AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL INVESTIGATION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEING A SINGLE PARENT AND POVERTY

Esra KARAPINAR KOCAĞ*

ABSTRACT

Single parenting has been a growing type of family structure both in Western countries and Eastern ones. Changing economic and social conditions have contributed to this growth. Poverty or worsening welfare is also a growing concern in society. This study, therefore, investigates whether being a single parent is associated with a poverty risk. To do so, The Current Population Survey (CPS) which is a commonly used data source applied in social science from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) database were utilised. Being a reliable source with large sample sizes and various subjects covered in the U.S. population makes IPUMS widely preferable data source with micro level data on individuals and household. This empirical investigation, therefore, relies on IPUMS CPS data to explain poverty risk of single parents. Findings reveal that being a single parent is significantly associated with being below the poverty line. Additionally, sex, age, employment status, education level, race, and citizenship status were found to be significant to explain poverty.

Keywords: Single-Parent Family, Poverty Risk, IPUMS CPS, Individual Level Analysis

TEK EBEVEYN OLMAK İLE YOKSULLUK İLİŞKİSİ ÜZERİNE BİREYSEL DÜZEYDE BİR İNCELEME

ÖZET

Tek ebeveynlik, hem Batı ülkelerinde hem de Doğu ülkelerinde büyüyen bir aile yapısı türü olmuştur. Değişen ekonomik ve sosyal koşullar bu büyümeye katkıda bulunmuştur. Yoksulluk veya kötüleşen refah da toplumda artan bir endişe kaynağıdır. Bu nedenle bu çalışma, bekâr bir ebeveyn olmanın yoksulluk riski ile ilişkili olup olmadığını araştırmaktadır. Bunun için, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) veri tabanından sosyal bilimlerde uygulanan ve yaygın olarak kullanılan bir veri kaynağı olan Current Population Survey (CPS) kullanılmıştır. Büyük örneklem boyutları ve ABD popülasyonunda kapsanan çeşitli konularla güvenilir bir kaynak olması, bireyler ve hanehalkı hakkında mikro düzeyde veriler içeren IPUMS'u yaygın olarak tercih edilen bir veri kaynağı haline getirmektedir. Dolayısıyla bu ampirik araştırma, bekar ebeveynlerin yoksulluk riskini açıklamak için IPUMS CPS verilerine dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, tek ebeveyn olmanın yoksulluk sınırının altında olmakla önemli ölçüde ilişkili olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca cinsiyet, yaş, çalışma durumu, eğitim düzeyi, ırk ve vatandaşlık durumunun da yoksulluğu açıklamada anlamlı olduğu bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tek Ebeveynli Aile, Yoksulluk Riski, IPUMS CPS, Bireysel Düzeyde Analiz

1. INTRODUCTION

Single-parent family structure has become important as 14 percent of children lives in this type of households across the world (Chamie, 2016). There might be several reasons for traditional coupled-family structure to evolve into that. Changing gender roles/norms and economic independence are likely to be two important factors. It should be noted that single-parent families are more likely to experience challenges to lower their wellbeing in comparison with coupled-families (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). For this reason, studying poverty for this particular group of people seems worthwhile.

Single-parent households do not only increase in the Western World, but it also does in Asia. Hong Kong is one of those examples with a substantial increase in the number of single-parent families with 137 percent increase from 1991 to 2011 (Cheung, 2015). While it was resulted due to death of a spouse before, it is currently

* Assistant Professor, Gümüşhane University, esrakkocag@gumushane.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-2239-0519
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arising from divorce and premarital birth (Cheung, 2015). Through a logistic estimation method and using Population Census data for 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2011, Cheung (2015) showed that child poverty risk increased continuously during the period of investigation, along with a significant gap between single-parent and married-couple households in the case of Hong Kong. Single-parent families are mostly headed by mothers in China, and they are disadvantaged on the following aspects that worsen their situation: worse economic conditions, lower employment opportunities, poorer health, poorer social relationships, and less chance of remarriage as a result of Chinese culture, beliefs, and stereotypes about single mothers (Li, 2020: 116).

