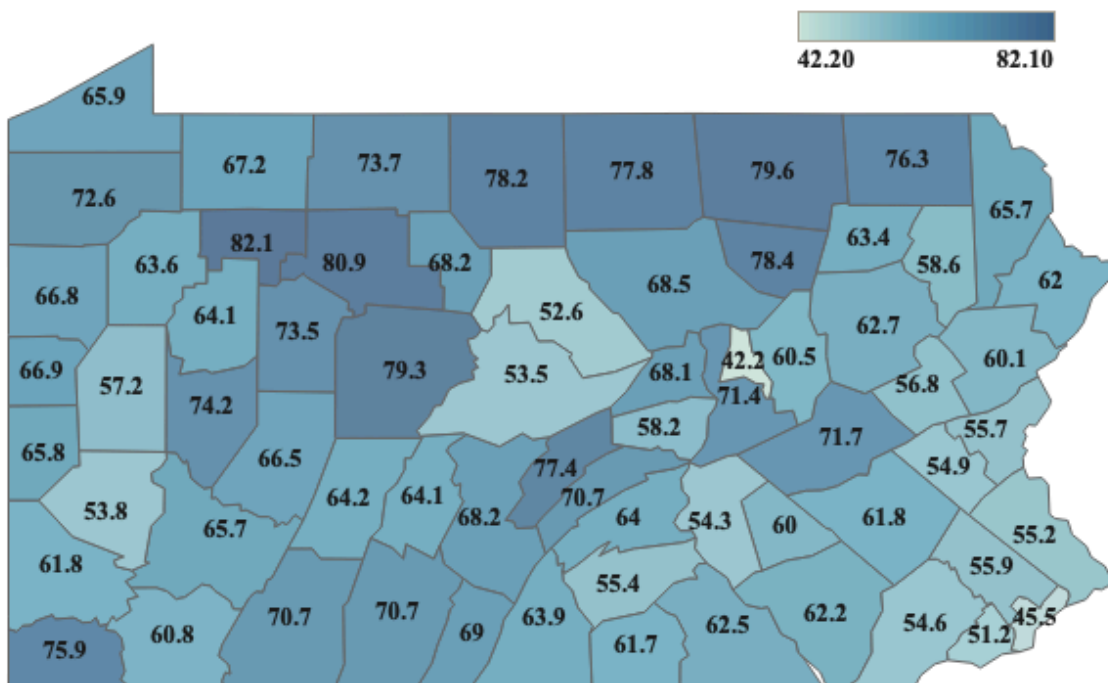


Figure 4: Percent of Food Service, Female, by County, PA, 2018

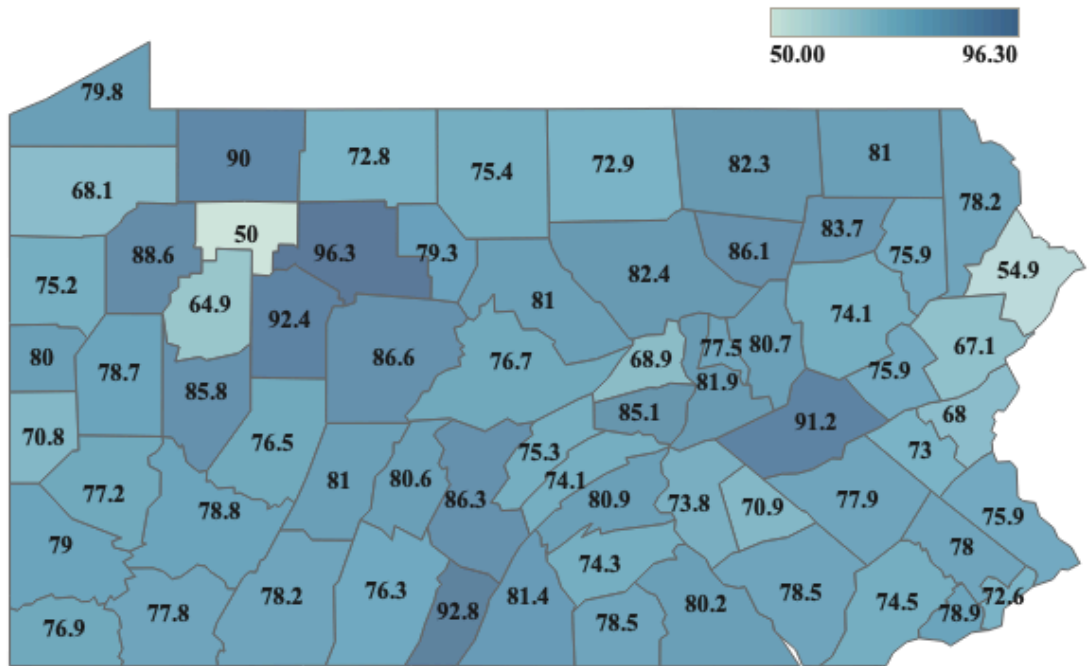


Figure 5: Percent of Personal Care/Other Services, Female, by County, PA, 2018

As seen in Table 2, the most pronounced gender differences in food service employment are in rural counties with Elk and Forest counties having the highest percentage of female employees within food services. Conversely, Montour and Philadelphia counties display an inverse trend, with men outnumbering women within food services as indicated by the negative percent differences. The least and most robust sex disparities within personal care industries (Table 3) are primarily seen within rural counties, with the exception of Northampton County which is considered urban.

Table 2: Sex Differences in Food Service, by County, PA, 2018

Smallest Difference	Largest Difference
Montour (-15.6%)	Sullivan (56.8%)
Philadelphia (-9%)	Clearfield (58.6%)
Delaware (2.4%)	Bradford (59.2%)
Clinton (5.2%)	Elk (61.8%)
Centre (7%)	Forest (64.2%)

Table 3: Sex Differences in Personal Care/Other Services, by County, PA, 2018

Smallest Difference	Largest Difference
Forest (0%)	Warren (80%)
Pike (9.8%)	Schuylkill (82.4%)
Clarion (29.8%)	Jefferson (84.8%)
Monroe (4.2%)	Fulton (85.6%)
Northampton (36%)	Elk (92.6%)

In contrast to the many workers in the food service and personal care industries who have experienced job loss during the COVID19 pandemic crisis, other workers have been deemed essential and face different constraints and here again, gender differences in vulnerability are of concern. For example, women comprise roughly 76% of the healthcare industry (Day, 2019). For parents deemed “essential workers” this meant an increased need for childcare at a time when childcare providers and schools were closing. Although many single parents may have been able to rely on a grandparent or other family member for help in the past, the coronavirus pandemic may have limited the use of social networks for childcare as families tried to keep older adults and those with underlying health conditions away from in-person interactions. For women on the front lines in these industries, fear of transmitting COVID19 to their loved ones is real and prevalent. Throughout the pandemic, healthcare workers have reported self-isolation from their family (Fitchel, 2020). However, when the individual healthcare worker is the only parent in the home, they are not afforded this luxury. This forces single parents to choose between their careers and their children, while having to still earn a salary to take care of their family. This burden disproportionately falls on women.

As seen in Figure 6 below, women in Pennsylvania hold the majority of jobs in the healthcare industry across the Commonwealth (between 58.4% and 100%). While this trend is prevalent across the country, it showcases how women are comprising much of the pandemic frontline, and how many single mothers are now likely put in a difficult situation. Note, women appear to occupy 100% of healthcare occupations in Cameron County, which is likely due to the small overall population (4,686) and the sample size of healthcare workers. The proportion of men in the field is probably too small to register due to rounding.

