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*Low-Income Families in the Twenty-First Century:
Effective Public Policy Responses*

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 5, AUGUST 2022

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Low-Income Families in the Twenty-First Century: Effective Public Policy Responses

ISSUE EDITORS

Marcia J. Carlson, Christopher Wimer, and
Ron Haskins

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Changing Work, Changing Families, and Public Policies Toward Low-Income Families



MARCIA J. CARLSON , CHRISTOPHER WIMER, AND RON HASKINS

The twenty-first century has seen major changes in both the nature of work and the nature of families in the United States—even before the COVID-19 pandemic upended nearly every aspect of economic and social life beginning in the spring of 2020. Many ongoing, longer-term changes in work and family life have occurred gradually over the past half century or more; some have occurred after shorter-term disruptions to society and the labor market. Technology has rapidly evolved, opening new industries and opportunities in the economy; other job sectors have calcified and faded in prominence; some jobs now require much less human labor as technology has become more sophisticated. Professional jobs—those that require a college degree or higher—have become increasingly well compensated even as the wages of so-called unskilled jobs have remained flat or even declined and the federal minimum wage has not kept pace with inflation. As a result, overall economic inequality has notably increased (whether measured by

earnings, income, or wealth), and many lower-income families today experience poverty and economic hardship. Many observers posit that the United States' public policies have failed to keep up with social and economic changes—or have done so unevenly across localities, with particularly deleterious consequences for the most disadvantaged individuals and families. At the time of this writing, the policy landscape that low-income families in the United States face is undergoing rapid and potentially dramatic change. It is therefore a critical moment to grapple with how policy could best help low-income families navigate the new realities of work and family life amid economic uncertainty.

In this issue, we aim to provide new research evidence about work and family issues in the twenty-first century for low-income families brought about by broad societal changes in the labor market and family patterns, and to highlight promising policy options to meet ongoing and emerging needs. We hope that this volume

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informs efforts to develop, reform, and implement public policies and programs that effectively support low-income workers and their families. We first describe the broad historical trends in both work and family that motivate the current issue, and then turn to a description of the pressing work-family issues that these trends have brought about for today's low-income families and children. We then describe the ways in which public policies have and have not evolved to meet the current times, as well as the opportunities for change that now exist in the new landscape created by the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude with brief summaries of each article

CHANGES IN WORK

Low-income workers today face a very different labor market than they did fifty years ago. Recent research documents key changes affecting workers that have emerged in recent decades.

Earnings and Education

We know that the job opportunities for those with low skills have diminished amid a rising premium for high skills (Autor 2014), and real wages have stagnated for those with less formal education (Groshen and Holzer 2019). David Autor (2014) describes some of the key trends behind rising premiums to education and high skills; he finds that the earnings gap between college and high school-educated men roughly doubled in the three decades between 1979 and 2012, and that this trend is nearly as strong for women. Thus those without a college degree are increasingly left out of experiencing the fruits of economic growth. Further, these earnings gaps are not just about less-educated workers gaining at a slower rate—instead, their earnings have actually declined in real terms, by 22 percent among those without a high school degree and by 11 percent among those with only a high school degree. This leaves those with lower education levels less able to provide for themselves and their families, absent help from government policies and programs. The reasons for this divergence are many and are being actively debated in the literature (Autor and Dorn 2013; Autor 2014), but the net result is a much-weakened standing of the non-college educated in the U.S. labor market in favor of

opportunities for those with higher levels of education. The COVID crisis may have further reduced the availability of low-wage jobs and hastened the automation of lower-skilled jobs (Autor and Reynolds 2020). At the same time, the supply of more highly educated workers has not kept pace with rapid technological change (Goldin and Katz 2018, 2020). Some scholars argue that sustained levels of immigration among those with less education—at least until the Donald J. Trump presidency—put further downward pressure on the wages and earnings of those without a college education (Borjas 2014).

Job Stability and Quality

In addition to declining earnings and labor-market position for the less educated, job stability also seems to be becoming more rare. Matissa Hollister and Kristen Smith (2014) find that job tenure has declined for men overall and for never-married women. Some increases in women's labor-force attachment have masked these trends, and public sector jobs may be a bit of an exception (Hollister 2011). Yet, there does seem to be an overall and pronounced decline in job stability. Arne Kalleberg (2011) describes these and other trends as reflecting the growing "precariousness" of work—which comes in the form of fewer benefits, less control over one's time, and fewer protections against job loss (see also Hill 2013). As David Howell and Arne Kalleberg (2019) note, using data from the Economic Policy Institute, the decline over recent decades in the share of workers receiving paid health insurance benefits from their employer has been concentrated among low-wage workers. Employer-provided pension coverage has also declined, and the nature of such coverage has shifted away from defined-benefit plans that historically provided workers with more economic security and less risk.

Nonstandard Schedules

Work schedules are also more variable, and work is more likely to occur during nonstandard hours (Presser 2003; Lozano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016; Craig and Powell 2012; Golden 2015); and unstable work schedules have been linked with a lower likelihood of hav-

ing health insurance (Lim 2019) and greater adverse health outcomes (Schneider and Harknett 2019). Lonnie Golden (2015) shows that nearly one in five workers in the United States (17 percent) have irregular or on-call schedules, work split, or rotating shifts. The lowest-income workers face the highest rates of irregular schedules. For parents of children, these unstable schedules are a routine and disruptive occurrence. For example, in a sample of workers with young children, Elizabeth Ananat and Anna Gassman-Pines (2021) find that over the course of thirty days, fully 87 percent of service-industry employed parents in a California city experienced at least one unanticipated work schedule change, and these schedule changes were associated with negative mood changes and reductions in sleep quality. Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett (2019) further document how unstable schedules are linked with psychological distress, poor sleep quality, and general unhappiness. Unstable or unpredictable work schedules can be a source of perceived and real economic insecurity for workers (Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019), and a long line of research documents the associations between economic insecurity and family stress (Masarik and Conger 2017). Sigrid Luhr, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett (2022, this issue) highlight how unpredictable work schedules for mothers make parenting more challenging, increasing the difficulty of arranging care for children and increasing work-family conflict.

Unions

Another important change in the nature of work in recent decades is the role of both private- and public-sector unions. Unions, which have historically bolstered workers' wages and benefits, cover significantly fewer workers today than in the past. Bruce Western and Jake Rosenfeld (2011) find that between 1973 and 2007, private-sector unions' coverage of American workers declined from 34 to 8 percent for men and from 16 to 6 percent for women. This declining coverage, in turn, seems to have contributed to some of the patterns in wage and earnings inequality described. Some research has even found that union density or coverage predicts positive spillovers to wages of non-

union private-sector employees (Denice and Rosenfeld 2018), suggesting that the decline in union membership affects the economic potential and economic security not only of union members themselves. This also seems to be true in the public sector, where state-level public-sector union membership has been associated with higher wages among nonunion public sector workers (Rosenfeld and Denice 2019). Related to and compounding these challenges is the declining real value of the federal minimum wage, which has further weakened the economic position of low-wage workers (Card and Krueger 2015; Mishel 2013).

Rise of Gig Work

Another fundamental change is the rise of so-called gig work, which is increasingly an income source for many Americans. Though definitions of gig work are contested and in flux, they generally refer to work that is not paid through a wage or salary and is not governed by a contract—and often does not entail a predictable work schedule or earnings (Abraham et al., 2019). There is little consensus even on the extent to which the gig economy has “risen”—Abraham and colleagues note that data sources often conflict when trying to estimate the scope of the gig economy, but that one fact is clear: there has been an unambiguous surge in the number of “self-employed passenger drivers” in recent years. Tax data also shows a rise more generally in rates of self-employment. Scholars posit that the rise of gig work may create desired flexibility for high-skilled workers but may leave low-skilled workers without stable and well-remunerated work (Spreitzer, Cameron, and Garrett 2017). At present, there is very little research on the effects of gig work on workers' incomes and economic insecurity, and these effects likely depend on whether engaging in gig work is voluntary and used as an income supplement, or is involuntary and used as a means of coping with inadequate well-remunerated opportunities in the formal labor market. Given the rise in this new type of work in at least some sectors of the economy, more research will be necessary to unpack its net impacts on work and workers.

Taken together, these many changes in the nature of work, in whether and how much in-

dividuals are working, and in the compensation derived from work are all pieces of the fundamental changes in the labor market and in the economy over many decades. These changes have especially—and negatively—affected less-educated workers and have strikingly increased the inequalities observed between those at the low and high ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, whether measured by wages, benefits, job quality, or job security. This already bleak situation was only made worse by the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit low-wage workers the hardest (Gould and Kassa 2021) and further increased inequalities on a host of outcomes by education and race-ethnicity (Perry, Aronson, and Pescosolido 2021). Although yet to be fully understood, what has been termed the Great Resignation—record numbers of Americans quitting their jobs in 2021—may reflect a profound reevaluation of Americans’ views of and attachment to work (Thompson 2021); this is especially true for low-income service workers, who both faced the worst working conditions and also greatly benefited from the income supports available in the pandemic relief bills. This phenomenon is yet to be fully explored in research, but recent news articles suggest that individuals are not so much rejecting work as they are essentially renegotiating the terms and conditions under which work occurs (Rosalsky 2022). Time will tell regarding the longer-term realignment within the labor market that may have emerged from the pandemic.

CHANGES IN FAMILIES

Over the same time that the economy and labor market have changed, American families have also changed dramatically. Sometimes referred to as the second demographic transition, striking changes since the middle of the twentieth century have been observed in the United States and across most Western industrialized countries in regard to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and fertility behaviors (Cherlin 2014; Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006). These changes have decreased the homogeneity of “typical” family experiences and have increased both the instability and diversity in American family life. As Frank Furstenberg (2014, 12) observes in his review of family change over fifty years, the

American family system has moved “from consensus to complexity.” These changes have occurred alongside—and perhaps in response to—the changes in the labor market and growing inequalities described. Family patterns themselves are increasingly characterized by inequality. First identified by Sara McLanahan (2004) as “diverging destinies” for children resulting from parents’ differential family behaviors by socioeconomic status, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing patterns differ by education and income, with important implications for family and child well-being (Amato et al. 2015; Lundberg, Pollak, and Sterns 2016; Raley and Sweeney 2020).