To the extent that gender differences are expected to be associated with poverty risk. Accordingly, men are more likely to be employed, and women are more likely to live with children, hence, that means more income for one group and more dependency obligations for the other (Casper et al., 1994). In their empirical study based on a logistic estimation with eight industrialised countries, that are Australia, Germany, Canada, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, Casper et al. (1994) found that single parenting differentials do not explain gender specific poverty gap, however, gender differences in employment have strong effect on the reduction of gender-poverty ratios.

Welfare programs are proposed as an important tool to increase the welfare level of families to reduce the gap between subgroups of society. The success of those programmes has been discussed in the literature, as well as by politicians or public. Butler (1996) examined whether a welfare programme in the US that of Aid to Families with Dependent Children helped single-parents to leave poverty. Findings revealed that higher benefits had no effect on how quickly families left pre-transfer poverty in families in which mother was 20+ years old when she became a single parent. Moreover, higher benefits prolonged the poverty in such cases of being a teenager, or no recent work experience when the mother became a single parent. Bearing in mind some limitations of the research as emphasised like unmeasured factors, declining exit rates across years might be due to a poverty trap experienced by those families. Even though welfare systems are likely to reduce poverty, yet it might be at the expense of higher dependence on the welfare programmes (i.e. Single Parent Law) as concluded by Flug and Kasir (2006). In the empirical examination Flug and Kasir (2006) utilised a combined data of Labour Force Surveys 1985-2003, and Income Surveys 1987-2003 in Israel case to investigate if changes in the policy instruments (e.g. eligibility criteria, or size of the benefit) have any effect on employment, labour force participation and poverty of single mothers. Increased benefits and loosened eligibility criteria served to lower labour force participation, lower employment, and lesser working hours of single mothers. In a similar way, Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis (2015) examined family policies whether they affect poverty of single-parent and two-parent families for 18 OECD countries from 1978 to 2008 through a combined data from the Comparative Family Policy Database. Parental leave and family allowances were found to be associated with lower poverty among single-mother families as it is facilitating employment of single-mothers which is more than coupled and single father families. Also, employment was found to be associated with an important reduction of poverty risk for single-parent families.

Measuring poverty is one of the concerns in poverty researches. Atkinson (1992) discussed poverty measures and suggested that different judgements on needs of families should be taken into account. He provides a partial ranking that uses Lorenz curves in the measurement of income inequality. This approach allows for different judgements across different family types such as single with a child, couple, and couple with a child, etc. that highlights standardisation may not be an efficient way in this regard.

Becoming a single parent and poverty are widely discussed topics that might be due to several reasons and consequences of it. Considering the increasing number of single parents and child poverty, Garis (1998) tested if

having a single-parent family causes risky behaviour of youth such as drug/alcohol use and sexual activity using more than ten thousand respondents in the US through a probit model. Analysis is conducted for income groups separately. Findings showed that religious exercises are the only significant variable in reducing alcohol/drug abuse of youth. Similarly, in reducing the probability of active sexual life, religion and time spent in dad's house were found significant. For the mid income group, dad's house, parental oversight (i.e., setting rules on TV, homework, time spent with friends, etc.), and religion were found significant to reduce alcohol/drug abuse of youth, while parental oversight, dad's house, parental education, culture (i.e., attending concerts, museums, and/or science exhibits), parental expectation (child to achieve certain level of education/training), and both parent work variables were significant to reduce sexual activity. Finally for the high-income group, parental oversight though the effect was smaller, marriage (i.e. parents being married) was found to have the strongest effect on reducing alcohol/drug abuse, while parental oversight decreases the likelihood of being sexually active for youth.

