

---

**Managing Alone: Single Parenthood and Silver Linings in the Time of COVID-19**

---

*Martha Toscano Joya  
Department of Sociology  
California State University, Los Angeles*

**INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken the world by storm. It has been a hundred years since a pandemic of this scale – of devastation and interference – has struck the global community with expansive social, economic, political, and cultural ramifications. Despite the medical and technological advancements of our time, the COVID-19 pandemic has immobilized modern society in unprecedented ways. There was no viable cure when it first struck, healthcare systems were on the brink of exhaustion, death toll skyrocketed, widespread closures amassed, and supply-chain scarcities marked the first months of the pandemic. We are still grappling with the implications of this moment in history.

My study focuses on the implications of the pandemic on single parents, arguably an understudied demographic group. My findings, based on 5 in-depth interviews with single parents suggest that the pandemic has been a double-edged sword – on the one hand, it has pushed single parents to the brink as they juggled rigorous parenting duties while shouldering work responsibilities. Yet, surprisingly on the other hand, single parents also found priceless moments of time that brought forth joy in those uninterrupted moments spent together with their children. The government’s assistance schemes (e.g., expanding EBT, rent moratorium, hot school packed lunches) that were put into effect in the first months of the pandemic sustained them through the worst forms of precarity.

This study, based on a feminist lens, contributes to the sociological scholarship on families in significant ways as it examines the micro-dynamics of everyday life in single-parent households during an unprecedented global crisis. The demographic group (single parents in California) as well as the context (COVID-19 pandemic) lend sociological credence to this article for several interrelated reasons. First, the U.S. has the

highest rates of single parent households in the world (Kramer 2019) wherein a quarter of U.S. children under the age of 18 live with one parent. Additionally, women outnumber men as single parents. A Pew study estimates that 9% of women between the ages of 35-59 years live as single parents (Kramer 2019); this is four times the rate at which men of the same group live as single parents. Yet, even as studies depicting everyday lives between families and children are emerging, they disproportionately focus on two-parent households.

Second, existing sociological scholarship on families has shown that single parents often create and rely on a network of extended kin and community (that includes friends and neighbors) to augment everyday needs of childcare. Brewster and Padavic (2002) found that, *“Mothers with fewer social and economic resources of their own—those who were single, less educated, or very young—were significantly more likely than other mothers to use relatives for childcare.”* The pandemic often closed these communities off limiting the very support and childcare that single parents once relied on. Given these circumstances, it becomes necessary to investigate the challenges experienced by single parents at this historic juncture. In addition to contributing to the sociological literature on families, this study fills the gap in mainstream news reporting on families which overwhelmingly depicts stereotypical family arrangements –comprising of two parents and children living in a household. My long-term hope for this study is that in the future it will generate awareness and provide insights for social policies related to single parents in times of crises and otherwise.

## CONTEXT

*“COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and rapidly spread to all parts of the globe, earning the title of a pandemic and changing the modus operandi of all segments of society”* (Almeida, et.al 2020). While the world remained unaware, patients with cases of severe pneumonia or upper respiratory illness began presenting themselves at the hospitals in Wuhan, China. By the end of the month, the world confronted a highly infectious variant of coronavirus that was impacting Wuhan, China. *“The outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 was*

*considered to have originally started via a zoonotic transmission associated with the seafood market in Wuhan, China. Later it was recognized that human to human transmission played a major role in the subsequent outbreak” (Yuki, Fujiogi and Koutsogiannaki 2020).*

Within two months, on January 31, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a global health emergency. Soon thereafter, WHO, declared the novel coronavirus as a pandemic setting the stage for sweeping changes all over the world. As of May 2022, 6,210,719 people had succumbed to the virus. The United States reported, *“COVID-19 has been impacting many people worldwide, being reported in approximately 200 countries and territories. As of April 7th, 2020, around 1,400,000 cases worldwide have been reported according to the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University” (Yuki, Fujiogi and Koutsogiannaki 2020).*

This wasn't the first time where humans experienced a pandemic, and it won't be the last. The Spanish Flu of 1918 is often compared with the COVID-19 pandemic for the extent of disruptions that it caused. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) statistical data,

*The Spanish Flu of 1918, was one of the deadliest outbreaks in the last century. It is estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected with this virus. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States.*

Despite the surface similarities and high death toll, the Spanish Flu occurred a century ago and therefore is not a living memory for the majority who populate the world today. Yet, the precautions taken in that historical period are reminiscent of the ones that this current pandemic brought forth (such as closures of businesses and schools as well as social distancing protocols).

In March 2020, our whole world changed overnight. The COVID-19 pandemic manifested in ways that were unforeseen and unpredicted. Many countries shut down their daily operations; businesses, schools, recreation, and all other places that were deemed “non-essential” were shut down. Supply chain disruptions

caused further panic. The fear of running out of an essential product led to excessive hoarding where stores couldn't fulfill the needs of the public.