Marriage

At the core of changes in family life over the past half century have been shifts in the nature of union formation and marital behavior. Marriage has become less central to the life course both because individuals are marrying later and a small—but perhaps rising—fraction are not marrying at all (Cherlin 2009). In the United States, the median age at first marriage is today higher than it has been at any point since such data were first observed in 1890: 28.6 for women and 30.4 for men in 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau 2020, 2021). Annual marriage rates (marriages per thousand unmarried women) declined from 76.5 in 1970 to 31.3 in 2018, and the proportion of women currently married declined from a peak of 65 percent in 1960 to a low of 46 percent in 2018 (Schweizer 2020). Recent opinion data suggest that most Americans hold positive views of alternatives to marriage (for both partnership and rearing children), but the majority (54 percent) still say that marriage is “important but not essential” for living a fulfilling life (Horowitz, Graf, and Livingston 2019).

Marriage patterns have not unfolded evenly across groups. In 1940, the proportion currently married ranged from 53 to 63 percent, regardless of racial-ethnic group or educational attainment. Since that time, greater declines in marriage among racial-ethnic minorities and individuals with less than high school education have yielded large gaps in current marriage by race-ethnicity, 26 percent of Black women and 43 percent of Hispanic women versus 51 percent of White women, and by education, 27

percent of those with less than high school versus 59 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or more (Schweizer 2020). The latter trends are certainly not independent of the labor-market changes noted earlier in that the deteriorating economic fortunes especially of working-class men are linked with lower family attachments (Edin et al. 2019), a phenomenon first observed by William Julius Wilson (1997) and noted by many other scholars (Coile and Duggan 2019; Edin and Nelson 2013; Nelson 2004).

Cohabitation

Delays and declines in marriage have meant that individuals spend a longer time unmarried, but this does not imply that individuals are not entering unions. Cohabitation has risen steadily since the 1970s (Hemez and Manning 2017), and fully 76 percent of recent marriages (2015–2019) were preceded by cohabitation (Manning and Carlson 2021). Cohabitation has essentially replaced marriage as the first union for the majority of young adults, as U.S. individuals have been entering a first union at about the same age over the last twenty years (Manning, Brown, and Payne 2014). In fact, the majority of adults will cohabit with a partner at some point, and for adults ages eighteen through forty-four between 2013 and 2017, a higher proportion had ever cohabited (59 percent) than had ever married (50 percent)—a reversal of the situation for the same age group in 2002 (Graf 2019). Yet cohabitation is not a unitary status but instead plays many roles in family formation patterns and is broadly characterized today by diversity and inequality (Sassler and Lichter 2020). Cohabitation may be a precursor to legal marriage—or an alternative to marriage—at different stages of the life course or across groups of people (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). For those with higher education, cohabitation is more likely a stage in the transition to marriage, whereas working-class individuals are more likely to move in together out of necessity and less likely to transition to marriage (Manning and Smock 2005; Sassler and Miller 2011).

Divorce

Divorce rose notably in the United States in the 1970s, reaching a peak annual rate of 22.6 di-

vorces per thousand married women in 1980, followed by a mostly steady decline since that time (Schweizer 2020) and reaching a forty-year low in 2019 of 15.5 divorces per thousand (Reynolds 2020). Still, about half of all marriages are expected to end in divorce in the United States (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014). Divorce rates are much higher among the socioeconomically disadvantaged, and a recent decade review article notes that “divorce is a stratified and stratifying life event” (Raley and Sweeney 2020).

Repartnering

After a union dissolves, many adults will repartner, and Americans are especially likely to do so (Cherlin 2009). In fact, in a comparison of family experiences across eighteen Western industrialized countries, Americans were most likely to repartner within six years of a prior union dissolution, 65 percent, relative to their counterparts in all other countries analyzed, from 14 percent in Italy to 60 percent in Belgium (Andersson, Thomson, and Duntava 2017). High levels of union dissolution and repartnering imply that many individuals will have more than one partner over their life course, by either marriage or cohabitation. Repartnering provides a new opportunity to share economic resources, give and receive emotional support, and experience companionship and sexual intimacy, and thus may offset some of the negative consequences of divorce for adults and children (Amato 2010). Repartnered relationships may be more complicated or less “institutionalized” than first partnerships when it comes to rearing children (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994), but recent research suggests that stepfather involvement may have changed in recent decades and may be more beneficial to children’s well-being (Gold and Edin 2021).

Fertility

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, hand-wringing was evident about the overall decline in U.S. fertility in recent decades, with below-replacement fertility rates observed since the 1970s and an historically low total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.64 in 2020 (Osterman et al. 2022). Yet U.S. fertility rates have remained surprisingly high relative to many other Western countries,

where they have remained far below the replacement level TFR of 2.1. The COVID-19 pandemic may have further diminished U.S. rates, raising new questions and concerns and generating front-page news stories such as the *New York Times* story on “Why American Women Everywhere Are Delaying Motherhood” (Tavernise et al. 2021). The extent to which current patterns portend an even greater long-term aggregate fertility decline depends greatly on whether the current trend reflects a real decline or simply a delay in U.S. childbearing. In other words, will U.S. fertility “catch up” after the profound economic and other uncertainties of the pandemic have passed? This remains unclear.

One aspect of fertility where striking change has been clear over the last half century concerns the proportion of births occurring outside legal marriage. From 6 percent of all births in 1960, a steady and notable rise over the next fifty years led to fully 40 percent by 2010 (Ventura and Bachrach 2000; Curtain, Ventura, and Martinez 2014), a fraction that has remained about the same over the past decade, 40.5 percent as of 2020 (Osterman et al. 2022). Much of the recent increase in nonmarital childbearing can be attributed to births to cohabiting couples. In the United States, 18 percent of all children were born to cohabiting mothers between 1997 and 2001 (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008), and fully 58 percent of nonmarital births between 2006 and 2010 were to cohabiting couples (Curtain, Ventura, and Martinez 2014). At the same time, being born to cohabiting parents does not mean that children necessarily enter a stable union because many cohabiting unions will break up—even more so in the United States than in other nations (Kiernan 1999; Osborne and McLanahan 2007). Recent research using data from the Gender and Generations Surveys and other comparable sources across Europe and the United States suggests that U.S. children born to cohabiting parents are more likely to see their parents break up by age fifteen, fully 73 percent compared to 22 to 52 percent for their Western European counterparts (Andersson, Thomson and Duntava 2017).

Although traditional family formation typically followed a linear course in the middle of the twentieth century—first dating, then marriage, and then childbearing, the rise in non-

marital childbearing (along with concomitant changes in union formation) has yielded a range of complex and diverse family arrangements. This is especially true for disadvantaged individuals in the United States, who are likely to have children outside marriage in relationships that are likely to break up (Cancian, Meyer, and Cook 2011; McLanahan 2011; Mincy and Pouncy 1999). Also, many cohabiting households include children born to couples living together or that one or the other partner had from a prior relationship (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Thomson 2014).

Family Complexity

Amid high levels of union dissolution and nonmarital childbearing, a large proportion of adults today have (or will have) biological children by more than one partner, sometimes referred to as *multipartnered fertility*. Recent studies focused on the United States have identified that a sizable proportion of individuals across various demographic groups have children by more than one partner (Carlson and Meyer 2014; Guzzo and Dorius 2016; Meyer, Cancian, and Cook 2005). Union instability in the context of childbearing implies that individuals will experience multiple family forms with various dimensions of complexity; adults are likely to spend time living with more than one partner, and children may experience changes in the adults with whom they coreside or who serve as parental figures to them. This means that families often span households, that family members within households may not all have the same biological or relational ties, and that the involved individuals may have different definitions of who is in their family. Moreover, these factors are likely to differ over time and across sociodemographic groups. In addition, recent decades have seen large numbers and increased recognition of children living with their single- or repartnered father and without their biological mother present in the household (Grall 2018; Livingston 2013). Together, these trends have resulted in growing uncertainty about family forms, relationships, and stability (Seltzer 2019).

Family instability is of concern because research suggests that children who live apart from their biological fathers do not fare as well

on a range of outcomes as children who grow up with both biological parents, especially within stable married families (Amato and Anthony 2014; Cavanagh and Fomby 2019; McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013). The research evidence is especially strong in the United States, although parents' union dissolution has been linked with various adverse outcomes across European and Anglo countries as well (Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien 2017; McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013). In broad scope, children in single-parent families are often deprived of two types of parental resources: economic (money) and relational (time) (Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994; Thomson and McLanahan 2012). Complexity in low-income families may also complicate children's access to income supports via public policies for which they would otherwise be eligible—such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (see Michelsmore and Pilkauskas 2022, this issue).

Changing Labor Market, Changing Families

The changing family patterns described have not occurred in a vacuum, however, and many have suggested that the new patterns—and inequality therein—have been largely attributable to the changing economic landscape. Amid rapid technological change, deindustrialization, and globalization in labor markets, “good jobs” for those with low-to-moderate education became increasingly scarce (Kalleberg 2011; Cherlin 2014). Beginning in the 1980s, scholars began to understand that the limited job opportunities for low-skilled men, especially in poor urban areas, were shaping family behaviors among the disadvantaged (Blank 2009); the decline in “marriageable men” (that is, men who could get and hold a steady job) was seen as a key aspect of decreasing marriage rates, especially in large U.S. cities (Wilson 1987). Residential segregation by class has only reinforced the challenges of those with low education obtaining a “good” job and has reified the differences in labor-market experiences by socioeconomic status (SES) (Bischoff and Rardon 2013).

Starting in the 1970s, women increasingly entered the labor market, leading to new awareness of—and scholarly attention to—work-family issues and the extent to which working

in the paid labor market was and could be compatible with family life. A robust literature has highlighted a range of work-family issues related to the household division of labor, work-family conflict, family stress, gender expectations, and children's well-being as related to parental work (Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel 2020). Public policies that facilitate parents' ability to reconcile work and family demands are shown to enhance children's health and reduce health disparities (Andersson, Garcia, and Glass 2021).