A wide range of risks is accompanied by poverty. It is higher for families headed by single parent, hence, this risky environment may cause disruptions in children's mental health (i.e., HPA system-measured by cortisol- that may relate to behavioural problems on those children) (Zalewski et al., 2012: 538). In a study with 78 preschool children and mothers participated in two stages by 6 months via an experimental design and a logistic estimation, Zalewski et al. (2012) concluded that only those children living in poverty and a single parent are more likely to have low cortisol pattern. This finding shows a significant risk exposed by child of a single-parent and poor family. Social exclusion is another issue that might be experienced by single-parent families. The number of single-parent families in the United Kingdom has grown since 1970's from 7 percent in 1972 to 24 percent in 2005, and it is expected to increase five time its size (Walker et al., 2008). Drawing data from children (i.e. 6-16 years old) of single-parent families, Walker et al. (2008), based on face to face in-depth interviews, investigated how those children experience their lives, how they cope with social exclusion and poverty, and how they understand the support and services. Study highlighted that social exclusion and poverty are important for those children's lives; and close relationships are necessary to support them.

Additionally, as stated in Beiser et al. (2002: 220), single parenting that increases the risk of psychiatric disorders in childhood regardless of income level, is 16 percent for Canadian children and 25 percent for American children. Beiser et al. (2002) compared children of immigrant parents and non-immigrant parents to check if there are any differences in terms of mental health issues using Statistics Canada's and the Department of Human Resources Development's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. They showed that immigrant children enjoy mental health advantage though they face more poverty than local children. Besides, single-parent status did not influence the relationship between mental health of children and poverty in Canadian case. On the contrary, Guttmann et al. (2004) in their research in which they examined infant hospitalisation suggested that children living with a single parent are more likely to be hospitalised in Canada case. In addition to the risk on the health of children, higher risk of child poverty among single-parent families, and lower improvements in the economic status of children within a single-parent households in compared to coupled families (Cheung, 2015: 519) are growing concerns for many countries. Besides, empirical investigation by Gillham et al. (1998) suggested significant correlation between child abuse (physical, and sexual) and single parenting, utilising 5551 referrals and 1450 abuse and neglect cases in Glasgow in 1991-1993. The size of the effect becomes larger when male unemployment is incorporated. This finding implies male unemployment contributes lessen child welfare considerably.

This paper, in this respect, investigates whether being a single parent is associated with poverty at individual level using IPUMS CPS data for 2000-2022 time period. Hence, the hypothesis of this empirical investigation is that being a single parent increases the probability of poverty risk. Poverty is measured by whether an individual is below or above poverty line as a measure of poverty status which constitutes binary dependent variable of this research. This research is expected to provide insights on the determinants of poverty, and single parenting that is spreading widely across the world within those determinants. In order to increase the welfare level of society in general, the findings obtained from this research is expected to be important in terms of policy suggestions for many developed and developing countries.

Rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the data set to be utilised in the empirical investigation. Selected independent variables and dependent variable of the study are summarised, along with the introduction of the empirical model. Model choice is also justified in this section. Findings of the OLS estimation are provided in Section 3. Finally, Section 4 concludes the paper, together with policy implications that might be suggested based on the findings of this paper.

2. DATA & METHODOLOGY

In this study, data comes from IPUMS CPS (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series-the Current Population Survey) that provides microdata for the U.S. from 1962 forward upon a registration process with no charges[*]. The CPS is a commonly used data source applied in social science. 23,495 publications that used IPUMS data were found between 2000 and 2023 including a variety of topics[*]. Being a reliable source with large sample sizes and various subjects covered in the U.S. population makes IPUMS widely preferable data source. This data source offers micro level data on individuals and household. This empirical investigation, therefore, relies on IPUMS CPS data to explain poverty risk of single parents.

Time period of this investigation covers from 2000 to 2022. This micro dataset contain information on various domains such as individual characteristics, employment status, education level, etc. In terms of the definition of being a single parent, I consider those who are single or never married; married but spouse absent; separated; divorced; or widowed, and having one or more own children in household. The share of observations across marital status for given categories are shown in Figure 1 below. Most of those individuals are single or never married individuals, with 46.12 percent. The second biggest group consists of those who were married and spouse present, with 39.98 percent. It is followed by divorced (i.e., 7.24), widowed (i.e., 4.08 percent), separated (i.e., 1.54 percent), and married but spouse absent (i.e., 1.04 percent).

