

BEYOND THE NUMBERS: REDEFINING SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN BLACK FAMILIES

Single Mothers Lead Almost Half of Black Households in California, But Category Fails to Factor in Non-Traditional Support

BY CATHERINE BUCHANIEC, ARIEL GANS, JULIA SHAPERO AND JAYJUAN JONES

When Diamond Stephens became pregnant with her son, Junaid, at 19 years old, she never thought she would raise him on her own. Although she and her son's father were not married, Stephens said single parenthood was never part of the plan.

But six years into motherhood, Stephens said she is raising Junaid primarily by herself in Oakland, California.

"We were on the understanding that this was for life," Stephens said. "I never thought that we were going to come to the terms of being broken up."

Stephens' family as well as almost half of Black households with children in California are categorized by the Current Population Survey (CPS) as being led by a single mother. However, some single mothers like Stephens and experts said this categorization doesn't tell the whole story.

Even though she is no longer in a relationship with her former partner, Stephens said she does not consider herself a single mom since her son's father is active in Junaid's life.

"A single mom to me is like you absolutely have no help from the father," Stephens said. "I do have help from the father — we're just not together."

Of Black households in California, 45%

of those with children under the age of 18 are led by single mothers, according to data from the CPS between August 2020 and August 2021. Only 12% are headed by a single father.

The data, jointly collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics every month, illustrates a sharp contrast between family structures in Black and white single-parent households.

About 21% of white households with children in California are led by single mothers. Single fathers, meanwhile, head 8% of white California families with children.

The Census defines a "single parent" as someone who does not currently live with a spouse, including those who are divorced, widowed or never married.

Nationwide, about 46% of Black children were raised by a single mother in 2020, according to the Census.

However, data collected from CPS and the Census fails to capture the full picture of family structure, especially within Black families, according to Christina Grange, a professor at Clayton State University.

She added that using the term "single mother" without contextualizing a person's family situation fails to capture the entire picture of their family structure.

Grange, a Black mother herself, works as a psychologist and studies African American parents raising their children in separate households.

"I think that some of the nuances about families are hard to capture in pure numbers," Grange said, adding that the term "single mother" doesn't address families who co-parent.

Although Grange said that many mothers do parent by themselves, single parenthood might also include financial assistance from the other parent in the form of child support as well as emotional support.

Grange also pointed toward the regularity of family structures outside of the "normal" mother-father household. Sometimes families that are categorized as single mothers might be receiving support from other sources, such as outside family members or their respective communities, she said.

"I think those binary categories limit us in ways that promote negative stigma," Grange said.

She added that combating the stigma of single parenthood requires changing the surrounding language.

"I think creating a language around co-parenting is really helpful, particularly in the Black community, where a lot of families are established, is created in non-marital contexts," Grange explained.

Sidelining non-custodial parents both on paper and when talking about single-parenthood contributes to a sense of fragmentation within Black families that isn't fully accurate, Grange said.

Delano Squires, a scholar at 1776 Unites, an advocacy group focused on

Black households in California led by single mother more often than white, Asian or mixed race households

In California, Black households were led a single mother 45% of the time in 2021. During the same time period, 21% of white households, 12% of Asian households and 19% of mixed race households were led by a single mother.