Compounding the described family patterns are related social and policy trends, which are also important but outside the scope of this discussion. The rise in mass incarceration since the 1970s has removed many fathers from their families and communities (Wakefield and Uggen 2010) and has increased “churning” within partner relationships (Turney and Halpern-Meekin 2021). In addition, the opioid crisis has left many parents ill-equipped to care for themselves or their children (Romanowicz et al. 2019). As a result, an increasing number of children are living with extended family members and grandparents, both out of financial necessity and as family stability has decreased (Pilkauskas and Cross 2018; Pittman 2015). Many children will end up in foster care, and recent estimates suggest that 6 percent of all U.S. children will be in foster care between birth and age eighteen—and the proportions are much higher among racial-ethnic minority groups, including 12 percent of Black children and 15 percent of Native American children (Wildeman and Emanuel 2014).

Overall, the past fifty to seventy-five years have witnessed dramatic changes in family behaviors in the United States, resulting in new and more diverse patterns of family experiences for adults and for the children they will raise. As described, family patterns have changed overall, yet they have unfolded quite differently across the socioeconomic spectrum, the largest differences in family demography observed between those with college degrees and those with less education (Lundberg, Pollak, and Stearns 2016). Families may play an important role in buffering the negative consequences of economic insecurity (Wiemers 2014), but when families themselves are unsta-

ble, their buffering role is threatened. This is where policy can usefully intervene to provide a social safety net. In the following section, we identify key issues linking today's labor market and low-income families.

TODAY'S LABOR MARKET AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

The trends outlined contribute to a deteriorating economic and social position for less-educated and lower-income individuals and families. Although poverty rates overall and among families with children have declined over the past fifty years, research shows that much of this decline has been achieved through policy that delivers income supports rather than progress delivered through the labor market (Fox et al. 2015; Wimer et al. 2016). For some groups such as young adults, poverty rates have actually risen over time even after accounting for government policies and programs (Wimer et al. 2020). This leaves today's workers facing increased pressures to make ends meet and support their families.

Many of the work and family trends outlined have put downward pressure on parents' earnings and incomes, which have been shown to causally affect children's short- and long-term development and well-being (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Duncan, Morris, and Rodrigues 2011; Chaudry and Wimer 2016; Wimer and Wolf 2020). Income is thought to affect family and child well-being in various ways, but two major dimensions are *family stress* and *family investments*. Family stress refers to the ways in which economic insecurity and the absence of resources increases parents' stress, compromises parents' mental health (such as increased anxiety or depression), and interferes with healthy and positive family interactions (for example, decreased relationship quality or harsher parenting). A long line of research provides evidence about the link between family stress and children's well-being in diverse populations and samples (McLoyd 1998; Conger et al. 2002; Evans and English 2002; Masarik and Conger 2017).

Although the family stress model is typically related to lack of income, hardship, and the like, it can be extended to encompass the various work pressures that contribute to the dete-

rioration of low-income families' position in the labor market. Indeed, articles in this issue focus on these connections. For example, Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett explore the connections between scheduling unpredictability and various forms of parenting—arranging child care, work-life conflict, and parenting stress—and find evidence that such unpredictability is associated with difficulty with childcare and also work-life conflict. Elizabeth Ananat, Anna Gassman-Pines, and John Fitz-Henley II show that the Fair Workweek Ordinance in Emeryville, California, seems to have led to decreases in schedule unpredictability and increases in worker well-being and sleep quality. The central point is that increasingly common characteristics of low-wage jobs such as scheduling unpredictability can have direct implications for family stress processes and ultimately family and child well-being.

The second major way economic insecurity is thought to affect family and child well-being is via family investments. When parents have limited resources—whether economic resources, time, or financial, social, or human capital—they are less likely to be able to invest in all of the things that support healthy family functioning and children's development and well-being. Lower-income families may be forced to invest their scarce resources into immediate needs, unlike families with more resources, who can invest in a broader range of inputs into family and child well-being (Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir 2012). As true of the family stress model, a long line of research supports lower family investments as a key pathway by which economic insecurity influences family well-being (Bradley and Corwyn 2002; Chazan-Cohen et al. 2009; Haveman and Wolfe 1994; Duncan and Magnuson 2003, 2011; Conger and Donnellan 2007). We know that differential resources by socioeconomic status are associated with differential parental investments (such as parental engagement and time use), which in turn are linked to SES gaps in child outcomes (Kalil and Ryan 2020). For example, low-income parents may not have enough money to buy books and learning materials for the child and may not have the time and knowledge to effectively and regularly use those books and learning materials; disadvan-

taged children are shown to have fewer books in their homes, and parents spend less time reading with children (Bradley et al. 2001). Also, economic disadvantage indirectly influences the resources available to children by affecting residential location, given that poor families live in areas with lower-quality schools and less generous public services (Allard 2019; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). As in the family stress model, these pathways have been extended beyond a focus on income and apply to other resources tied to work and family changes described earlier. For example, family investments also involve resources such as time and cognitive bandwidth, both of which can be influenced by the changing nature of work and family life that has altered not only direct economic resources but also associated nonmonetary resources.

The implications of the broad trends described about changing work and labor markets point to additional strain on already scarce resources among lower-income families (both monetary and nonmonetary) that are likely to further compromise their ability to invest in their families and children in a variety of ways. These are likely to be compounded, given the ways that changes in family formation, structure, and complexity sometimes constrain resources such as time, money, and other factors. Many of the articles in this issue speak to the ways such processes can unfold. For example, Sarah Halpern-Meekin and Adam Talkington (2022) discuss the ways in which men who have become “disconnected” from the labor force, given the broad trends in the labor market, have altered the ways they think about fulfilling their roles as romantic partners and as fathers. They highlight nontraditional contributions besides money, for example, by sharing in the caregiving role or finding ways to provide economic support through channels outside the formal labor market. In a much different setting, David Rangel and Elizabeth Peck (2022, this issue) show how Mexican immigrant parents deploy their resources in investing in their children’s education through involvement in their schools. Given sometimes more tenuous labor-market positions and weaker school resources in terms of translation and advocacy for their interests, many of the parents in the

study are forced to advocate for themselves in subtle ways, especially in an immigration context of heightened enforcement and limited educational supports.

These situations reflect some of the broader labor-market changes that put less-skilled workers in a more deleterious bargaining position with their employers. Alejandra Ros Pilarz, Heather Sandstrom, and Julia Henly (2022, this issue) highlight the various and complex ways that parents’ jobs and financial situations—including work schedules and incomes—lead them to invest in different types of childcare arrangements they perceive to be either more or less planned and more or less desirable for themselves and their children. These contributions point to the ways that the connections between work and family life for low-income workers are complex and dynamic and depend on the various constellations of resources people have at their disposal to invest.

Family patterns themselves may in other important ways affect the need to work or access to resources or may condition particular challenges for low-income families. For example, the Micheltore and Pilkauskas article highlights how growing family complexity has left the majority of low-income children in some uncertainty around their ability to obtain the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)—the major cash benefit for low-income working families in the United States. In her article on diaper need, Jennifer Randles (2022, this issue) highlights the different diaper-related needs as a function of family structure, especially whether one or two parents are in the household. In sum, we see that changing work has affected families, and changing families affect the need for and circumstances surrounding work.

POLICY RESPONSES

The combination of these forces means that low-income and working-class families today face dramatically different circumstances than their counterparts a half century ago (Kalleberg 2011; Cherlin 2014). At the same time, social policies and programs—many of which were enacted in the mid-twentieth century and designed around the assumption of nuclear families—have evolved slowly or unevenly across

locations. They are often based on outdated assumptions about families, about the availability and nature of work, or about the causes of poverty. Also, U.S. federal policies have historically done little to help individuals balance work and family demands, unlike policies in many other Western industrialized countries (Boushey 2016). Overall, low-income families face more uncertainty today and bear a greater share of the risk than government or the business sector (Hacker 2019; Morduch and Schneider 2017).

Although a comprehensive history of the American welfare state and policies that affect low-income workers and families is beyond the scope of this issue and this introduction, we do draw out key trends in policies relevant to how they are or are not tailored to the evolving nature of work and family in the United States for low-income families and their children, as well as the current realities of work and family at the lower-end of the labor market and income distribution. We focus on developments over the past twenty-five years. We highlight important recent developments that may present key turning points in how policy may change going forward in ways relevant to the issue's key themes, with a special emphasis on how the recent COVID-19 pandemic and government's response to it are transforming the policy discussion and policy space.

Income Support Policies

Although income support policies are not often considered the key pillar of work-family policy, we argue that they loom large in relation to how low-income families balance work and family. Low-income families with children must balance effort in the labor market (which is often low-wage) with raising children and dealing with family obligations. Most current antipoverty policies that aim to provide income support are explicitly tied to levels of work (earnings requirements) and family constellations (different benefit structures tied to family arrangements such as marriage and household coresidence). Thus antipoverty policy can be thought of as work-family policy when it comes to the concerns of low-income families with children. It can be the basis for ensuring an adequate level of economic resources, and mea-

suring economic status has long been the central indicator of individual and family well-being vis-à-vis policy inputs—even though articles in this issue point to more nuanced outcomes, such as workers' perceived control of their work circumstances and parents' ability to make planful decisions for their children's care. We recognize that income-support policies are not the only relevant policies at play and thus discuss additional policy domains.