[*] For more information, please see https://cps.ipums.org/cps/

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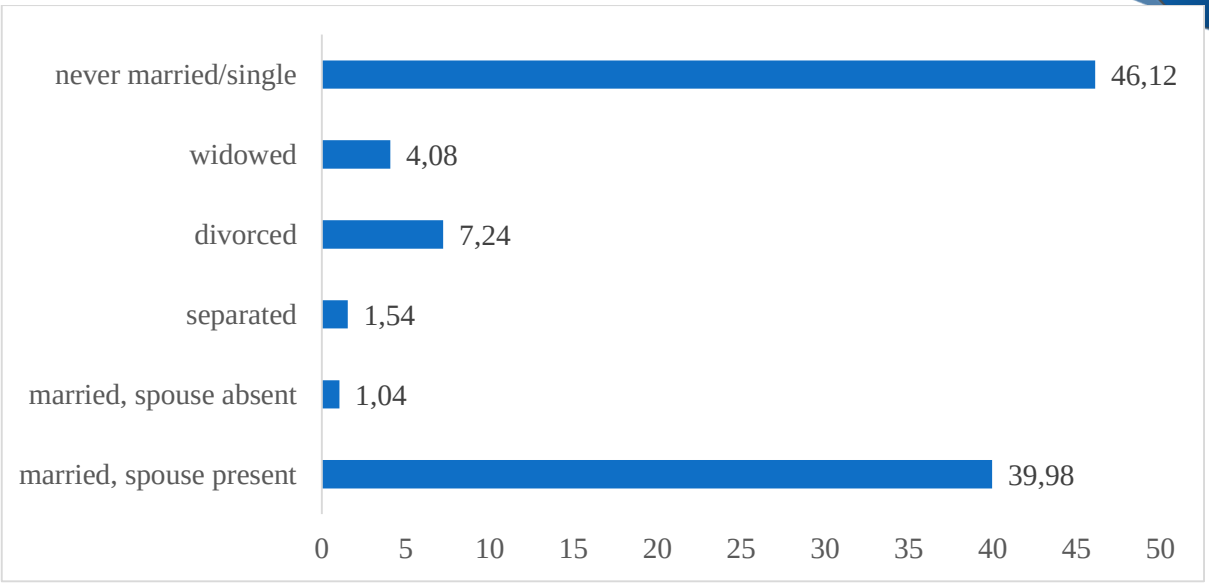

Figure 3. Distribution of sample across given marital status, percentage

Source: Own calculations based on IPUMS CPS data

Based on the given information on number of own child in the household and those marital statuses in the data set, I generated the main independent variable of being a single parent. So, those who had at least one own child in the household and never married/single/widowed/separated/divorced/married, spouse absent are categorised as single parents. This variable is a dichotomous variable takes 1 if an individual is a single parent, 0 otherwise. More than 8 percent of the sample consists of those single parents.

This study aims to shed light on poverty risk on that particular group. The information on the poverty status of individuals is provided in the data set. Accordingly, the dependent variable of this empirical analysis is whether an individual is below or above poverty line as a measure of poverty status. As shown in Figure 2, approximately a quarter of the sample of those single parents lives below the poverty line.