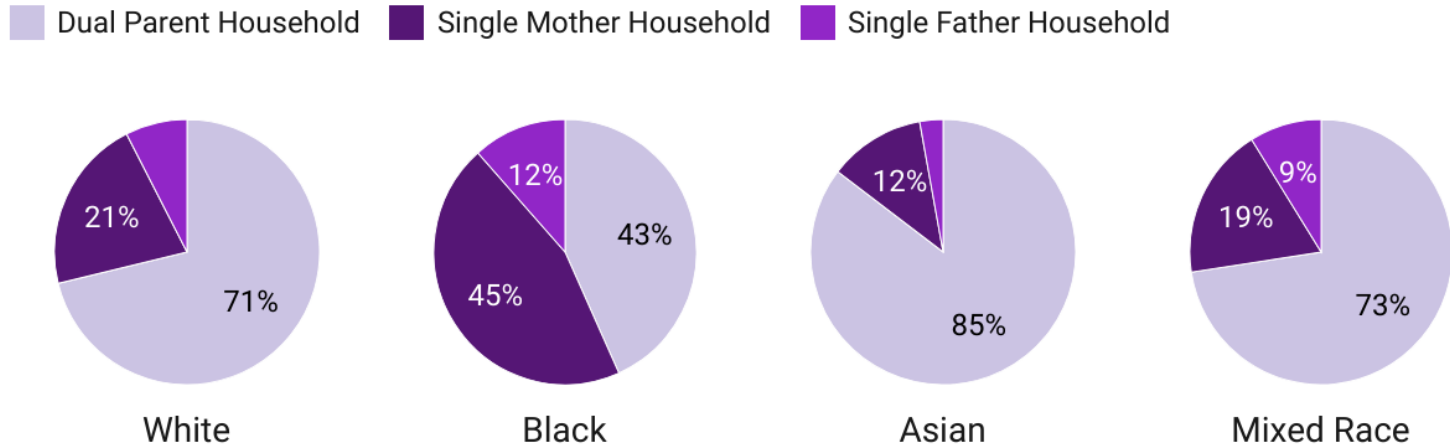


Chart: Julia Shapero • Source: U.S. Census Bureau Community Population Survey • Created with Datawrapper

upward mobility of the Black community, agreed traditional “descriptors” of single parents or single mothers are at times misnomers. However, he said believes this is trivial when it comes to the actual impact on and importance to children, particularly in the Black community.

“It doesn’t matter how you technically define it,” Squires said. “It’s about the culture behind it. What I see everyday in my work is that children need both parents present full-time. The traditional nuclear family is important.”

Squires noted his support for alternative or non-traditional means of child support other than the “normal” mother-father parental unit, but added that he believes regardless of how parenting is defined, the responsibility lies first with any able-bodied mother and father.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Kevin Recker, a white single father of three children, received immediate support from his community in Long Beach, California when his wife, Kelly, died from cancer in January of 2016.

“I would say generally speaking, immediately and for the next few months there was a pretty good amount of support,” Recker said. “Of course, the longer you go that wanes.”

Recker received the majority of his support from members of his church. They took his 15-year-old daughter to school and provided assistance for his 18-year-old daughter with Down’s Syndrome. His mother-in-law also provided extensive support in the months following Kelly’s death.

“She would help with care-taking of the kids and sometimes they’d spend the night there,” Recker said. “I would also say we had a couple of close family friends that were connected to our church who would help out with the care-taking as well.”

Recker’s situation sharply contrasts with that of Stephens, who said she lacks support from her family.

Stephens’ parents died when she was a teenager. Her only living family member is her 90-year-old grandfather. While Stephens’ grandfather has met her son, he is

not interested in helping care for him.

“It’s not a lot of support nowadays because people don’t like watching kids no more,” Stephens said. “It’s not like it used to be where grandmas were so willing to watch kids — they want to be free.”

She added: “They always say, ‘I’ve already raised my kids’ and ‘oh, I need money for that’ — you know, it’s always extra stuff.”

While Stephens said she has received government assistance to supplement her finances, she has not sought help from outside sources.