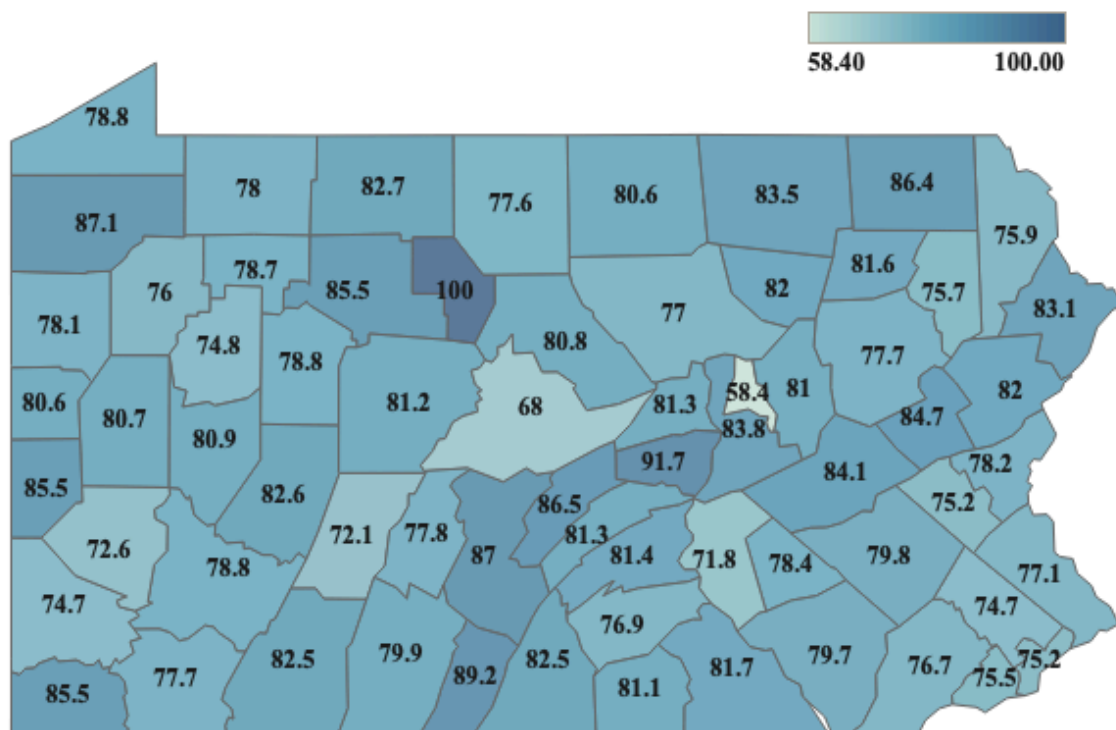


Figure 6: Percent of Healthcare, Female, by County, PA, 2018

Table 4 displays sex differences in employment in healthcare and the counties with the largest and smallest differences. The five counties with the largest sex differences in healthcare employment are all in rural counties. This trend may be due to a variety of reasons such as less economic diversification in industry and gender role expectations. Interestingly, there is not a distinct location trend for counties with the smallest difference as Dauphin, Allegheny, and Montgomery are urban counties and Cambria and Washington are rural. The presence of large medical facilities, such as Hershey Medical Center, UPMC, and Einstein Health may provide employment to a greater proportion of residents and could be contributing to these smaller gaps seen within Dauphin, Allegheny, and Montgomery counties.

Table 4: Sex Differences in Healthcare, by County, PA, 2018

Smallest Difference	Largest Difference
Dauphin (43.6%)	Huntingdon (74%)
Cambria (44.2%)	Crawford (74.2%)
Allegheny (45.2%)	Fulton (78.4%)
Montgomery (49.4%)	Snyder (83.4%)
Washington (49.4%)	Cameron (100%)

Policy Implications

The challenges faced by single parents are numerous and have likely been exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic. Experiences of single mothers in particular demonstrate the importance of workplace flexibility and security. Without the ability to work remotely and/or maintain employment, many single parents are in an increasingly challenging, and in many cases economically precarious, situation. Additionally, many wage employees who have lost work tend to receive a higher income from unemployment benefits than they did from their place of work. This reflects the low pay associated with many positions. And, low pay and concentration in vulnerable industries likely contributed to the disproportionately high poverty rates seen among female-headed family households long before the pandemic. The COVID19 pandemic has shed light on the shortcomings of many employment sectors as well as the need for a systematic “back-up plan” to support families and children when unexpected events occur. Increasing the availability of safe childcare, heightened employment security, and implementation of a living wage are needed in order for single parents to be able to consistently provide proper care for their children. These supports are needed even more now as the impacts of COVID19 reverberate across Pennsylvania.

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Part of the Social Science Research Institute at Penn State

About the Network:

The Pennsylvania Population Network (PPN) is a visible program of demographic and health research, application, and outreach focusing on population characteristics and change in Pennsylvania, the United States and the world.

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