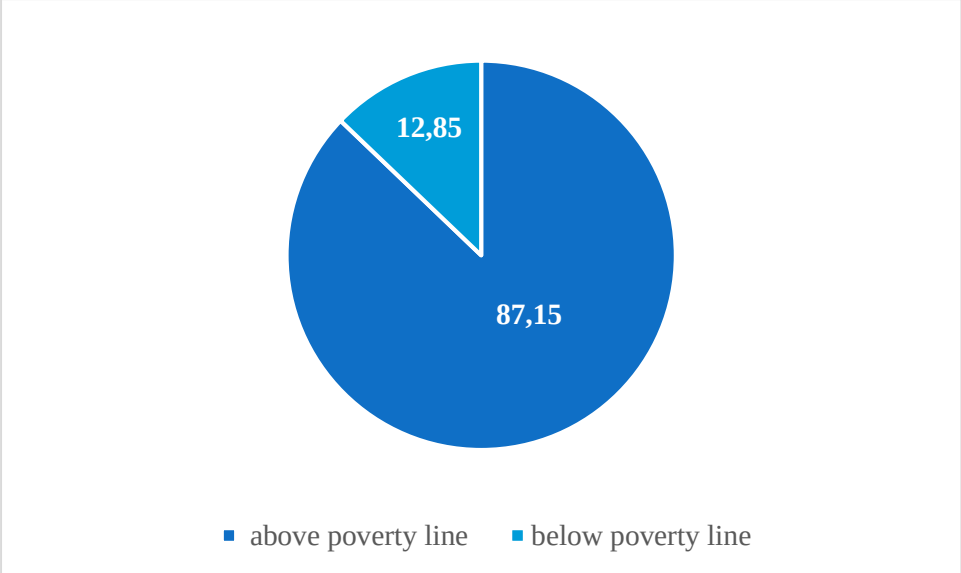

Figure 4. Poverty Status of The Sample, Percentage

Source: Own calculations based on IPUMS CPS data

Dropping the missing observations on the dependent variable (i.e., poverty status), total number of observation becomes 4,453,476 individuals to analyse.

Being below the poverty line is likely to be associated with a set of characteristics. Considering the availability of the variables in the data set, the following equation will be estimated:

$$PS_i = \beta 0_i + \beta 1_i SP + \beta 2_i age + \beta 3_i sex + \beta 4_i race + \beta 5_i nchild + \beta 6_i emp + \beta 7_i edu + \beta 8_i occ + \gamma + \varepsilon$$

Where i refers to an individual i, PS is poverty status of that individual. SP is the main independent variable of interest, and presents being a single parent to test if being a single parent is important to be below the poverty line. Additionally, *age* is age of the respondent; sex is sec of the respondent; race is race of the respondent; *nchild* is the number of own child in the household to test the importance of the number of children to explain poverty; *emp* is employment status to test whether being employed is important; *edu* is education level of the respondent. While γ refers to the year to control for year-specific factors, ε is the error term that includes the effects of missing other attributes that can influence poverty status of an individual.

Summary statistics of the variables used in the analysis are given in Table 1 for 4,453,476 observations in the sample. While *age*, and *nchild* are continuous variables, the rest of the independent variables are categorical variables.

Table 1. Summary Statistics of Thee Variables Used in The Analysis

Variable	Description	Frequency	Percentage
PS	above poverty line	3,881,311	87.15
	below poverty line	572,165	12.85
SP	Not a single parent	4,080,347	91.62
	Single parent	373,129	8.38
Sex	Male	2,162,424	48.56
	Female	2,291,052	51.44
race	white	3,514,844	78.92
	black	520,485	11.69
	american indian/aleut/eskimo	66,229	1.49
	asian or pacific islander	25,128	0.56
	asian only	205,601	4.62
	hawaiian/pacific islander only	19,134	0.43
	white-black	25,508	0.57
	white-american indian	35,512	0.8
	white-asian	17,377	0.39
	white-hawaiian/pacific islander	4,618	0.1
	black-american indian	3,955	0.09
	black-asian	1,307	0.03
	black-hawaiian/pacific islander	386	0.01
	american indian-asian	318	0.01
	asian-hawaiian/pacific islander	3,624	0.08
	white-black-american indian	2,951	0.07
	white-black-asian	513	0.01
	white-american indian-asian	510	0.01
	white-asian-hawaiian/pacific islander	3,882	0.09
	white-black-american indian-asian	158	0
	american indian-hawaiian/pacific island	69	0
	white-black--hawaiian/pacific islander	91	0
	white-american indian-hawaiian/pacific	83	0
	black-american indian-asian	44	0