*As consumers play a key role in food supply chain, changes in consumer behavior strongly affected the food supply chain. COVID-19 outbreak caused a significant rise in food price related to lockdown restrictions accompanied by panic buying, as well as supply chain disruptions.*  
(Aday and Aday 2020)

There was a unique and unforeseen phase in the pandemic where people were hoarding toilet paper. For a long period of time, disinfectants, hand sanitizers, disposable cloths, masks, gloves, and even baking yeast among other items were unavailable and if they were—only one per customer could be purchased. Food items also became scarce on the shelves. In the early days of the first shutdown, The New York Times (2020) reported, “*They grabbed milk and aspirin, paper towels and spaghetti. Cans of soup and bottles of laundry detergent. Olive oil and sanitizing wipes. With futures suddenly thrust into the unknown, they did what felt reassuring: panic shop.*” Consumers experienced long wait times to purchase goods, which wound around parking lots. Banker (2021) wrote, “*during the early months of the pandemic, demand planning error jumped to 59%, up 14% from the pre-pandemic error rate of 45% as companies could not accurately forecast demand in this unprecedented time.*” Many compared the lack of food and goods to the Great Depression of 1929.

In the United States, the first state to experience full shutdown was California and this occurred in March, 19, 2020—making the Californian population remain at home due to this mandate. It is in this social context of elevated fear, scarcities, and social distancing that single parents found themselves “managing alone” while balancing childcare with work.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Scholarship on Single Parenthood (Pre-COVID)*

Single parents refer to a parent – a mother or a father - living without a co-parent and with their dependent children. Circumstances that bring on single parenting can be due to

separation, death, divorce. With the growth of reproductive technologies (IVF, surrogacy etc.) women have also made the choice to have children regardless of being in a relationship. *“In the US, there are more than 11 million single-parent families with young children that are younger than 18-years-old. Single moms make up just over 80% of single-parent homes”* (Pace 2021).

*“Mother-only families have become increasingly common during the past three decades.’ Whereas in 1960 only about 9% of families with children in the United States were headed by nonmarried women, by 1985 the number was over 2007 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960, 1961, 1988). (McLanahan and Booth 1989)*

While a taboo in the past, as compared to today, being a single parent is becoming more common. This is in part due to the women’s rights movement and the sexual revolution that introduced sweeping changes in society. However, scholarship shows that *“individuals serving as a single parent for their family may experience more stressors than those who co-parent their family including poor finances, reduced social support, and higher rates of depression”* (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine 2003).

The first challenge is the absence of the other parent to share in parenting and childcare. Raising children can be quite stressful, even if it is a meaningful responsibility, and stressors multiply when one is forced to manage them alone. Factors that contribute to chronic stress and mental health issues among single mothers are numerous and include a lack of financial resources, challenges with job stability, issues with health insurance, stress in the home, and increased instances of experiencing or witnessing domestic violence (Broussard 2010).

The second challenge are finances; scholarship shows occupation sex segregation and gendered differentials in income and wealth coupled exposes the financial fragility that households with single mother’s experience (as noted before, 80% of single parents are women). Pressman (2003) argues the complication that holds with having a lone earner is that they become vulnerable to financial shifts, various obstacles such as being laid off from work, getting sick, getting reduced hours due to an economics low

down. Previous research (Augustijn 2022) has repeatedly shown that separation or divorce can lead to a substantial decline in economic resources, and that it is mostly mothers who suffer from the severe economic consequences.

Thus, the household is more than likely to wind up in poverty due to these circumstances. The emotional strain of struggling with finances takes further toll on the family (Kotwal and Prabhakar 2009). Though there is public assistance it should be noted that it is hard to come by, public benefits can be denied, and there are delayed wait times in receiving the actual assistance. As a result, many single parents also deal with poverty and food insecurity.

*Food insecurity, broadly defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a lack of “enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members,” generally rises and falls with changes in the economy but has fluctuated between 10 percent and 15 percent since the USDA began tracking it in the early 1990s.”*  
(Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020)

Food insecurity amongst single parent households is already a challenge due to it being a single income household. On the downside, parents may also have to navigate an unhealthy relationship with the other parent. This relationship might manifest onto the child(ren) as well and can create a hostile environment where the child(ren) finds it hard to “choose” between parents due to their own parents' strained relationship and so forth. The relationship amongst parents may be strained due to previous physical and emotional domestic abuse and there may be certain restrictions set in place by a high level of authority—such as a court order. The other parent may have a court order that restricts them from seeing their child(ren) and can place another added challenge that the family may experience. On the upside, there are parents who work together and co-parent effectively.

### *Challenges of Single Parenthood (COVID-19)*

The pandemic affected *everyone* as was often repeated in the media through the popular slogan, “We are all in this together.” However, the extent may have varied depending on

factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, class, race, occupation, and country of residence (to name a few). As this paper will show, the pandemic has brought forth a new set of challenges for single parents. It affected each corner of their lives and continues to impact them negatively and, in some cases, positively. In the following paragraphs, I detail the nascent literature that has described the many ways in which the pandemic has affected single parents and the new set of challenges and hardships that they have faced.

### *Financial Hardships*

Businesses, schools, recreation, and all other places that were considered “non-essential” were forced to shut down. The shutdown placed a financial burden on employees. With having to stay home, many individuals were out of employment. A percentage of the population included single parents. The unexpected loss of income and not having any funds to cover expenses is a tremendous hardship for the family. Even before the pandemic, solo parents were experiencing challenges, said Juliana Horowitz, an associate director of research at Pew Research Center. She noted that Pew’s research shows a quarter of solo parents living in poverty; that number was even higher, 30 percent (Bowen 2020), for single moms.

