

Frontiers in Child Care Research
Annual Meeting of the Child Care Policy Research Consortium
Radisson Lord Baltimore Hotel
March 8–11, 2005

SESSION 3

**Linkages among Employment, Workplace Policies, and
Child and Family Well-being**

Examining the employment context is critical in understanding the realities low-income parents face. Work characteristics and workplace policies affect the well-being of families and children. This session focuses on what we know about these issues and explores new frontiers for future research.

Discussants: Katherin Ross Phillips, The Urban Institute

Peggy O'Brien-Strain, The SPHERE Institute

Shelley Waters Boots, New America Foundation

Scribes: Eden King, Rice University

Lucy Jordan, University of Washington

Shelley Waters Boots:

What's Work Got to Do with It? How Workplace Policies Affect Child and Family Outcomes

- Trends in U.S. labor force
 - Increased work hours for families driven by labor force participation of women
 - Lack of flexible work schedules, benefits, leave time
- Consequences for children and families
 - Stress, marital instability, poor parenting
 - Child development, lack of quality child care
- Pressing Questions
 - How do characteristics of low-wage jobs affect child & family outcomes?
 - Beyond income, there is little known about how parents' work schedules affect children and families (e.g., long/nonstandard hours, mandatory overtime, rotating schedules, ages of children)
 - How do workplace characteristics affect child care usage patterns?
 - What are the child care policy implications of these findings (e.g., supply and quality issues, parental choice)?

- How should these realities be incorporated into research on children and families (e.g., what other questions should be asked)?

Katherine Ross Phillips

Employment Context for Low-Income Workers

- Public and Private Workplace Policies
 - Family care, child care, early childhood education, taxes, health insurance, part-time parity, flexible work schedules
 - Federal, State/local, private policies
- What role should governments have in setting workplace policy?
- What impact will public/private policies have on parents and children?
- How can the effectiveness of these policies be assessed? Who bears the costs? Who realizes the benefits?

Peggy O'Brien-Strain

How Do We Institute Better Workplace Policies and Practices?

- Need to foresee problems in implementation (not necessarily mandating)
- Background questions
 - Who are the employers of low-wage parents?
 - How stable are low-wage jobs?
 - How strong is labor market?
- How do alternative policies fit into the existing business climate?
- How do employers react to alternative policy levers (substitute away from low-wage labor, greater investment in labor force)?
- What are employer experiences with child care provision (on-site child care)?
- When high-wage mothers leave the workforce, does it create pressure for family-friendly policies?

Discussion

Is it better to focus on needs of low-wage employees or their employers (e.g., what they need to generate policies that will maintain their ideal workforce)?

- Difficult to solidify employer incentive, think about changing who bears the cost (e.g., California tax system charges employees not employers for some benefits)
- Layers of policies should be addressed separately. Some issues have a business case even for low-wage employers (e.g., flextime leads to decreased absenteeism), while others may be better addressed at a different level (e.g., public support or encouragement) or in innovative methods (e.g., pooled benefits, cafeteria style or employee choice)
- Important to consider whether there are resources other than the employer to support these issues
- Difficult to convince employers to offer broad, integrative policies

What are the business implications in countries with more support for families?

- High taxes inherent in social-democratic nations
- Mandated short work week in France was partly due to unemployment. It had inadvertent outcomes such as decreased productivity
 - Tipping point for parental leave policies that are too short or too long
- U.K. offers right to request flexible work time, low penalty for employers who do not comply. About 900,000 workers have taken advantage of this policy
- Can the United States institute cultural changes that support asking such questions? There are lessons to learn from other countries
 - Preliminary research findings at the University of Chicago suggest workers are informally negotiating with supervisors to adopt a more flexible schedule
- In European countries, more women than men take advantage of the policies, leaving inequities

Is there a benefit to helping parents discuss more equitable arrangements?

- American families are creative in balancing children and work

Where would offering parents options (e.g., flextime) lead?

- Work disincentives could be positive—goals of child care and employer programs should reflect this value structure.

How can these benefits be reframed to present them in the employers' best interests?

- Think more broadly about policies and their benefits (e.g., FMLA is not for new parents only)
- Take a more long-term, lifecycle view of policies
- Social safety nets were designed to avoid risks in a different era
 - Look at mitigating the current risks (e.g., having money when a family member is sick)
 - Could parents receive credits through tax systems (social security or private insurance)?
 - How should child care change to fit families' work habits?
 - How can financial penalties be minimized?
- Need to energize many groups—stay-at-home moms could an ally
- If public insurance is not available, private insurance might helpful

Why is there a need for nonstandard work hours? Are consumers driving this need?

- What happens to the night-shift workers when the night shift is eliminated?

How is Federal money allocated for individual development accounts for families used?

- Families cannot live off of IDAs or IRAs
- Need to put child care choices in the context of many issues—bringing economists and developmental specialists together is a start
- Should not assume that higher wage workers have access to supportive policies
- Supervisors can have the worst schedules, most pressure (wages may be better but the demands can be worse)

Gender Issues

- Policies undermined through interpersonal backlash, such as women without children begrudging women with children
- Segregation between high- and low-wage workers—advocating for women might not have the best effect
- There are more men than women in high-wage positions
- Changes could start at the higher levels with the hope that they will filter down to lower levels
- If the norm becomes stay-at-home parents, there may be fewer options for working parents
 - There have not been significant increases in the number of stay-at-home moms.
 - Cannot ignore the importance of fathers and their role in child care (especially low-wage men and their effect on the well-being of families)
 - Workplace strategies will change when both men and women advocate for change

Can laws be restructured to account for the changes in our work habits?

- Parents must be available to children of all ages for supervision and guidance
- Some evidence suggests teens are highly affected by parents' work schedules
- Parental After-School Stress Syndrome (PASS) has an effect on parents' mental health across income levels and genders
 - Flexible work schedules and after-school care alleviate this stress
 - Need to consider planning issues that are involved in work alternatives

Remaining Questions and Comments

- How can the equal involvement of fathers in families be encouraged? What role do organizations play in this encouragement?
- Valuing child development and parenting in a consumer culture
- How can employee benefits and work flexibility be marketed to businesses with unskilled workers? Productivity studies?
- Has there been any research demonstrating that child care arrangement instability or lack of family-friendly workplace policies has had a depressing/downward pressure on low-wage jobs and wages overall?
- What is known about low-skill workers and workplace policies?
- How can public benefits (child care subsidies) better reach the realities of low-income workers?
- Should a cafeteria-style approach be offered? Can employers offer variety of family supports and allow families to choose based on their needs? A multifaceted program is more likely to meet the diverse needs of the workforce
- More discussion is needed on employers and their perspectives; also need to link issues to globalization
- How can child care “assistance” policies rightly compliment, rather than jeopardize, workplace strategies?

- Is it possible to adopt policies available to middle-class families to lower-income families? Do lower-income families need a completely new view to shaping policy?