PROVIDING HELP ALONG THE WAY

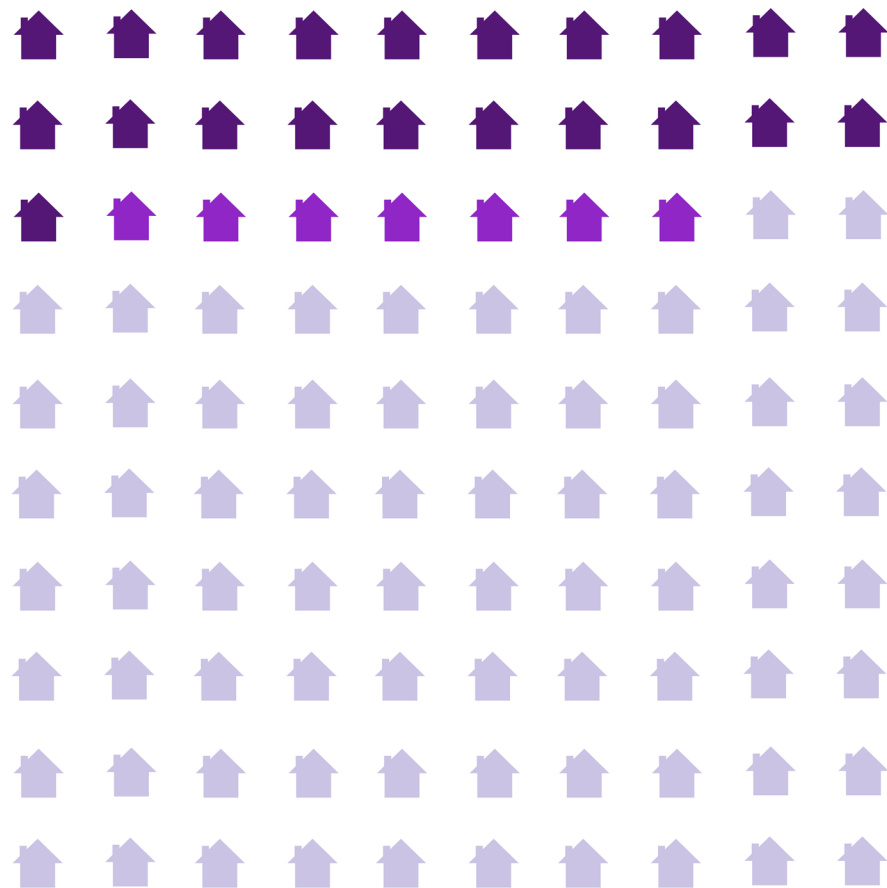
Tara Taylor became a single mother at the age of 27 after she and her husband divorced, leaving her to raise her six-month-old daughter on her own.

After looking for assistance in California through the government and third-party organizations, Taylor said she realized there was a gap in resources for single mothers. Using her background in business, she founded Single Moms

Single mothers more common than single fathers among California households

About 21% of California households were led by a single mother between August 2020 and August 2021, compared to 7% led by a single father.

■ = Single Mother Household ■ = Single Father Household ■ = Dual Parent Household



Caty Buchaniec | Current Population Survey (August 2020 - August 2021)

Strong — an organization that seeks to help mothers like herself — five years ago.

Single Moms Strong assists single mothers with discounted preschool and childcare services and workforce development programs in California.

Taylor explained that single motherhood comes in many packages, and isn't always the result of someone marrying the wrong person or making a bad choice. Rather, single motherhood comes with varying levels of resources and circumstances.

"This population is growing, and so it doesn't really matter how they got there," Taylor said. "It matters what we're doing to help."

She added her organization serves a higher proportion of Black women than are represented in California's population.

"I think that number would be even higher, but we're physically located in an area that's more predominantly white," Taylor said.

Tisha Janigian faced a similar situation as Taylor in California. After getting di-

vorced, Janigian said she didn't have the resources to financially support herself and her family, and turned to government assistance and small jobs, such as babysitting and taking out the trash for neighbors.

"Without all of those extra things helping I wouldn't have made it, and that's what I found so terrifying," Janigian said. "As I've been getting on my feet, and talking to more and more women, the story is quite prevalent and it's terrifying."

Like Taylor, Janigian formed an organization to help mothers get off the ground and obtain the necessary professional skills to be financially independent.

However, Janigian said her organization, She is Hope LA, is mostly based on word of mouth, and may not be reaching all single mothers in Los Angeles equally.

Janigian said she estimates her organization has assisted a bit under 200 mothers, and leans more toward those who are white rather than Black or Hispanic.

The problem, she said, is outreach. Over the next few years, Janigian said she hopes to grow her team as well as their internet presence, which will hopefully expand the number of mothers her group is able to assist.

Eventually, Janigian said she hopes to expand to other cities across the nation and counter the stigma of single parenthood through tangible resources.

However, Stephens said it is difficult to break the cycle of single parenthood. For mothers like Stephens, the daughter and granddaughter of Black single mothers, the prevalence of Black single parenthood feels generational.

"I can definitely say this is very much deeper than just California," Stephens said. "It's deeper than a single-mom and a single-dad type of thing. I feel like this is embedded — it's like a curse."