*Vulnerable communities face significant risks in times of COVID-19. Communities with deeply entrenched poverty, overcrowded housing, and limited employment flexibility (e.g., communities where individuals are unable to work from home, miss a day of work, or face long and crowded commutes), face greater immediate risk of COVID-19. (Fisher et.al, 2020)*

Financial hardships such as losing a home and/or becoming houseless changes lives. The impact that this would have on the family is tremendous. Not only would the loss of a home impact on the family, in a physical sense, the loss of comfort of a safe space is removed. This would not only affect the parent but the child(ren) as well. Another factor in experiencing financial hardship is food insecurity. Not knowing where to locate emergency social services and/or the accessibility of food is

something that the parent confronts. There is often shame brought forth in seeking these types of services and can have the parent feeling a wave of helplessness that may affect the family as well.

### *Childcare*

Another challenge that many single parents faced were school closures. School-aged children attending school in the traditional setting (in person) were restricted to staying at home and processing their daily schoolwork via virtual learning. Their mode of operation for learning was having a teacher instruct a classroom via the computer. Teachers and educators used different modes of learning, and many used the video application, Zoom, to communicate with students. This may or may not have taken a toll on the student. Considering issues regarding connectivity i.e., a stable internet connection, could be classified as a barrier to the student in effective learning.

Another foreseen drawback is if the student may have had difficulty in learning in this new virtual setting as opposed to their usual mode of learning. The challenge here would be if the student could or could not thrive in this learning space and if they were able to manage their schoolwork. *“Communication is essential for any task, and due to the lockdown, communication through technology has replaced face to face interactions. It has its own limitations”* (Debbarma & Durai 2021). Communication is key in transmitting the information that is imperative in learning and flourishing as a student.

The limitation with online learning is not having that “face to face” interaction that a student is typically used to in a traditional school setting. *“During the lockdown, children and adolescents were experiencing physical isolation from their classmates, friends, teachers, and other important adults (e.g., grandparents) leading to further emotional stressors”* (Luijten et.al, 2021). With the issue of virtual learning occurring in the same household environment as the parent, working from home also became an issue for both parties to work effectively. Moreover, having a parent considered an “essential” employee—one that must work at an institution or establishment that cannot be shut down, can pose a concern for childcare.



*Co-parenting*

The issue of co-parenting is a major concern for many single parents. The issues of child custody are always relevant and may be cumbersome for parents to deal with especially if the other parent is “difficult” and there may not be a harmonious agreement between parents. The pandemic may pose several challenges for co-parenting. If one parent falls ill the other parent may have to take on the full load of parenting due to the other quarantining and not being able to see the child(ren). The other factor is that the other parent may not even be in the picture and not have any responsibilities shared. An added difficulty is if there is child custody in place. The courthouses, being considered an essential establishment in the pandemic, may have only a small window of operating hours and/or communication was limited. Thus, arranging any modifications to a court order could be incommodious and sometimes not possible due to their constricting hours of operation. Considering if there was a violation of court order, an enforcing institution such as a police department, was available for the public and parents could seek aid if there was cause for any type of court order violation or case of domestic dispute amongst parents.

*Mental health children and families in the United States have suffered greatly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. School shutdowns, unprecedented job loss, and the grief and loss related to COVID-19 deaths have highlighted the mental health and financial needs of parents—particularly single parents. (Shipe, Ayer and Guastafarro 2022)*

The social distancing and restrictions may impede single parents from reaching out to others “face to face” for companionship and/or support. All the issues together pose a risk for a single parent to suffer from depression, anxiety, and distress.

*With so many people forced to conduct paid work from home—and with so many social services like childcare and public schools that are essential to people’s ability to work shut down—the*

*pandemic has stretched family to a breaking point.* (Hertz, Mattes, Shook, 2020)

This accumulation of these issues coming together at such a vulnerable time in a parent's life can stress the family out and make them reach their breaking point.

## METHODOLOGY & DATA

### *Data Collection*

This study examines 5 in-depth interviews with women who also identify as single parents living in California. The term single (alternatively, sole) parent refers to a parent who may be divorced, separated, widowed, single, never married, or not living with a partner. The study was reviewed, approved, and granted "exempt" status by the CSULA IRB and conducted during academic year 2021-22.

To recruit participants, I posted fliers on social media sites (e.g., primarily through Facebook) to recruit my participants. I posted the flyer on Facebook in a specialized group that included nearby neighbors in the city of which I live in. I also posted this flyer on two other university school pages and lastly on a single parents Facebook page. The fliers contained my contact information so that potential participants could contact me if they were interested in the study.

Over four months, I received over ten email messages from individuals who wanted to take part in the study. Ultimately, only five of the ten followed through with an interview. Based on the recruitment parameters, all participants identified as currently "single" parents and had at least one child living with them. I used Zoom to conduct my interviews for several reasons. First, on account of the pandemic, zoom was the safest option to get together. Second, the ability to conduct interviews from comfort of homes would be especially important to my participants who were singularly juggling childcare and busy work schedules. For example, even during the interview the hum of everyday life and parenting was happening in the background. I could hear mothers instructing their children to take a bath or get ready for bed.

If a participant did not have access to a computer or internet access, I was prepared to offer the interview via a mobile device—such as a telephone call. I should add that all participants were

able to connect via zoom. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and were, with the consent of the participant, recorded. I decided to use interviews as a method to elicit in-depth stories that spoke of their unique experiences/ familial situation and the pandemic. I transcribed each interview and coded them thematically to arrive at my findings.