In regard to income-support policy, the 1996 passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), known as welfare reform, brought to fruition a series of reforms that occurred through the mid-1990s in response to several key trends in safety net policy that themselves were a partial product of the changes to families and work discussed earlier (Moffitt 2008). These entailed reforms to the Aid to Dependent Families with Children (AFDC) program, which provided cash aid to low-income families with children in the form of a federal entitlement and was at that time seen as the main welfare program. By the mid-1990s, public and political sentiment had turned sharply away from support for the AFDC program, critics claiming that it disincentivized work and rewarded single-parent families (which had grown tremendously in recent decades, as described). Also, labor-force participation rates for women overall had risen dramatically between the 1970s and the 1990s, raising questions about why some women were being paid “to stay home.” We locate welfare reform as a starting point for discussing the changing policy landscape, not because cash welfare is the policy currently critical to low-income families with children (indeed, to the contrary, its current role is highly circumscribed and now fairly minor relative to other policies). Instead, we argue that welfare reform set into motion a cascading series of fundamental changes to the social safety net that altered the equation for how public policies have helped (or hindered) low-income parents' ability to manage and balance work and family life.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, or PRWORA, which was signed into law by President Clinton in 1996, encompassed numerous changes to the safety net, but

the central shift was the elimination of AFDC and its conversion to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (Blank and Haskins 2004). No longer was federal cash aid for the poorest families with children to be a federal entitlement. Instead, the program was converted to a block grant, whereby each state received a fixed amount of TANF money each year to be spent according to federal rules. Assistance was required to be temporary, such that recipients could “time out” after receiving five years of assistance if they did not meet work or work-related program requirements (Moffitt 2008).

For many proponents of the reform, PRWORA had its intended effect—a large shift of former recipients exiting from the program and increased work among former recipients as they left the so-called welfare rolls. But a move off welfare into work turned out not to be the panacea that critics of AFDC hoped for. Many who left the program for work entered jobs with low pay and minimal benefits even while contending with the new realities of having to balance work and family such as childcare, transportation, and providing for health care (Tach and Edin 2017; Moffitt and Garlow 2018).

Welfare reform coincided with major changes to tax policies aimed at providing support for low-income workers and their children. The Earned Income Tax Credit, a relatively small program when it was launched during the Nixon administration in the mid-1970s, was greatly expanded in the decades since, and by its largest margin during the first term of the Clinton administration in 1993. This was supplemented by the creation of the Child Tax Credit in 1997, which increased in both size and scope in the years following. The driving idea behind these was the prevailing policy mantra of the time that “if you work, you shouldn’t be poor” (Ellwood 1988). Thus, the credits acted as wage supplements to low-wage work, augmenting the family incomes of those who were able to maintain sufficient work effort to yield the highest credit values from the programs (Hoynes 2019). The net result was a shift in support away from the most disadvantaged toward augmenting the incomes of the working poor, in a sense compensating for these workers’ de-

teriorating labor-market positions over time (Moffitt 2015; Hardy 2016; Ziliak 2016). Yet many with low skills were left behind in the search for steady employment.

The other main federal entitlement for low-income families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps) initially also saw declines in caseloads after the conversion of AFDC to TANF. But following the dot-com recession of the early 2000s and sustained efforts by policymakers and states to enroll needy families in the program, caseloads reversed course and eventually boomed during the Great Recession, when opportunities in the formal labor market declined and need skyrocketed (Tach and Edin 2017; Ziliak 2016).

The combined effect of all of these changes was a fundamentally different safety net available to low-income families with children in the 2000s than had been available to their counterparts in the 1960s. Those who remained employed at adequate levels had their earnings augmented by sometimes large once-a-year tax credits in the form of the EITC (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015). For those who were not, cash aid was increasingly scarce and hard to come by, and families had to make due with a patchwork of in-kind assistance and reliance on sources of income such as the informal labor market and various “side hustles” to generate some cash for day-to-day needs. Thus, in recent years, nearly two-thirds of government assistance to low-income families with young children comes in the form of in-kind assistance and once-a-year tax credits, up from just 10 percent in 1968, when 90 percent came in the form of regular cash assistance (Pac et al. 2017). Overall, heterogeneity in families’ economic situations under the new safety net is now greater than in the earlier era, such that families able to maintain employment are financially better off, on average, whereas those facing barriers to doing so—health and mental health problems, limited labor market skills and experience, undocumented immigrant legal status—are worse off (Danziger et al. 2016).

The policy developments are more complicated in the light of increasing family complexity. For example, tax rules for claiming children are built around residency with those who care for the children; as the makeup of families and

households has shifted over time, the clarity of these rules and the resultant nature of who benefits from them has become increasingly murky, as Katherine Micheltore and Natasha Pilkauskas (2022, this issue) show in clear and stark terms. Likewise, SNAP benefits are built around who lives and cooks together, which also becomes more complicated to establish and treat fairly in an era of increased family complexity. Both programs also rely on reported income in the formal labor market, such that labor-market trends leading many to rely on more informal supports such as gig work and various off-the-books forms of income likely leads many families to be unable to claim the full value of benefits like the EITC and Child Tax Credit (CTC).

Other Policies

A number of other policies are also relevant to low-income families. Unemployment Insurance (UI), for example, is a critical support for many workers and their families when people lose their jobs. But historically, those at the margins of the labor market have benefited least from UI's income replacement function. This is because historically a person has had to be a covered worker and to have paid enough into the system under such employment to be entitled to UI benefits in the context of qualified work disruptions. Many of the lowest-income workers have instead been shut out of the program. As work has become more informal and varied in recent years, UI has become less protective. Housing has become increasingly unaffordable for many (Desmond 2018), but government housing assistance in the form of rental vouchers or public housing remains scarce, restricted by stringent rules related to increased earnings and living arrangements. Health insurance through employment is less available to families, but more available through public programs to children. The Affordable Care Act (ACA, also known colloquially as Obamacare) and associated state Medicaid expansions have made public coverage more likely but also more subject to where a person lives. Overall, the ACA has dramatically reduced

the number of insured persons in the United States and increased access to health care (Blumenthal, Collins, and Fowler 2020). Lastly, disability insurance, through the Supplemental Security Income program and related programs, has seen growing enrollment over recent decades, though this seems to have slowed or even reversed in recent years (Autor, Maestas, and Woodbury 2020).

A wide range of additional policies are relevant to the ability of low-income families to navigate the challenges and responsibilities of work and family today. These include aggregate-level policies that regulate aspects of work (such as minimum wage laws and regulations about work scheduling), policies that affect families directly (such as childcare provision, child support enforcement, child welfare policies, early childhood education, and even the K-12 educational system) as well as policies that facilitate the integration of work and family (such as parental leave policies). A full review of all of these policy domains is beyond the scope of this article.

Growing recognition of the rising precariousness of employment for many, especially low-wage workers (Kalleberg 2009), has increased attention to policies that might improve working conditions and wages. Although the federal minimum wage rate has held at \$7.25 per hour since 2009, a number of states and localities have enacted higher rates. Currently, according to the Economic Policy Institute,¹ thirty states have a minimum wage higher than the federal standard (led by California at \$15.00 an hour), and forty localities have one higher than that of their state. As Ananat and Gassman-Pines explain (2022, this issue), in the past ten years, some local areas (several cities and the state of Oregon) have also begun regulating schedule irregularity by employers; these regulations vary but generally mandate that large employers provide notice of work schedules for hourly workers and pay some compensation if and when schedules are modified.

Another large group of policies directly affect family life in various ways, including by en-

1. Economic Policy Institute, "Minimum Wage Tracker," last updated January 1, 2022, <https://www.epi.org/minimum-wage-tracker> (accessed March 18, 2022).

sure financial contributions of nonresident parents, providing care and education for children, or providing a safe environment when biological parents face challenges in caring for their children (for a more detailed discussion of family policies, see Berger and Carlson 2020). Child support enforcement is a federal program that requires nonresident parents to provide financial support for their children, but the particular rules and degree of emphasis vary across states. Childcare enables parents to work, and instability in child care is common and can disrupt employment trajectories and vice versa (Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henly 2022, this issue). All states are required to provide schooling for children from kindergarten through high school, and education is a major predictor of social and economic attainment; however, school quality is shown to vary dramatically across states and localities. Finally, the federal child welfare system provides a system of foster care and adoption when parents are unable to care for their children, but effectiveness and outcomes across states vary notably. Taken together, these policies affect the resources and quality of environments available for children that may enhance their development and well-being.

Finally, some policies affect the extent to which parents are able to simultaneously engage in work and parenting. In particular, parental leave and care policies allow parents to take time off around the birth of their child(ren) or when care needs arise. The United States remains the only Western industrialized nation with no federal guaranteed, paid parental leave. Nine states and the District of Columbia have a paid leave program, but at the federal level, workers are entitled to only twelve weeks of unpaid leave, and only for employers with fifty or more employees. President Joe Biden has proposed to provide federal guaranteed parental leave, and it remains unclear as of this writing whether such will be enacted.

Overall, the 2019 U.S. safety net thus stood as geared toward work, tilted toward in-kind assistance for the neediest and once-a-year tax credits and income support for those able to maintain work effort; it was also splintered across many policies and programs serving different populations with different eligibility cri-

teria and program rules, with notable state variation. Then COVID-19 arrived. The pandemic that swept over the United States and much of the globe during 2020—and continues in 2022 with new variants and concerns—may have rewritten the rules for how public policy interacts with changing work and family issues for the low-income population. COVID was first and foremost a public health emergency but also took a severe economic toll on the population given widespread shutdowns and the associated halting of economic activity. As these dual crises unfolded over 2020 and 2021, U.S. policymakers responded to meet the growing economic and public health needs and tried to rectify some of the major holes in the safety net that left segments of poor and low-income groups exposed to the vicissitudes of the labor market and their resultant economic insecurities. Over a series of bills passed by Congress and signed into law by Presidents Trump and Biden, the policy response to the COVID crisis took many forms. These included, but were not limited to major expansions to unemployment insurance, both in terms of benefit levels and who the system covered (including the self-employed, independent contractors, and others); expanded SNAP benefits and summer food assistance; economic impact or stimulus payments—direct payments to Americans meeting various income thresholds; eviction protections and increased housing assistance; aid to small businesses and child care centers; an expanded EITC for childless workers; an expanded Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit; and numerous other provisions.