	white-american indian-asian-hawaiian/pa	21	0
	two or three races, unspecified	663	0.01
	four or five races, unspecified	465	0.01
citizen	born in u.s	3,839,904	86.22
	born in u.s. outlying	26,847	0.6
	abroad of american parents	35,120	1
	naturalized citizen	234,674	5
	not a citizen	316,931	7
emp	niu	1,040,846	23.37
	armed forces	15,147	0.34
	at work	1,992,250	45
	has job, not at work last week	69,262	2
	unemployed, experienced worker	119,104	3
	unemployed, new worker	11,130	0.25
	nilf, unable to work	160,935	4
	nilf, other	562,190	13
	nilf,, retired	482,612	11

niu=not in universe, nilf=not in labour force

Table 1. Cont.

Variable	Description	Frequency	Percentage
edu	niu or blank	1,040,846	23
	none or preschool	12,495	0
	grades 1, 2, 3, or 4	27,542	1
	grades 5 or 6	54,439	1
	grades 7 or 8	105,231	2
	grade 9	122,711	3
	grade 10	138,392	3
	grade 11	146,115	3
	12th grade, no diploma	55,917	1
	high school diploma or equivalent	966,031	22
	some college but no degree	601,111	14
	associate's degree, occupational/vocati	137,618	3
	associate's degree, academic program	151,806	3
	bachelor's degree	580,726	13
	master's degree	225,421	5
	professional school degree	42,884	1
	doctorate degree	44,191	0.99
year	2000	133,380	2.99
	2001	217,727	4.89
	2002	216,683	4.87
	2003	215,860	4.85
	2004	212,717	4.78
	2005	210,152	4.72
	2006	207,987	4.67
	2007	206,322	4.63
	2008	206,079	4.63
	2009	207,543	4.66
	2010	209,407	4.7
	2011	204,626	4.59
	2012	201,102	4.52
	2013	202,269	4.54
	2014	199,245	4.47
	2015	198,745	4.46

2016	185,216	4.16
2017	185,577	4.17
2018	179,715	4.04
2019	179,773	4.04
2020	157,662	3.54
2021	163,253	3.67
2022	152,436	3.42

niu=not in universe, nilf=not in labour force

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
age	4,453,476	35.24133	22.26636	0	90
nchild	4,453,476	0.628118	1.061419	0	9

Source: Own calculations based on IPUMS CPS data

The independent variables in the analysis aim to test the following hypothesis: If *SP* is statistically significant and positive, that means being a single parent increases the likelihood that an individual to be below the poverty line. If *sex* is positive and significant, it means being a female increases the likelihood of being below the poverty line. If a category of race is positive and significant, it means being from that particular ethnic group increases the likelihood of being below the poverty line. If a category of *citizen* is positive and significant, it means being from that particular category increases the likelihood of being below the poverty line. The same is true for employment categories. Education is given in categories within ascending order. Therefore, it will be considered as a continuous variable. If *edu* is negative and significant, it means increasing level of education decreases the likelihood of being below the poverty line. Similarly, *age* is another numerical variable, and if it is negative and significant, it means the likelihood of being below poverty line decreases when one gets older. So, positive and significant coefficient indicates that variable increases the likelihood of being below the poverty line, while negative and significant coefficient indicates that variable decreases the likelihood of being below the poverty line.

3. FINDINGS

As the dependent variable of poverty status is dichotomous, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) may not be a useful method to estimate such nonlinear form. However, when the regressions were calculated on the OLS, probit, and logit based, the results of those methods end up similar qualitatively. Therefore, in this section, results from the OLS estimate are presented. Also, weighting the regression did not influence the findings significantly, hence, presented results are not weighted OLS estimates in this respect.