### *Participant Characteristics*

All the participants for this study identified as women i.e., Karina, Lizette, Jennifer, Crystal, and Annie (names altered per IRB). I did not specifically seek single mothers as I understand that there are single fathers out there as well. However, as data shows—most single parents are mothers. Even though 3 single fathers had initially responded to my flyer, none followed through despite multiple emails from me. All the participants were women of color – four of them identified themselves as Latinas and one as Black. All of them had sought higher education with three completing a bachelor’s degree. Their income range varied. Crystal \$125,000/annually and was arguably an outlier as the rest made between \$24,000 – 50,000 annually. At least two worked more than one job. Their ages ranged between early 30s and early 40s years. Two of the mothers had only one child, while three of the participants had 2-3 children. All the children were minors, lived with their mothers, and their ages ranged between 4-14 years of age.

Further, all participants self-identified as “single” parents. All women had been in heterosexual relationships before its dissolution. Four of the participants had separated before the pandemic. Only one of them (Annie) separated and started the divorce process at the beginning of the pandemic. In Annie’s case, as related by her, the domestic violence she had endured before the pandemic had escalated during the pandemic and during the pandemic the children were also becoming victims of abuse. In fact, Annie made the decision to separate when her ex-husband physically abused her son. As I discuss in the next section in more detail, all participants were solely responsible for the care of children and for most of them their ex-partners were not invested in childcare. Two ex-partners reported active restraining orders against them due to a history of violence. The data provided for

the pieces of information and taking a “closer” look at the lives of these single parents provided a foundation for further analysis into their very own hardships and struggles.

### *Managing Alone as Single Mothers*

All my participants said that the fathers of their children were mostly absent from their lives. None of the fathers made financial contributions and the few that met their children did so rarely. Crystal mentioned that even when they were together, she essentially operated as a single parent and divorce just solidified that responsibility. She said, “*sometimes even when you're married, you select you're single anyways, I just want to make that a point that women do a significant amount of work in the household. And so, it's just hard either way.*” Karina said that her son’s father wasn’t majorly involved in his everyday activities as she was. He would visit when it suited him. For all intents and purposes, she was the only parent who held the sole responsibility for her son.

Lizette and Jennifer reported that their ex-partners were both incarcerated during much of the pandemic, but their substance dependence meant that they didn’t contribute even when they had been together. In Jennifer’s case, it has always been an uphill battle when it came to the inconsistency that her ex-partner provided for her and her child. Lizette’s ex-partner was released for a short while before being incarcerated again. Annie and Crystal reported that the fathers of their children had a current restraining order on file. They were both survivors of domestic violence. Even though the fathers saw their children for supervised visits according to the court’s child custody order, there was no shared parenting relationship due to restraining orders. Annie said,

*So, when we separated, um, we had that domestic violence situation. And so immediately, I had a restraining order put in place. And I still Okay, now I know that people are most likely going to relapse multiple times before they could get sober, you know. So, I decided to stick around with him for two years. It was on and off, he would get clean, then he would relapse...When he*

*was clean, everything was fine...but I can't have a part time husband or father figure for my son, you know. He had gotten released from the state facility. So, whenever he came out, he had to go live with his sister. He couldn't...he didn't have the resources to support or share custody, buying food for the kids. He didn't even have a job. I have a restraining order in place till this day. And within that restraining order, it gave me executive control over the children with their persons, their medical, so I am their number one caregiver and in the eyes of the law and just in general. But I also want to preface this by saying, even when I was married, I was basically doing all the work anyways. So, I was already doing everything.*

Clearly, the participants are the sole caregivers and the household's only breadwinners. Going through the challenge of living through a historic pandemic—or not—they report that they were always there for their children. They couldn't depend on or even place the father of their children in consideration in their children's lives. This is due to the constant inconsistency that they experienced even when they were together, as a couple, at some point in their lives. Managing alone is a recurring theme with all these participants and it is clear that they carry the tremendous responsibility of playing all these roles simultaneously to provide a quality of life for their child(ren).

### *Positionality*

Like my participants, I identify as a single mother. I am also the sole caretaker of two school-aged children—aged twelve and seven years old. As an “essential worker,” I was required to go into work even as my children were home due to school closures. I was fortunate to have my mother close by to rely on. She looks after my children while I am away. But that came with its own challenges, I had daily contact with the public and feared contracting the virus and bringing it back to my family. My mother is immunocompromised, and I constantly feared for her well-being. Unlike my participants, I was also fortunate enough to have developed a healthy co-parenting relationship with my ex-

partner. Since he was able to work from home, he would often come by to my house and assist our children with online learning. He also had a computer desk set up for our children when they would visit him at his home. I was acutely aware that I was extremely fortunate in this regard, and this was not the case for most of my participants yet the shared realities between myself and my participants forged a rapport and intimacy that would have been harder to achieve had I been an “outsider.” If I had been an outsider, I wouldn’t have gained my participant’s trust so easily. It is difficult to open to someone, let alone talk about hardships and challenges that one goes through. If I claimed to be single with no children, I wouldn’t have a commonality to share with them. They would have possibly not wanted to be emotionally open to me and might have withheld information if that were the case. All in all, as single parents, we shared a deep knowledge and empathy for each other’s challenges. At the end of the interviews, they added that they were grateful to have participated in this research study and claimed it to be a form of therapy and felt that they were “seen” and “heard”. Thus, my own personal history, common and shared stories of challenges and resilience aided in gaining my participant’s trust and confidence.

