

NEWS DESK

# “SOME DAYS I FEEL LIKE I’M MELTING”: HOW SINGLE MOTHERS IN NEW YORK CITY ARE COPING WITH QUARANTINE

By Emily Bobrow

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*The burdens of the COVID-19 crisis and its economic fallout are hurting all parents, but they may fall disproportionately on single mothers, many of whom were already struggling.* Illustration by Maya Ish-Shalom

**S**hoshana Cherson’s husband died suddenly in early 2019, when their daughter was a year old. She had been working as a doula but couldn’t keep a job with such uncertain hours as a single mother. By last fall, she had found a daytime shift as a restaurant server at Jeannie’s, inside a Nordstrom in Manhattan, and put her daughter in a day care near her home, in Crown

Manhattan, and put her daughter in a day care near her home, in Crown Heights. On weekends, she arranged playdates with friends and their young children. A year out from becoming a widow, “we were beginning to feel less lonely,” Cherson, who is thirty-five, said. “Our life was starting to hit a nice groove.”

Now, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the restaurant and day care are closed. Playdates are out. Basic tasks that are always more complicated when alone with a toddler—shopping for groceries, dropping off laundry—are suddenly nerve-racking. It can take a week or more to nab a grocery-delivery slot in New York, so Cherson is always running out of food; some friends recently gave her toilet paper. She is using her husband’s life insurance to cover her rent and expenses, but she will blow through that soon. Worst of all, she feels isolated, unmoored. “Being a single parent is really lonely, even when you’re not social-distancing,” Cherson said. “The whole support system I had put in place to keep me going has now completely fallen apart.”

Almost a quarter of all children in the United States live with a single parent, a higher share than anywhere else in the world. In New York, the American city that has been hardest hit by the pandemic, more than four hundred and twenty-five thousand children live with single parents, most of them single mothers. The COVID-19 crisis and its economic fallout are hurting all parents, but there is good reason to believe that the burdens are falling disproportionately on single mothers, many of whom were already struggling. (Census Bureau data from 2018 show that, among black and Latinx single mothers in the city, the child poverty rate was forty-six per cent and fifty-six

per cent, respectively.)

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*The New Yorker's* coronavirus news coverage and analysis are free for all readers.

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In past recessions, job losses skewed male. In the Great Recession, men lost nearly eighty per cent of the jobs. Marina Adshade, a faculty member at the Vancouver School of Economics at the University of British Columbia, who studies the role of women in society, noted that, even in the Great Depression, women often kept working, and many others joined the workforce, mostly as teachers, nurses, clerical workers, and domestic laborers. The jobs may have paid less, but they were more stable. “In the past, if you were a single mother working as a waitress, you’d be fine,” Adshade said. “Your tips may have been lower, but you’d keep your job.”

This time around, though, many of the industries that employ large numbers of women, such as child care, housekeeping, hospitality, retail, travel, and the service sector, are imploding. Many of the jobs dominated by men—truck driving, warehouse work, and the upper ranks of management in most industries—are still mostly intact. Statistics from several states show that a majority of unemployment claims are coming from women; in New York State, more than half of new claims filed in the last two weeks of March were from women, compared with a historical average of thirty-seven per cent. What’s more, those numbers don’t take freelancers and the gig economy into account—

more than a month into lockdown, the process for applying for benefits as a 1099 worker is still inchoate. (Freelancers use the 1099 federal tax form to report income.) “The low-wage jobs that kept women working are going away, and they rarely have protection like severance pay or unemployment insurance,” Adshade said. “I don’t know how many single mothers realistically have jobs they can do at home.”

Teana Mendoza, a twenty-one-year-old single mother of three children, ages two to six, was scraping by with a job at a small shop in Harlem. Her eldest child was in school, her younger two were in a free Head Start day-care program, and all three qualified for free breakfast and lunch. Mendoza earned enough to rent a room for the four of them in the Bronx and make a decent dinner every night. But when she got laid off from her job, close to a month ago, she also lost their room. “Right now im just going from home to home of my friends. . . . im scared to take my kids to the shelter and they get sick with this virus going on,” Mendoza wrote to me, using Twitter D.M. because she hasn’t paid her phone bill. She tries to get food from local pantries, but they are usually bare by the time she arrives. Because she was working off the books, she can’t file for unemployment. When I was in touch with her, she was down to two diapers. Her oldest child keeps asking when she can sleep in her own bed again.