Table 2. Findings of The Analysis, OLS Estimates

Variables		OLS Estimates
SP	Single parent	0.118***
		(0.001)
age		-0.001***
		(0.000)
sex	Female	0.009***
		(0.000)
nchild		0.008***
		(0.000)
citizen	Born in U.S. outlying	0.093***
		(0.002)

	Born abroad of American parents	-0.002
		(0.002)
	Naturalized citizen	0.016***
		(0.001)
	Not a citizen	0.089***
		(0.001)
emp	Armed Forces	-0.002
		(0.003)
	At work	-0.008***
		(0.001)
	Has job, not at work last week	0.011***
		(0.001)
	Unemployed, experienced worker	0.130***
		(0.001)
	Unemployed, new worker	0.158***
		(0.003)
	NILF, unable to work	0.268***
		(0.001)
	NILF, other	0.117***
		(0.001)
	NILF, retired	0.095***
		(0.001)
edu		-0.001***
		(0.000)
Constant		0.162***
		(0.001)
Observations		4,453,476

Note: *race* variable included in the model specification, yet, not presented here for practical reasons. As categorical variable of race includes a wide set of races, it would take too much space which make the presentation harder. Nevertheless, it is available upon request.

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Almost all of the independent variables included in the specification are statistically significant at 1 percent significance level. Starting from the main independent variable, *SP* is positive and significant. That means being a single parent increases the likelihood of being below the poverty line. Variable of *age* is found negative and significant, the younger a person is, the poorer she/he is. As expected, *female* is positive and significant. This indicates that being a female increases the likelihood of being below the poverty line. The variable of *nchild* is positive and significant, the more number of own children in the household is associated with a higher likelihood of being below the poverty line.

For the categories of *citizen* variable, three of the categories end up positive and significant. Accordingly, being one of those who were born in U.S. outlying, naturalized citizen, or not a citizen increases the likelihood

of being below the poverty line. Only those who were born abroad of American parents are found negatively associated though not statistically significant. For the categories of *emp* variable, *At work; Has job*, not at work last week; Unemployed, experienced worker; Unemployed, new worker; NILF are revealed significant. As one can expect, being at work decreases the probability of being below poverty line, while being unemployed, having a job but not at work recently, being not in labour force increase that probability. Finally, *edu* is negative and significant, a higher level of education decreases the likelihood of being below the line.

4. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

This study explored whether being a single parent increases the likelihood of poverty. As the number of single-parent households increases across the world, the welfare of this growing group of individuals needs closer attention to address issues around this specific family type. In this respect, the U.S. is an important country facing a large share of single-parent families. Utilising IPUMS CPS data from 2000 to 2022, this study found that being a single parent increases the likelihood of being below the poverty line. This finding is consistent with the literature (see for example Cheung, 2015; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

It was also found that being a female and younger increase the risk of poverty. It is well-known that single-parent families are dominantly female-headed. Considering disadvantaged position of females either in the labour market or in society, gender differentials seem to contribute poverty of this group. This study did not investigate the risk on young single parents particularly, nonetheless, it would be informative to see the effect on this smaller disadvantaged group. Even though it was not presented in the findings section in detail, race of individuals is also matter to explain poverty. Being employed, and having higher level of education lower the probability of poverty.

In the light of empirical findings of this study, a few policy recommendations might be suggested. First, this study found evidence on the vulnerability of females. Therefore, supporting females on several grounds such as labour market, education, or socially is necessary to improve welfare of this group, and to sweep gender inequalities. Similarly, ethnic differentials should also be dealt with to improve overall welfare in the society. Additionally, employment is a very important tool to lower the likelihood of poverty. Hence, increased employment opportunities would certainly contribute to lower levels of poverty. Finally, more accessible education opportunities would help individuals to be protected against poverty.

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Çatışma Beyanı: Bu çalışma ile ilgili taraf olabilecek herhangi bir kişi ya da finansal ilişki ve dolayısıyla herhangi bir çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.
Destek ve Teşekkür: Çalışmada herhangi bir kurum ya da kuruluştan destek alınmamıştır.
Etik Kurul Kararı: Bu araştırma, Etik Kurul Kararı gerektiren makaleler arasında yer almamaktadır.
Katkı Oranı: Makale Tek yazarlıdır.