## FINDINGS

My findings suggest that single parents experienced the pandemic as a double-edged sword – on the one hand, it pushed single parents to the brink as they “managed alone” the intensive tasks of parenting while shouldering work responsibilities. Yet, surprisingly, they found moments of joy in otherwise trying times due to uninterrupted time spent with their children.

### *Managing Alone and Pushed to the Brink*

The single mothers I interviewed were pushed to the brink during the early months of the pandemic as school closures weighed heavily on the mothers as a “new” expectation of round-the-clock parenting without breaks added to already existing challenges that single mothers endured while keeping a balance on work and life. As Karina noted, “*For one if you're single, right, so you cannot rely on your partner late at night or in the morning, it's kind of you... kind of just have to keep on going without*

*hesitating or, or even have a time to complain, because at the same time, you're so busy trying to get things moving, like taking your child to school, to the doctor, to providing food on the table, that it has been very challenging... there is just no time."*

Due to fear of spreading and contracting the virus, they further isolated themselves from others. While in the past they had the support of their mothers and friends to step in, the pandemic took that away from them. With no one to fall back on, Lizette summarized and said, *"There's no time I can't even be sick, because if I'm sick every ship will sink!"*

Since schools and childcare centers were shut down due to the lockdown, it became a hardship for those parents that had to still go to work "in person" and leave their children at home. With no one to turn to, some like Lizette left her children – who were of "legal age" –home alone as she went to work. But she worried about them nonstop. She said, *"Without anyone to watch over them, there is no one to even make sure they wake up for school on time."* Some others like Crystal, who jobs to find one where she could take her youngest with her. Ultimately, she took a job at a daycare to be able to take her youngest son with her. She said she worked in a school district, took her children with her when she went to work. Annie had to change professions—she notes the following:

*I reached out to this school that had daycare. They have special programs for low-income families, like you know... So, I went in there looking for daycare, and they offered me a job, because I said I need a job. So, I had to stop looking out for things in my field, you know, office, clerical stuff—to changing diapers and potty training and all that just so that I could be close to Kayden so that I can obtain childcare.*

It was not a job Annie wanted. She did not want to *"clean poopie diapers all day,"* but she settled for the sake of her son. All in all, the feature of childcare has always been an issue with or without the pandemic taking place, but the pandemic took away the few support systems that my participants had previously relied on.

Virtual schooling added another layer of stress. All the participants wanted to make sure that their children did great in

school. They often reported checking their work and rearranging their work schedules and/or meetings to accommodate their children. In addition to it all participants reported being stressed, due to the pandemic, and the uncertainty of everything occurring around them. Parents were often responsible for facilitating the education of their children during the pandemic. As one participant said, *“They call us the parent coaches...I have to help him with doing the homework, experiments, reading and I have to check everything before he submits. So, in addition to everything else I’m basically his teacher at home.”*

Single mothers also feared for the welfare of their children. They worried what would happen to their children if they had COVID and were hospitalized or worse. Fear was a constant that would further isolate them from others. Annie, for example stated the following, *“We would go outside for a little while, but it was always that little fear, like, the uncertainty of like, is it okay, is it not?”* Moreover, the losses they experienced during the pandemic made it harder. Two of the participants (Lizette and Crystal) lost their own mothers during the pandemic leading to tremendous emotional turmoil. Scholarship has shown the important roles grandmothers typically play in low-income and/or single-parent families to supplement childcare (George and Dickerson 1995). The women in this study had also relied on their mothers on occasion before so their mothers’ loss left yet another gap in their lives. During the interview, all the women reflected on the pain and loss, yet not being able to find time or space to properly grieve losses. They felt stretched thin. Annie’s words put that in perspective. Annie who had just left a violent marriage knew she needed therapy, but she said,

*The kids are going through therapy, right? You know, every, every Tuesday they get therapy. They offered me help as well. I said no at the time, they are priority right now. I still have a lot of a lot going on. And I go to work, I come home, I have to cook, I have to do homework, I have to give showers. When do I even have time to do therapy? during my lunch break? So, I don't have time for school, I don't have time for therapy*



*sessions. I know, they will probably benefit me a lot, but I don't have time.*

Having to manage alone in this pandemic and life overall wasn't enough for these participants— their quality of life was at a standstill or to place it in a literal sense—they felt defeated. They were all “burnt” out in having to just exist in their child(ren)’s lives and having to constantly juggle everything all at once without having to drop anything because everything, each role, was just as important. They constantly had to manage the ever-changing climate of their surroundings and had to adhere to these special circumstances that made life cumbersome for them. They expressed a tiresome tone in their interviews. They felt like they needed a “break” from it all but when was that going to happen?

*“Silver Linings” while Managing Alone*

Despite the struggles and hardships that the participants faced, it was surprising to hear that they felt the pandemic had its silver linings for them. All of them claimed that they were able to spend more time with their children and that it was a blessing in disguise. They experienced this quality time that they had not experienced “pre-pandemic.” There was time “saved” in not having to get ready and the time it took to travel from point A to B was just a walk to the living room to start work or school. They created this special bond with their children. They felt they were more than just parents—they were their teachers now. While this was sometimes overwhelming, as noted above, they also got a chance to be involved more with their children’s schoolwork and academics, which was meaningful.