Perhaps most consequential for the workers and families that are the focus of this issue, the American Rescue Plan, signed into law by President Biden in March 2021, included a temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit. This expansion increased benefit levels to a maximum of \$3,600 per year for younger children up to age five and \$3,000 per year for those age five through seventeen—up from a maximum of \$2,000 per child under prior law. But even more critically, it extended this credit to all children whose parents were not making enough in earnings under prior law to qualify for the full credit; this included those with low or zero

earnings, who constituted about one-third of all children in the United States (Collyer, Harris, and Wimer 2020). Further, these expanded benefits arrived monthly, beginning in July 2021. As of this writing these benefits have expired, but any future permanent enactment of such would represent a fundamental shift in the nature of social provision for children in the United States—more akin to Social Security for the elderly. Such an expanded CTC would essentially provide regular, guaranteed income support to all children (except those in the most affluent families) regardless of whether parents had enough earnings to qualify. Such a policy would likely fundamentally change the situation that many of the workers and families described in this issue face, who include not only the parents struggling to afford diapers (Randles 2022), but also those struggling with unstable work schedules, volatile childcare markets, and chronic health problems.

NEW RESEARCH IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue, we include eight new empirical articles that evaluate various aspects of work or family life for those in poverty or near poverty, highlighting the extent to which public policy is effectively serving low-income families and ways it might be improved. What unites these articles is a focus on how workers and families today are coping with their current environments, including public policies that may (or may not) meet their needs. The issue begins with three articles that address current challenges families face with respect to work and family life—precarious scheduling, being disconnected from the labor market, and childcare instability. Next are three articles focused on particular policy programs or issues, which include fair workweek policies that preclude employers' use of unpredictable schedule, the Earned Income Tax Credit as linked to complex families, and the lack of policy attention to diapers as a key need for parents. Finally, two articles focus on key subpopulations with respect to race-ethnicity and immigration.

Sigrid Luhr, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett's article uses innovative data from the Shift Project about mothers in the service sector with children age fifteen or younger to examine how unpredictable schedules are linked

with parenting. In particular, they explore how having an uncertain schedule (including on-call shifts, changes in shift timing, volatility in work hours, and minimal advance scheduling notice) in low-wage work is associated with three aspects of parenting—difficulty arranging childcare, work-life conflict, and parenting stress. They find that unpredictable schedules are associated with increased difficulty arranging childcare and greater work-life conflict (but not parenting stress). They also find that family structure and race-ethnicity are important moderators, given that scheduling unpredictability has greater negative effects for single mothers and Black and Hispanic mothers. This is one of the first articles to directly consider how flexibilities granted to employers for managing worker schedules have direct negative consequences in the lives of service sector workers—at least workers who are parents, pointing to potential needs for policy to better regulate scheduling policies and provide other supports to parents.

Sarah Halpern-Meehin and Adam Talkington's article, which is based on an analysis of more than sixty qualitative interviews with so-called disconnected men in rural Wisconsin, tackles how the broad forces reshaping work and family over recent decades intersect in the United States today. Although some continue to endorse the traditional view of a male breadwinner supporting the family through formal labor-market activities, most have come to redefine the nature of both their work and family roles. Some men in the sample report a redefinition of the provider role in their participation in activities outside the formal labor market, such as informal cash or barter work, or in the disability income some contribute to the household. Others have embraced caregiving responsibilities as part of a new way of contributing to a joint maintenance of the household with their partners. Still others reject the model entirely, either choosing to go it alone without a romantic relationship or seeing their economic prospects as unrelated to their partnership potential. The article demonstrates the complex ways that individuals adapt to the forces changing the nature of work and family for low-income people in the United States. Individuals and families are constantly redefin-

ing what it means to be a worker, a provider, and a partner under the constraints of a changing set of systems.

Alejandra Ros Pilarz, Heather Sandstrom, and Julia Henly's contribution to the volume turns attention to childcare as a key component for facilitating employment stability. If childcare arrangements are unreliable or raise safety concerns, parents will be challenged to maintain their work schedules and expectations over the longer term. The article focuses on changes in child care arrangements and the extent to which they might be desired or planned. They find that nearly all desired changes were planned in advance, but undesired changes were often unplanned and might have resulted from the loss of a childcare subsidy, sometimes because of job loss. Their work helps us understand the complexity of trajectories of childcare and the need for policies that support childcare stability.

Elizabeth Ananat, Anna Gassman-Pines, and John Fitz-Henley II evaluate how implementation of a local law to reduce schedule unpredictability influenced parents' well-being. The authors used data on ninety-six working parents with young children to assess how a Fair Workweek Ordinance (FWO) enacted in Emeryville, California, in 2017 affected workers. This law required large retail and food service companies to give notice about scheduling and to pay workers for last-minute changes. They found that indeed, workers experienced lower schedule unpredictability as a result of the FWO law, but also had reduced work hours, potentially reducing earnings; at the same time, they find improvements in mental health, especially improved sleep quality. This article suggests that policies can directly affect worker outcomes in various domains.

The Katherine Michelmores and Natasha Pilkauskas article considers one of today's most important social safety programs for low-income families, the Earned Income Tax Credit. The authors use U.S. Census survey data about family structure to evaluate how many families might be exposed to uncertainties about their tax filing status for the EITC, given that only one parent can claim custodial responsibility for a child. They find that 60 percent of children in low-income households

might be exposed to some ambiguity in tax filing status, and hence potentially reducing the amount of federal support they could be receiving. The authors conclude with several suggestions for policy improvements, including expanding the childless EITC and creating a noncustodial parent EITC. The ambiguities and complexities documented have particular salience in the current moment, when potential expansion to the CTC would likely have to reckon with similar issues.

Jennifer Randles' article focuses on an underrecognized hole in the contemporary social safety net for parents, diaper need. As described earlier, many parents now depend on the low-wage labor market and, if they are able to maintain adequate earnings in the formal labor market, will benefit from sometimes substantial work-based tax credits such as the EITC. Yet many are not able to balance work and family, and are increasingly likely to be only tangentially or unstably attached to the formal labor market. The current safety net has left these parents without regular cash assistance and reliant on a patchwork of in-kind supports such as food stamps. This leaves them scrambling to afford some of the basic necessities of raising a newborn, such as diapers. The article highlights how major trends in work and family have left many parents desperate to meet some of the most routine and necessary expenditures associated with raising a child and supporting a family.

Pamela Joshi, Abigail Walters, Clemens Nölke, and Dolores Acevedo-Garcia's article provides important evidence related to how changes in the labor market have played out unevenly by race, ethnicity, and nativity status. Using data from the Current Population Survey, the authors examine the extent to which low-income full-time working families earn enough to cover a basic family budget. They find that Black, Hispanic, and foreign-born households consistently have fewer economic resources and fewer employer-provided benefits than White households. This suggests that racial and ethnic minorities, as well as immigrant households, are likely to feel the effects of changes to work and families that have strained these households' resources and economic security. It is these households that will need the

most targeting from public policies designed to correct for inequities.

David Rangel and Elizabeth Peck's article on Mexican immigrant parents of school-aged children in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona, underscores the ways parents' abilities to engage with their children's schooling emerge and are shaped by the policy context and resources these parents bring to bear. The key distinction between the two research sites was Phoenix's far harsher and more restrictive immigrant enforcement policy context. Parents in Phoenix operated under a climate of fear and restricted access to free, safe, and remunerative work—an underappreciated facet of the changing nature of work across the socioeconomic spectrum in recent decades. Operating in a largely informal and underpaid work sector, under an immigration enforcement regime putting parents under near-constant threat of deportation, created a series of barriers to parents' desires and goals of effectively managing their children's education. They in turn were more likely to have to structure their school involvement around their fears. This work and policy context made parents' involvement in education—an important input into children's development and educational success—quite challenging, despite the resourcefulness many parents in the sample displayed.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The societal forces reshaping the labor market and the family have been profound, and profoundly felt, especially by lower-income families, who have both had fewer resources to buffer against these changes and whose resources have been directly compromised by these changes. Lower-income families today are consistently working against the disadvantages brought about by the changes described in this issue. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these inequities; its long-term effects are yet to be fully understood but likely to be substantial. The articles in this issue cast into stark relief the public policy challenge of the moment, which cannot be simply to return to the prepandemic normal or tinker around the edges of the current policy regime. Instead, a broader rethinking of how public policies support workers and families is necessary and in-

deed in some respects seems to be under way. Our hope is that the current issue will contribute to that moment by illuminating particular linkages between policies that shape individual experiences and remuneration from work and policies that support families amidst growing change and complexity.

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Implications for Family and Public Policy

Parenting Without Predictability: Precarious Schedules, Parental Strain, and Work-Life Conflict



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Against the backdrop of dramatic changes in work and family life, this article draws on survey data from 2,971 mothers working in the service sector to examine how unpredictable schedules are associated with three dimensions of parenting: difficulty arranging childcare, work-life conflict, and parenting stress. Results demonstrate that on-call shifts, shift timing changes, work hour volatility, and short advance notice of work schedules are positively associated with difficulty arranging childcare and work-life conflict. Mothers working these schedules are more likely to miss work. We consider how family structure and race moderate the relationship between schedule instability and these dimensions of parenting. Unstable work schedules, we argue, have important consequences for mothers working in the service industry.

Keywords: childcare, low-wage work, parenting stress, work schedules, work-family conflict

The COVID-19 pandemic drew new attention to the challenges working parents face. Although many workers lost jobs (Parker, Minkin, and Bennett 2020), others were forced to swiftly transition their work online (Miller 2020). Others—including those working in grocery stores and pharmacies—suddenly became essential workers (Robertson and Gebeloff 2020). As schools and daycare centers closed, parents scrambled to arrange childcare for their chil-

dren (Karpman, Gonzalez, and Kenney 2020) and many women took on added responsibilities at home (Collins et al. 2020). Yet even before the pandemic began, parents in the low-wage service industry were struggling to meet the competing demands of work and family life.

Work has grown more precarious over the past several decades, particularly for low-wage workers, who have seen stagnant wages, re-

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trenchment in fringe benefits, and a rise in nonstandard contractual arrangements (Kalleberg 2011; Fligstein and Shin 2004). This transformation has coincided with parallel changes in the American family, including later and less marriage, rising nonmarital fertility, and a higher incidence of single-parent and complex families (McLanahan 2004; Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2019). The confluence of these two currents in American life may create particularly turbulent conditions for young children. The home is a key context for child development that lays a foundation for later life achievement and attainment (Heckman 2006). Yet parental working conditions, especially when precarious and unpredictable, may impede mothers' and fathers' abilities to parent. These challenges may be exacerbated for single parents, who lack the ability to pool resources and coordinate work and care that partnered parents enjoy (Presser 1999). Because of the pronounced class stratification in both the rising precarity of work and instability of family life, this situation may entrench disadvantage across generations.