For single mothers fortunate enough to have kept their jobs—according to an analysis by the *Times*, one in three jobs held by women has been categorized as essential during the pandemic—lives that were already hard now feel unmanageable. Simone Colbert, a thirty-two-year-old city employee, is trying

unmanageable. Simone Colbert, a thirty-two-year-old city employee, is trying to work from home alongside her two sons, who are five and ten. Because she lives across from Brookdale Hospital, in East Flatbush, she is nervous about letting her children go outside, despite their restlessness. The local sidewalks these days are often full of hospital staff and sick people coming and going from the emergency room, and her older son has asthma. “There’s a semi truck behind Brookdale, because the morgue is at capacity. That’s really scary,” she said. Her fidgety younger son now spends a lot of time running around and around their apartment. One day last week, she begged him to stop—she was having trouble hearing a Webinar for work, and she worried that their neighbors would complain about the noise—and he started to cry. Now she is more indulgent. “They’re kids,” Colbert said with a sigh. “Hopefully, my neighbors understand.”

Juggling to get everything done is starting to feel overwhelming, she said. “It’s difficult for me to do my work and be the chef and be the teacher and find time for self-care. Some days, I feel like I’m melting,” Colbert told me over the phone. In the background, a small voice could be heard asking, “How do you spell ‘April?’”

**A**dshade’s research is informed by her experiences as a single mother in Canada, where health care is free, unmarried couples enjoy many of the same benefits as married ones, and anyone who has lost a job receives two thousand dollars a month, with extra benefits for any children. In America, where health-care costs are often prohibitive and tied to now precarious or

nonexistent employment, and where those who have lost their jobs rarely have savings, Adshade suspects many will emerge from the pandemic thinking, The only way to insure myself against risk is a traditional family. The traditional family is faring so much better than all other family types right now.

But a conventional nuclear family can feel out of reach even for those who already bought into the promise of marriage. Nadia, a thirty-two-year-old mother of two children, who are eight and ten, in Forest Hills, Queens, got married at twenty and dropped out of college when she became pregnant two years later. She planned to return to school after a few years at home, but money was too tight to pay for the child care she needed to attend classes. By the time the kids were four and five, her marriage was unravelling, and she started taking whatever jobs she could find: assistant to an optometrist, administrator in a doctor's office, receptionist at a home-care agency. When the agency folded, a couple of years after her divorce, she spent most of her savings. She got a temp job at a nonprofit, then lost that job in February. She now has only a few hundred dollars in the bank. Child-support payments from her ex-husband have faded out, and the pandemic keeps her from taking him to court. When she received her stimulus check, it went straight to her landlord, whom she had not yet paid this month.

“I sat my children down and said, ‘Please, do not get married until you’ve dated the person for two years, lived with them for another two years, and know you can tolerate every inch of them,’ ” Nadia told me. She let out a small, dark laugh “ ‘Don’t do what I did ’ ”

laugh. Don't do what I did.

In coverage of how the pandemic has affected families with small children, amid observations of bickering couples and stir-crazy kids, there have been stories about how sheltering in place is bringing families together: they are apparently rediscovering the joy of the family dinner, while homebound fathers are pitching in more with housework and child care. Now that employers are discovering how much work can be done remotely, there is talk that those who are lucky enough to keep their jobs may be in a position to ask for more flexible work arrangements and a better work-life balance when stay-at-home orders are lifted.

But there's been little talk of any silver linings for single parents. In between caring for her daughter and trying to figure out how to file for unemployment, Shoshana Cherson is attempting to build a virtual community with other single parents on Instagram; for all of the parenting groups on social media, she noticed that there are few that cater to those who are doing it on their own. "There's a lack of support for people who are going through this process," she said. "I want to help others feel less alone."

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