All, except for Crystal, had dealt with severe financial strain before the pandemic but things shifted after the pandemic. As Karina said, *“Financially, it is challenging, because I’ve always worked two or three jobs in order to maintain a healthy financial status for me.”* In fact, their finances were less impacted by the pandemic and most continued to work where they had worked before. Ironically, for some, the pandemic offered more hours at work and therefore, more money. Jennifer reported that she was offered more overtime which added more income to the family. She stated the following, *“In my field, I feel like we’re always going to be...considered essential. So workwise, it didn’t*

*really affect me...we were getting more hours...it was even a better working schedule for me.”* However, this came with the possibility of exposure which constantly worried them. She related the extra time she would spend sanitizing her workplace to keep herself safe.

Government assistance programs during pandemic further added to their financial stability. However, they all reported that they qualified for the EBT card and were able to purchase groceries to help sustain their families. The “free lunch” pickup feature at school was another feature that helped them. Even Crystal, who makes \$125,000 annually, qualified for the EBT card because of her children’s school district in a low-income neighborhood. Lizette said,

*We were fortunate, their school district without us even knowing they applied for a grant. So, what they did is that if your children received free lunch, and all the kids get free lunch here in the district, they don’t have to pay for lunch. Pretty much everybody got it...They would do curbside meals. So, the cafeteria would supply breakfast and lunch...my kids didn’t have a way to get there when I was at work...They got a food benefit card...That helped tremendously.*

Further, Child Tax Credit programs helped them create some savings. Under the American Rescue Plan, parents were eligible to receive an increased child tax credit, if they were caring for a child in the household. The monthly child tax credit was \$250 per child. This occurred from the time of July through December 2021. Annie had fared the worst amongst all. She had just begun the process of separation when the pandemic started. Upon separation, she had to find employment and a place to live with her children. Her ex-spouse refused to provide support in any form and even kept the money received from Child Tax Credit programs. She worked multiple jobs to stay afloat and relied on social services (e.g., EBT, Section 8 Housing, Church, and domestic violence shelters) to get her back onto her feet and provide a type of security for her and her children. Annie would spend hours and days trying to ensure that she and her children had basic amenities. Yet, she felt that the pandemic also saved her

and her children, because pandemic related assistance programs helped her out:

*I'm under a program where they're helping me with housing, which is for women and children that suffer from abuse. So, it's called, "(name removed)" They're helping me with my rent. I had COVID in February. I reached out to a church that helped me...So I've been looking out for different programs to help me because it's really hard getting paid \$15 an hour when your rent is \$1,800. And I get paid \$2,000 a month?*

The process of healing also not only occurred within each participant, but it was apparent on the outside. Annie claimed that she started to notice changes on the outside. She started to become healthier, and her mental health was getting better. Despite all her struggles, she expressed that she felt that the pandemic saved her life.

*My health is better. I was on heart medication. You know because he had me on edge. My heart rate was always like 185 and I was sitting on the sofa. It was because of the tension because he would bring my adrenaline you know, like this (snaps fingers) like a switch. No, I'm not on that anymore...I had this weird allergy on my face...it was all stress related. My hair is actually growing out. It's all those little things that you start noticing. It's like, "Wow, this man was affecting so many people in so many different ways." Even my son is thriving, and now for the past year now, since he's been with me... we've been away from all that mess. He's nothing but straight A's, honor roll. 4.0 grade point average. I mean, he's doing so well.*

This significant feature is the most remarkable silver lining in the study. Annie was the participant that showed the most turmoil and was in great distress. Although she remained calm and positive. She managed to cope and handled her hardships with grace and hope.

Thus, despite the many challenges the pandemic presented the single mothers in this study found their solace in the few indirect perks the pandemic brought them, they found more time with their children and sometimes more of a financial safety net they had not experienced before due to pandemic relief programs. While the study had initially expected to find that challenges for single parents were exacerbated during the pandemic, I unexpectedly found narratives of hope and resilience. Despite these silver linings the study points to the fact that even before the pandemic, single mothers were hard pressed to find quality time with their children. Perhaps, more importantly, it shows the need for stronger safety nets for single parents. The moderate offerings in public assistance during the pandemic made so much of a difference is both eye-opening and troubling; and suggests that the public safety net needs to be broadened more generally.

## CONCLUSION

I expected the pandemic to only bring more grief and challenges along the way for the single parent and make life worse for the household. However, there were silver linings in these times uncertainty and unforeseen circumstances. The resilience of the participants and how they approached and coped with the challenges was remarkable. There was a medley of hardships that each of them uniquely encountered, however, they were all able to jump over that obstacle and make the best out of a bad situation. The participants shared a wealth of information about how they coped with the many factors that they encountered during the pandemic. They provided a lens into their lives and told stories about “managing alone” through the pandemic as a single parent. They spoke about their children and how much they cared for their well-being during this uncertain time. They tended to their basic human needs such as shelter and food security. They also were concerned about their children’s education. They all coped with virtual schooling that brought many challenges that needed to be dealt with. They worried about childcare and who could be present to ensure their children’s physical well-being if something were to happen to them. These parents worried about social distancing and mask requirements. After the school reopened and the

children were able to get back to a so-called “normal” they had to rebuild their past friendships and teacher relationships once again since they had spent so much time apart. While single parents are and were resilient for the sake of their children, the pandemic offered unforeseen silver linings that they all experienced during doubt and uncertainty.