Alongside low wages and few fringe benefits, precarious work is characterized by a temporal dimension of job quality. Many employers use just-in-time scheduling practices where the number of hours that workers are given and the times those hours are scheduled vary a great deal, often with little notice and limited worker control (Lambert 2008; Schneider and Harknett 2019). Such practices may reduce labor costs for the employer but transfer that payroll risk to workers and households (Hacker 2006). These practices are particularly pronounced in the retail and food service sectors, which account for 17 percent of the American workforce and in which one in ten children have a parent employed (author's calculations from CPS and ACS). Many of these jobs are held by women, who make up 70 percent of waiters and waitresses and 73 percent of cashiers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a). Relative to White women (20 percent), Black (29 percent) and Hispanic (32 percent) women are overrepresented in low-wage service occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a).

Researchers have begun to unpack the consequences of unpredictable scheduling prac-

tices for various dimensions of family life. Recent research describes the associations between exposure to precarious scheduling practices and worker health and well-being (Schneider and Harknett 2019). Other research suggests that parental exposure to schedule instability is associated with complex and informal childcare arrangements (Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022). However, less research has examined how parental exposure to such scheduling is associated with other aspects of parenting, such as parenting stress, work-family conflict, and difficulty arranging care.

In this article, we examine how maternal exposure to a set of precarious scheduling practices—including on-call shifts, last-minute shift cancellation, short notice of schedules, and hours volatility—are associated with various aspects of parenting. We then examine whether any such associations are moderated by family structure or race. To do this, we draw on large-scale survey data collected between 2016 and 2019 from workers in the retail and food service sectors through the Shift Project. These data sample hourly workers employed at 129 of the largest retail and food service firms in the United States. The Shift Project data uniquely contain detailed measures of precarious scheduling alongside reports on parenting behaviors. We focus on the 2,971 mothers with children under the age of fifteen who are captured in the data. We take mothers as our focus because in most families women continue to do the majority of caretaking (Bianchi et al. 2012; Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel 2020).

We find that unpredictable schedules are associated with increases in the share of mothers reporting difficulty arranging childcare, work-life conflict, and missing work. Schedule unpredictability was not associated with levels of parenting stress. Further, we find that marital status affects some of these associations but not others. We find no evidence that marital status moderates the relationship between schedule instability and the difficulty arranging care or missing work, but that it does affect the relationships with work-life conflict and parenting stress. We also find that Black mothers are particularly affected by schedule instability when it comes to parenting stress.

UNPREDICTABLE AND PRECARIOUS WORK

Work has become more precarious and unpredictable in recent years, especially for workers in the low-wage service industry (Kalleberg 2009). The rise of the 24/7 economy means that more workers are working night, evening, and weekend shifts (Presser 2005). At the same time, the growth of on-call and just-in-time work schedules mean that daytime workers increasingly experience uncertainty about when they are expected to work. To drive down costs, employers now use a variety of human resource strategies to match staffing to demand (Lambert 2008). These practices are especially common in the retail and food service industries (Henly and Lambert 2014; Lambert 2008). Although these arrangements allow for flexibility from the employer's perspective (Milkman 2009), they leave workers with little to no control over their work hours. Instead, workers often have shifts canceled, added, or changed at the last minute (Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003). As a result, few workers in the service industry work a predictable nine-to-five Monday-to-Friday schedule (Gerstel and Clawson 2018).

These scheduling practices and the unpredictability they produce can make it difficult for workers to manage their time and plan for other aspects of their lives (Clawson and Gerstel 2014), particularly when it comes to parenting and childcare (Carrillo et al. 2017; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022). Unpredictability in one person's schedule can spread out to affect others—including caregivers, spouses, relatives, and children—in what Dan Clawson and Naomi Gerstel (2014) call the “web of time.” Yet the consequences of unpredictable schedules on both workers and their families are still not well understood. Gerstel and Clawson call for more research to “document, specify, and explain further both the spillover of unpredictability between work and family and the compounding effects created by the webs connecting them” (2018, 86). In this article, we examine how schedule instability affects three aspects of family life: difficulty arranging care, work-life conflict, and parenting stress.

DIFFICULTY ARRANGING CARE

Although many working parents struggle to find adequate childcare for their children, the conditions of the low-wage service industry pose added challenges. Parents in this sector of the economy rarely have support outside of their friends and families to aid in childcare (Carrillo et al. 2017), and often lack resources at work that can mitigate work-family conflict (Henly and Lambert 2005). These challenges are compounded for women (Luhr 2020), who not only do the majority of childrearing (Blair-Loy 2009; Ishizuka 2018) but are often responsible for arranging childcare in their families (Doucet 2001). Recent evidence suggests that women continued to shoulder the bulk of childrearing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Collins et al. 2020).

Some forms of nonstandard work (such as night, evening, and weekend shifts) could make it easier to arrange childcare, if parents can find informal caregivers who are not working these hours (Han 2004). Other research, however, has linked nonstandard work to difficulty arranging care (Barnett, Gareis, and Brennan 2008). Much of this research points out that nonstandard work schedules conflict with childcare centers' hours of operation (Henly and Lambert 2005; Rachidi 2016), constraining parents' formal childcare options. How disruptive nonstandard schedules are might therefore depend on the form of childcare parents choose (Presser 2005). Yet this research often focuses on nonstandard schedules in the form of night, evening, and weekend shifts, rather than on schedules characterized by routine unpredictability.

A small body of research finds that schedule instability affects the specific forms of childcare that parents use, increasing the use of informal care, sibling care, multiple childcare arrangements, and children caring for themselves (Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022). This may be because unstable schedules make certain forms of childcare more difficult to access. In a study of retail workers, Julia Henly and Susan Lambert (2005) find that mothers who experienced last-minute schedule changes were more likely to face difficulties arranging childcare. Other researchers similarly determine that

varying shifts heightened the likelihood of mothers' experiencing childcare disruptions by 12 percent, and that working evenings decreased the likelihood by 9 percent (Usdansky and Wolf 2008). Childcare disruptions are particularly detrimental to family well-being when they are unplanned (Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henly 2022, this issue), as they likely are when driven by unpredictable schedules.

Difficulty arranging care is important to consider not only because it can disrupt family life but also because it might lead parents to miss work (Gordon, Kaestner, and Korenman 2008). Margaret Usdansky and Douglas Wolf (2008) find that nearly half of mothers who reported a disruption in childcare missed work as a result. This missed work can pose problems to both employers and employees. Missed work may lead to losses in income, force mothers to use their vacation and personal days, and potentially jeopardize their jobs (Gordon, Kaestner, and Korenman 2008; Usdansky and Wolf 2008).

WORK-LIFE CONFLICT

Schedule instability may also affect parents by increasing work-life conflict (Ben-Ishai 2015; Haley-Lock 2011). Research suggests that about half of workers report that work "sometimes" or "frequently" interferes with their family life (Schieman, Glavin, and Milkie 2009). Mothers may experience greater levels of work-family conflict, given gender differences in expectations for parents and time spent in caregiving (Bianchi et al. 2012). It is less clear how work-life conflict might vary by race. Some studies suggest that White mothers experience greater work-life conflict than Black mothers (Dilworth 2004), possibly because Black fathers are more likely to help with childrearing (Kane 2000). Other research finds that Hispanic respondents tend to express more traditional gender attitudes, and that Hispanic women report high levels of work-family spillover (Roehling, Jarvis, and Swope 2005).

Various aspects of work are known to affect levels of work-life conflict. Work hours are associated with greater work-family conflict (Hill et al. 2010). Schedule flexibility (Golden 2008) and control (Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2011) are

associated with lower levels of work-family conflict. Much of this research focuses on professional jobs, where schedule control and employee-driven flexibility are more common (Golden 2008; Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2011). Yet schedule flexibility is relatively rare; only about a third of workers report that they work their current schedule because it suited their caregiving or personal needs (Boushey 2005).

The service industry, in particular, is often characterized by a worker's lack of control over their work schedules. Schedule instability, including on-call schedules, limited advance notice, and last-minute schedule changes, may increase work-life conflict. European data shows that although 14 percent of workers reported issues with work-life balance when their schedules stayed the same, 35 percent of those with last-minute schedule changes did (Eurofound 2012). In another study of women working at a national retail firm, Henly and Lambert (2014) find that unpredictability of work schedules—measured as limited notice of schedules, last-minute schedule changes, and variation in days worked—was associated with greater work-life conflict. Unlike our study, Henly and Lambert did not restrict their sample to working parents. They did find, however, that respondents who did not live with a partner but had caregiving responsibilities reported less work-life conflict. They suggest that this may be because women who face greater challenges with childcare might be pushed out of the industry. In this article, we add to this research by using a national sample of working mothers and drawing comparisons by family structure and race.

PARENTING STRESS

The responsibilities associated with parenting often lead to parenting stress, specifically, the "feeling experienced when a parent perceives that the demands associated with parenting exceed the personal and social resources available to meet those demands" (Cooper et al. 2009, 559). Parenting stress can have long-term consequences for both parents and their children. It is associated with higher levels of psychological distress and depression among parents (Puff and Renk 2014), poorer develop-

mental and behavioral outcomes in children (Joshi and Bogen 2007), and less effective parenting (Deater-Deckard 2004).

The experience of parenting stress may differ by race, shaping “what events are perceived as stressful, what coping strategies are acceptable, and what support systems mothers may turn to for assistance” (Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson 2010, 430). Some research indicates that Black mothers, along with foreign-born Hispanic and Asian mothers, experience greater parenting stress than White mothers, because of structural disadvantages (Nomaguchi and House 2013). Jodi Cardoso and colleagues (2010) also find elevated levels of parenting stress among Black mothers relative to both White and Mexican American mothers.