The information gathered here and the data that was analyzed, especially what mothers called “silver linings” is also a troubling insight into our current world. What kind of world do we live in that it takes a pandemic for a single parent to find quality time with their children? What kind of work culture have we created that allows us to ignore the crises of childcare experienced especially by single parents, day after day? The study showed the importance of public assistance/welfare measures for the health and welfare of children and women. All these participants benefited from a social service, one way or another, that was provided by the government during the pandemic. How would Annie have fared without these given her ex-husband had not provided for them financially? The school lunches enabled the mothers to work, parent, and teach without worrying about making food during school/work hours. Consider this, what would have happened to the mothers in this study had these services been absent during the pandemic? How would these single parents fend for themselves and their children? If anything, this study shows the importance of strengthening our social safety nets even after the pandemic.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH

A major limitation of this study was sample size. This research is based on five participants due to time constraints and the difficulty in recruiting from a demographic whose time is stretched thin. Being a single parent and managing everything all at once is cumbersome and they simply may not have any extra time reserved to answer the questions involved in the interview. Many single parents are still trying to manage and maintain their households and their mental health might be at risk. Some potential participants may not have been ready to share their own challenges and struggles. They might be struggling with

homelessness or food insecurity and do not feel that they are in a safe space to speak about these hardships.

Future research could feature a larger sample size. Further, as this study focused on single mothers, future research could compare the experiences of single fathers. The study would benefit from viewing the coping mechanisms according to a single father's perspective, a group we rarely hear from. Finally, future research could include an explicit analysis of vulnerable groups within categories of single parents, like undocumented single parents. Such research would add nuance to our understandings of how groups living under multiple layers of oppression cope with the systemic challenges facing them.

## REFERENCES

- Almeida, Marcela, Angela D. Shrestha, Danijela Stojanac, and Laura J. Miller. 2020. "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women's Mental Health." *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 23(6):741–48.
- Andrada-Poa, Mary Rose Jean, Ronaldo F. Jabal, and Jerome V. Cleofas. 2021. "Single Mothering during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Remote Photovoice Project Among Filipino Single Mothers Working From Home." *Community, Work & Family* 25(2):260-278.
- Aday, Serpil, and Mehmet Seckin Aday. 2020. "Impact Of COVID-19 On the Food Supply Chain." *Food Quality and Safety* 4(4):167-180.
- Asanov, Igor, Francisco Flores, David McKenzie, Mona Mensmann, and Mathis Schulte. 2021. "Remote-Learning, Time-Use, And Mental Health of Ecuadorian High-School Students During The COVID-19 Quarantine." *World Development* 138:105225.
- Augustijn, Lara. 2022. "Mothers' Economic Well-Being in Sole and Joint Physical Custody Families." *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 44(1):53–64.
- Banker, Steve. 2022. "Toilet Paper Shortages, Empty Shelves, and Panic Buying: Just How Bad Was Grocery Service in 2020?" *Forbes*. Retrieved May 5, 2022 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevebanker/2021/10/01/toilet-paper-shortages-empty-shelves-and-panic-buying-just-how-bad-was-grocery-service-in-2020/>).
- Bowen, Alison. *There's Not Balance: Single Parents Struggle with Being the Sole Decider, Caregiver and Teacher*. TCA Regional News. Chicago: Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2020.
- Brewster, Karin L., and Irene Padavic. 2002. "No More Kin Care?" *Gender & Society* 16(4):546-563.
- Broussard, C. Anne. 2010. "Research Regarding Low-Income Single Mothers' Mental and Physical Health: A Decade in Review." *Journal of Poverty* 14(4):443–51.
- Burghes, L. 1994. "What Happens to the Children Of Single Parent Families?" *BMJ* 308(6937):1114-1115.
- Cairney, John, Michael Boyle, David R. Offord, and Yvonne Racine. 2003. "Stress, Social Support and Depression in Single And Married Mothers." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 38(8):442-449.

- Choi, Shinwoo, Soo-Jung Byoun, and Eun Hee Kim. 2020. "Unwed Single Mothers in South Korea: Increased Vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *International Social Work* 63(5):676–80.
- Dunatchik, Allison, Kathleen Gerson, Jennifer Glass, Jerry A. Jacobs, and Haley Stritzel. 2021. "Gender, Parenting, And the Rise of Remote Work During the Pandemic: Implications for Domestic Inequality in the United States." *Gender & Society* 35(2):194-205.
- Christner, Natalie, Samuel Essler, Astrid Hazzam, and Markus Paulus. 2021. "Children's Psychological Well-Being and Problem Behavior During The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Online Study During the Lockdown Period in Germany." *PLOS ONE* 16(6):e:0253473.
- Craig, L., & Churchill, B. 2021. Unpaid work and care during COVID-19: Subjective experiences of same-sex couples and single mothers in Australia. *Gender & Society*, 35(2), 233-243.
- Debbarna, Immanuel and Tabitha Durai. 2021. "Educational Disruption: Impact of COVID-19 on Students from the Northeast States of India." *Children and Youth Services Review* 120:105769.
- Elliott, Sinikka, Sierra J. Satterfield, G. Solorzano, Sara Bowen, Annie Hardison-Moodie, and Latasha Williams. 2021. "Disenfranchised: How Lower Income Mothers Navigated the Social Safety Net during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 7. DOI: 237802312110316.
- Fisher, Jenny et al. 2020. "Community, Work, And Family In Times Of COVID-19." *Community, Work & Family* 23(3):247-252.
- Fenstermaker, Sarah, and Candace West. 2013. *Doing Gender, Doing Difference*.
- Gasibat, Qais, Aburwais Aymen, and Musab Gasibat. 2021. "Should Schools Reopen During The COVID-19 Pandemic?" *Journal of Medicine* 22(1):57-59.
- Hertz, Rosanna, Jane Mattes, and Alexandria Shook. 2020. "When Paid Work Invades the Family: Single Mothers in the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Family Issues* 42(9):2019- 2045.
- George, Susan M., and Bette J. Dickerson. 1995. "The Role of the grandmother in Poor Single Mother Families and Households." Pp. 146-163 in *African American Single Mothers*; Sage Publications
- Kotwal, Nidhi, and Bharti Prabhakar. 2009. "Problems Faced by Single Mothers." *Journal of Social Sciences* 21(3):197-204.
- Luijten, Michiel A., Maud M. van Muilekom, Lorynn Teela, Tina J. C. Polderman, Caroline B. Terwee, Josjan Zijlmans, Leonie Slaufus, Arne Popma, Kim J. Oostrom, Hedy A. van Oers, and Lotte Haverman. "The Impact of Lockdown during the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental and Social Health of Children and Adolescents." *Quality of Life Research* 30(10): 2795-2804.
- "The Impact of Lockdown During The COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental and Social Health of Children and Adolescents." *Quality of Life Research* 30(10):2795-2804.
- McLanahan, Sara and Karen Booth. 1989. "Mother-Only Families: Problems, Prospects, and Politics." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51(3):557.
- Mills, Susanna, Viviana Albani, and Heather Brown. 2021. "Estimating the Direct and Indirect Risks of Becoming Food Insecure During The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Analysis Using UK Cohort Data." *The Lancet* 398: S67.
- Pakstis, Debra, and Pei-Chun Hsieh. 2015. "How Family Leisure Influences Family Functionality in Single-Parent Families." *Therapeutic Recreation Journal* 49(4).
- Pace, Lori. 2021. "Single Mother Household Statistics in 2022." Retrieved May. 5, 2022 <https://singlemothers.us/single-mother-statistics/>
- Perry, Charity, and Rick Fraser. 2020. "A Qualitative Analysis of New Norms on Transition Days in Blended Families." *Sociology Mind* 10(02):55-69.

- Radey, Melissa, Lisa Langenderfer-Magruder, and Joedrecka Brown Speights. 2021. "“I Don't Have Much of a Choice”: Low-Income Single Mothers' COVID-19 School and Care Decisions.” *Family Relations* 70(5):1312-1326.
- Samuel, Laura J., Darrell J. Gaskin, Antonio J. Trujillo, Sarah L. Szanton, Andrew Samuel, and Eric Slade “Race, Ethnicity, Poverty and The Social Determinants of The Coronavirus Divide: U.S. County-Level Disparities and Risk Factors.” *BMC Public Health* 21(1).
- Shipe, Stacey L., Lynsay Ayer, and Kate Guastaferro. 2022. “American Single Father Homes: A Growing Public Health Priority.” *American Journal of Public Health* 112(1):21-23.
- Spyreli, Eleni, Michelle C. McKinley, Jayne V. Woodside, and Colette Kelly. 2021. “A Qualitative Exploration of The Impact Of COVID-19 On Food Decisions of Economically Disadvantaged Families in Northern Ireland.” *BMC Public Health* 21(1).
- Tang, Suqin, Mi Xiang, Teris Cheung, and Yu-Tao Xiang. 2021. “Mental Health and Its Correlates among Children and Adolescents during COVID-19 School Closure: The Importance of Parent-Child Discussion.” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 279:353–60. *Clinical Immunology*
- Tso, Winnie W. Y., Rosa S. Wong, Keith T.S. Tung, Nirmala Rao, King Wa Fu, Jason C. S. Yam, Gilbert T. Chua, Eric Y.H. Chen, Tatia M.C. Lee, Sherry K.W. Chan, Wilfred H.S. Wong, Xiaoli Xiong, Celine S. Chui, Xue Li, Kirstie Wong, Cynthia Leung, Sandra K.M. Tsang, Godfrey C.F. Chan, Pual K.H. Tam, Ko Ling Chan, Mike Y.W. Kwan, Marco H.K. Ho, Chun Bong Chow, Ian C.K. Wong, and Patrick Ip. 2020. “Vulnerability and Resilience in Children During The COVID-19 Pandemic.” *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 31(1):161-176.
- Westrupp, Elizabeth M., Mark A. Stokes, Matthew Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, Tomer S. Berkowitz, Tanha Capic, Sarah Khor, Christopher J. Greenwood, Antonia Mikoka-Walus, Emaa Sciberras, George J. Youssef, Craig A Olsson, Delyse Hutchinson. 2021. “Subjective Wellbeing in Parents During The COVID-19 Pandemic in Australia.” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 145:110482.
- Yuki, Koichi, Miho Fujiogi, and Sophia Koutsogiannaki. 2020. “COVID-19 Pathophysiology: A Review.” *Clinical Immunology* 215:108427.

**Martha Toscano Joya** (She/Her/Ella) graduated with a Master of Arts degree, in Sociology, from California State University- Los Angeles. She is an adjunct instructor at Pasadena City College. Her main courses are Intro to Sociology and Race & Ethnicity. Her research interests include: Human Sexuality, Immigration, Race & Ethnicity, Poverty & Social Psychology & Justice. This published piece is representative of her work alongside mentor, Dr. Shweta Adur, who she is grateful and thankful for her continued support. This piece is dedicated to all single mothers who navigate life's challenges & obstacles.