Research on the effect of nonstandard work on parenting stress is somewhat mixed. In one study, Pamela Joshi and Karen Bogen (2007) find that nonstandard work schedules (including night, weekend, rotating, and split shifts) significantly increased parenting stress. Unfortunately, they do not distinguish between these schedule types, making it difficult to determine whether all forms of nonstandard schedules result in similar levels of parenting stress. Other researchers find that nonstandard work schedules may not increase parenting stress (Nomaguchi and Johnson 2016; Lozano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016). In a study of working-class parents, Kei Nomaguchi and Wendi Johnson find that nonstandard work hours—including evenings, nights, rotating shifts, or weekends—were not related to higher levels of parenting stress for either mothers or fathers. They conclude that “It may be that working-class fathers and mothers work long hours, have multiple jobs, or take informal jobs in order to earn enough to support the family or to avoid being fired, and thus they tend to feel that they are doing what they are supposed to do for their children” (2016, 1552). It is also possible that schedule predictability is important when it comes to parenting stress. Mariona Lozano and her colleagues (2016) find that Canadian workers with nonstandard but predictable schedules experience less stress than those with unpredictable schedules. They argue that parents may use nonstandard schedules “as a means to achieve better life-work balance” (Lo-

zano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016, 278). Some nonstandard work schedules—like night and weekend shifts—may allow parents to better split their childcare responsibilities with their partners (Carrillo et al. 2017; Lozano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016), which could reduce parenting stress.

Less research, however, has examined how other forms of schedule instability—such as on-call shifts, last-minute shift cancellation, short advance notice of schedules, and hours volatility—affect parenting stress. Research finds that parental stress generally increases during times of change (Cooper et al. 2009; Halpern-Meekin and Turney 2016) and during workplace transitions (Craig and Churchill 2019). It stands to reason that the types of schedule instability common in the retail and food service industries might increase parenting stress as well. A small but growing literature links schedule instability to poorer health and well-being, including greater psychological distress and poorer sleep quality (Schneider and Harknett 2019). Instability in work schedules can also affect parents financially (Ben-Ishai 2015; Haley-Lock 2011), which can in turn exacerbate parenting stress (Puff and Renk 2014). To our knowledge, however, no studies directly examine how precarious scheduling practices—including on-call shifts, last-minute shift cancellation, short advance notice of schedules, and hours volatility—affect parenting stress.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND RACE/ETHNICITY

Americans are marrying later and less than they were fifty years ago, resulting in a higher number of single-parent and complex families (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2019). This is particularly true among those with lower levels of education (Wang and Parker 2014) and more precarious jobs (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2019). Declines in marriage have been particularly steep among Black families (Raley 1996). It is therefore important to consider how family structure and race might moderate the effect of schedule instability on parenting stress, work-family conflict, and difficulty arranging care.

Parents who are married or cohabiting with

a partner may have more resources to buffer against the negative effects of schedule instability, compared to single mothers. Previous research suggests that parenting stress is particularly common among single mothers (Cooper et al. 2009). Having a partner might also reduce work-family conflict and make it easier to arrange childcare. In one study, Hui Liu and colleagues (2011) find that married parents experience some positive associations between nonstandard work schedules—including evening, weekend, and rotating shifts—and parental well-being. This may be because partnered parents are able to “tag team” (Carrillo et al. 2017) childcare with their partner, even when they experience schedule instability. Partners may be able to provide a ready source of backup childcare when work schedules change (Carrillo et al. 2017) or childcare arrangements fall through (Usdansky and Wolf 2008). Single mothers might therefore have a more difficult time arranging childcare for their children (Joshi and Bogen 2007) and experience more work-life conflict and parenting stress.

Yet these same benefits may not extend to cohabiting partners. Although married parents experience higher levels of well-being when working nonstandard work schedules, cohabiting parents working the same schedules experience lower levels of well-being and higher levels of work-family conflict (Liu et al. 2011). Cohabiting mothers working nonstandard schedules also report worse health than married mothers (Shen 2018). This may be because cohabiting parents are less likely to care for their partners’ children, receive childcare help from family members, and have fewer economic resources at their disposal (Abroms and Goldscheider 2002; Liu et al. 2011). These differences are important, considering that the numbers of cohabiting parents are growing (Lichter 2012) and that cohabiting mothers are more likely to work nonstandard hours (Presser 2005).

It is also possible that relationship status will not be strongly related to these outcomes. Researchers have found that marital status and children’s contact with fathers does not necessarily mean that both parents are sharing in childcare responsibilities (Usdansky and Wolf 2008). As Usdansky and Wolf reason, “sharing

a household or having a child in common may not mean sharing responsibility when childcare problems arise, whether because men use their greater economic resources to opt out of childcare duties, face greater time constraints, or subscribe to traditional gender ideologies” (2008, 1206). Precarious work schedules may therefore be particularly disruptive for mothers, who shoulder the bulk of childcare responsibilities (Blair-Loy 2009; Ishizuka 2018), regardless of their relationship status.

The precarious conditions in the service sector may also contribute to racial-ethnic inequality in well-being and to intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Black and Hispanic women are overrepresented in the low-wage service industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a) and therefore disproportionately affected by the challenges of precarious schedules in this sector. Further, research suggests that Black and Hispanic mothers may be more vulnerable to parenting stress and work-life conflict. Some studies have found that Black mothers experience greater levels of parenting stress than their counterparts in other racial-ethnic groups (Nomaguchi and House 2013; Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson 2010). Other research has shown that Hispanic women report relatively high levels of work-family conflict (Roehling, Jarvis, and Swope 2005). For these reasons, we expect that race-ethnicity may moderate the effects between precarious work and various aspects of parenting.

METHODS

To examine how precarious work schedules shape work-life conflict, difficulty arranging care, missed work, and parenting stress, we draw on survey data collected from the Shift Project. The Shift Project was designed to understand how unpredictable schedules shape the lives and well-being of service sector workers and their families. Between 2016 and 2019, the Shift Project collected completed surveys from approximately forty thousand workers employed in the retail and food-service sectors across the United States. Respondents in the sample are workers age eighteen or older, paid by the hour, and employed at 129 of the largest retail or food service employers in the United States. This paper restricts the Shift sample to

2,971 working mothers who were surveyed between 2017 and 2019. Because this article examines aspects of parenting, we select respondents with dependent children under the age of fifteen. Working mothers of young children represent about 7.5 percent of the Shift Project survey sample. The remainder of the Shift Project sample includes fathers, parents with children age fifteen or older, and nonparents.

We recruited respondents to the Shift Project using Facebook advertisements, targeted by employer name. Advertisements included a photograph of a worker in a setting designed to resemble their workplace, along with text reading, “Working at {*employer name*}? Take a Short Survey and Tell us About Your Job!” and “Chance to win an iPad!” Respondents who clicked on the Facebook advertisement were taken to an online Qualtrics survey, which took about twenty minutes to complete. Although nearly 80 percent of Americans aged eighteen to fifty are active on Facebook (Greenwood, Perin, and Duggan 2016), some people may be more likely to take surveys of this kind than others. We poststratify the data by race-ethnicity, age, and gender and weight the data to the characteristics of parents working in the same sectors surveyed by the American Community Survey. We further adjust the sample to correct for any over- or underrepresentation of respondents by employers by weighting the data to capture the relative employment sizes of each employer according to benchmarks we calculate from the Reference USA data.

We describe the data collection procedures for the Shift Project survey in detail elsewhere (Schneider and Harknett 2022) and these data have been used in a series of recent articles (Harknett et al. 2022; Harknett, Schneider, and Wolfe 2020; Schneider and Harknett 2019; Schneider 2020; and Storer, Schneider, and Harknett 2020).

Measures

We examine four dependent variables to capture different aspects of parenting. First, we measure parents’ reported difficulty arranging for childcare with the items: *How difficult to arrange childcare during work hours* (very, somewhat, a little bit, not at all); *Ever miss work because needed care for children and could not*

arrange (yes or no). Second, we measure work-life conflict through a scale variable (alpha = 0.83) constructed from four items: *It is easy to get time off when I need it; My shift and work schedule cause extra stress for me and my family; It is difficult to deal with family or personal matters during working hours; In my work schedule, I have enough flexibility to handle family needs*. Third, in line with previous research (see Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson 2010; Cooper et al. 2009), we measure parenting stress using the Aggravation in Parenting Scale adapted from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey. We construct a scale variable (alpha = 0.78) of parenting stress: *Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be; Feel trapped by responsibilities as parent; Taking care of children much more work than pleasure; Often feel tired, worn-out, or exhausted from raising a family*.

We measure in our independent variables a detailed set of parental exposures to precarious scheduling practices. We first gauge schedule type, contrasting those who report that their schedule is variable (defined as “changes from day to day or week to week”) against those with regular day schedules, evening, night, or rotating schedule. We also gauge the amount of advance notice of work schedules, contrasting no to two days, three to six days, one to two weeks, and two or more weeks’ notice. We construct two dichotomous measures of schedule instability—whether the respondent worked at least one on-call shift in the prior month and whether the respondent experienced at least one timing change to schedule in the prior month. Unfortunately, we can only capture this “extensive margin” of on-call shifts and timing changes, not the “intensive margin” of the number of such shifts or changes. Finally, we measure work-hour volatility as the percentage difference in hours between the week in the prior month when the respondent worked the most hours compared to the week when they worked the fewest.

For our moderating variables, we compare parental respondents who report being married with those who report cohabiting and those who report no coresidential partner. We additionally examine moderation by respondents’ race-ethnicity, comparing the association between work schedule instability and our

outcomes for respondents who identify as non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, and as being of another race-ethnicity.

With our control variables, we adjust for a large set of potentially confounding demographic characteristics (age, race-ethnicity, speaking a language other than English at home, educational attainment, school enrollment, marital status, children age zero to four, children age five to nine, children age ten to fourteen, number of children), economic conditions (hourly wage, household income), and job characteristics (schedule control, nonstandard shifts, number of usual hours, occupation, job tenure) in addition to year and month fixed effects.

We present sample demographics in table 1. The mothers in the Shift Project sample, with a median age of thirty-three, are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Fewer than 10 percent holds a bachelor's degree and 10 percent have an associate's. Sixty-one percent of mothers live in households with less than \$35,000 in annual income, and mothers report earning a median wage of just \$11.65 an hour, with little schedule control, frequent night and evening shifts, and near-universal weekend work.

Analysis

We first estimate a series of OLS regression models that describe the association between these scheduling exposures and our outcome measures of difficulty arranging childcare, missed work, work-life conflict, and parental stress. We estimate separate models for each of our five measures of schedule instability and for each of our four dependent variables, for a total of twenty models. We then focus on our scale measure of schedule instability, showing the main effects on our four dependent variables. Finally, we test if these associations are moderated by family structure or race-ethnicity. We limit the analysis sample to respondents who completed the survey and met our inclusion criteria. We then perform multiple imputation to address item non-response.

RESULTS

We first present descriptive statistics from mothers in our sample, before turning to how schedule instability affects work-life conflict,

difficulty arranging childcare, and parenting stress.

Descriptive Statistics

Mothers in our data face significant challenges to arranging childcare. As shown in table 2, nearly half reported that arranging childcare was “very difficult” and another quarter reported that it was “somewhat difficult.” The result was often irreconcilable conflicts between work and care, with a third of parents reporting that they had to miss work in the last month because they needed to care for their child or children and could not arrange care. Parents in the sample also reported significant work-life conflict overall, with a mean score of 2.27. More readily interpretable are the distributions of response from the constituent items in the scale. For example, 30 percent of mothers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “it is easy to get time off from [Employer] when I need it” and 38 percent said it was always or often true that it was “difficult to deal with family or personal matters during working hours.” Mothers also reported high levels of parenting stress, with a mean score of 2.44 of 4.

Mothers in our sample were exposed to a significant degree of schedule instability. Thirty-one percent reported a “variable schedule” that changed from day to day; another 17 percent reported a “rotating schedule.” Thirty-one percent reported a regular day shift. Mothers also received little notice of their work schedules, 17 percent receiving less than seventy-two hours and another 12 percent three to six days, for a total of nearly a third receiving less than one week and another 30 percent receiving one to two weeks. One in four mothers reported working on-call. Mothers reported that their schedules often changed at the last minute, 66 percent reporting changes like a later starting time or an earlier ending time to their shift in the last month. This schedule fluctuation added up to significant work-hour volatility, mothers reporting mean variation between the week in the last month with the greatest work hours and the week with the fewest of 31 percent. In the second column of table 2, we also compare the schedule instability of mothers with children under the age of fifteen (our analytic sample) with all other women in

Table 1. Demographic, Economic, and Work Covariates

	Weighted to ACS		Weighted to ACS
Demographics		Economic Conditions (cont.)	
Age		Hourly wage	
Mean	33	Mean	\$12.28
Median	33	Median	\$11.65
Race-ethnicity (%)		Job characteristics	
White, non-Hispanic	59	Schedule control (%)	
Black, non-Hispanic	12	Employer decides	56
Hispanic	22	Employer decides, some worker input	26
Other race-ethnicity, non-Hispanic	7	Worker decides with some limits	10
Language other than English at home (%)		Worker decides	2
Yes	17	Non-day shifts (%)	
Educational attainment (%)		Often	10
No degree or diploma	6	Sometimes	16
High school diploma or GED	38	Never	75
Some college	37	Weekend shifts (%)	
Associate's degree	10	Often or sometimes	94
Bachelor's degree	8	Weekly hours (%)	
School enrollment (%)		Mean	33
Enrolled in school	9	Median	36
Partnership Status (%)		Occupation (%)	
Married, living with spouse	45	Manager	31
Living with a partner	27	Cashier or clerk	22
Not living with a spouse or partner	28	Salesperson	16
Children age (%)		Customer service	4
Children 0–4	62	Waiter, waitress, server	5
Children 5–9	45	Cook	2
Children 10–14	38	Baker	2
Number of children (%)		Butcher, meat cutter	1
One child	31	Sandwich artist, food preparation	11
Two children	28	Delivery person	1
Three children	21	Other	5
Four children	11	Job tenure (%)	
Five or more children	10	Less than 1 year	18
Economic conditions		1 year	13
Household income (%)		2 years	13
Less than \$15,000 per year	17	3 years	10
At least \$15,000 but less than \$25,000	23	4 years	8
At least \$25,000 but less than \$35,000	21	5 years	5
At least \$35,000 but less than \$50,000	18	6 or more years	34
At least \$50,000 but less than \$75,000	12	Covered by, member of union (%)	
At least \$75,000 but less than \$100,000	8	Union	7
N	2,971	N	2,971

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

Table 2. Parenting Outcomes and Measures of Schedule Instability

	Weighted to ACS Demographics	
	Women With Children < 15	Women Without Children < 15
Difficulty arranging childcare (%)		
Very difficult	47	—
Somewhat difficult	22	—
A little bit difficult	18	—
Not at all difficult	13	—
Miss work for child care (%)		
Yes	33	—
Work-life conflict scale		
Mean	2.27	—
Median	2.25	—
Parenting stress scale		
Mean	2.44	—
Median	2.50	—
		35
Schedule type (%)		
Variable schedule	31	35
Regular daytime schedule	31	27
Regular evening schedule	6	8
Regular night schedule	10	8
Rotating schedule	17	19
Other	4	4
Schedule change advance notice (%)		
0–2 days	17	14
3–6 days	12	15
1–2 weeks	30	28
2 or more weeks	40	44
On-call work in last month (%)		
Yes	25	20
Schedule timing change in last month (%)		
Yes	66	64
Work-hour volatility		
Mean	0.31	0.33
Median	0.27	0.28
N	2,971	22,409

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

the sample. We see that mothers of younger children are somewhat less likely to have variable schedules and somewhat more likely to have regular day shifts and somewhat lower work-hour volatility, though these differences are not large. In contrast, mothers of young children are less likely to get two weeks' notice (40 percent versus 44 percent), more likely to work on-call shifts, and slightly more likely to have last-minute timing changes.

HOW SCHEDULE INSTABILITY AFFECTS PARENTS

We find consistent positive associations between each indicator of schedule unpredictability and difficulty arranging childcare. As shown in table 3, mothers who have variable (or rotating) shifts are significantly more likely to report trouble arranging childcare than those who have regular day shifts. We also find that relative to mothers with at least two weeks' notice of their schedules, those with less than seventy-two hours' have more difficulty arranging care.

Last-minute scheduling practices such as on-call shifts and changes to shift timing also significantly increase the difficulty of arranging care. Finally, work-hour volatility is also significantly associated with difficulty arranging childcare.

By and large, mothers who are exposed to unstable and unpredictable work scheduling practices are also more likely to report having had to miss work at least once in the last month because they needed childcare but could not arrange for it. We see positive associations between short notice, on-call shifts, timing changes to shifts, and work-hour volatility and this outcome. Mothers with more unpredictable work schedules also report significantly higher levels of work-life conflict, with consistent associations between working a variable (or rotating) shift relative to a day shift and work-life conflict as well as with having less than 1 week's notice of work schedules, working on-call, last-minute timing changes, and work-hour volatility. However, quite notably, we

Table 3. Work Scheduling Practices and Parenting Outcomes

	Hard to Arrange Care	Miss Work to Care	Work-Life Conflict	Parenting Stress
Work schedule type				
Regular day shift	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Variable schedule	0.195*	-0.017	0.277***	0.042
Evening shift	-0.164	-0.083	-0.019	-0.067
Night shift	0.080	-0.019	0.073	0.055
Rotating shift	0.251*	-0.055	0.355***	0.046
Other	0.235	-0.045	0.103	0.055
Amount of notice				
2+ weeks	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
1-2 weeks	0.046	0.034	0.095	0.071
3-6 days	0.124	0.072	0.229***	0.025
0-2 days	0.408***	0.171***	0.409***	-0.044
On-call shift				
No	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Yes	0.197*	0.101**	0.262***	0.013
Shift timing change				
No	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Yes	0.253***	0.081*	0.373***	0.074
Work-hour volatility	0.458**	0.243***	0.455***	-0.023
N	2,971	2,971	2,971	2,971

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

do not find evidence of significant associations between schedule unpredictability and parenting stress across any of our five indicators.

INSTABILITY SCALE AND PARENTING CHALLENGES

In table 4, we assess the association between a scale measure of schedule instability and each of our four outcomes. We first test a categorical measure for the scale variable, which allows us to detect a nonlinear relationship. We see that difficulty arranging care increases with the number of exposures to different types of schedule instability, but that exposure to all five sources particularly raises the risk of difficulty arranging care. We similarly see a strongly positive relationship between schedule instability exposures and difficulty arranging childcare.

Turning to the outcome of missing work because of a lack of childcare, we do not find a significant relationship between one, two, three, or four exposures and missing work due to challenges finding childcare; however, those with five such exposures are significantly more likely to miss work because of childcare. When we constrain the estimated relationship to be linear, we see that missing work for care increases as the schedule instability scale exposures increase.

Work-life conflict is strongly patterned by the number of exposures to schedule instability, rising substantially and significantly in the categorical specification as well as in the linear specification. However, as we saw for each of

the indicators of schedule instability, there is no relationship between the instability scale and parenting stress.

MODERATION OF SCHEDULE INSTABILITY AND PARENTING CHALLENGES

In table 5, we present results from models that test whether marital status moderates the associations between schedule instability and parenting challenges. We do so by interacting the linear term for exposures to work schedule instability with a three-category measure of marital status—married, cohabiting, and single. We find no evidence that marital status moderates the association between schedule instability and difficulty arranging childcare or missing work because of not being able to arrange childcare.

However, we find that the association between schedule instability and work-life conflict is strongest for single mothers. In figure 1, we plot this association based on predicted values from the regression model in table 5. Although work-life conflict rises with schedule instability for all mothers, the slope is steepest for those who are not living with a spouse or partner.

Despite not finding evidence of main effects of schedule instability on parenting stress, we do find that cohabiting mothers appear to be negatively affected by schedule instability. For cohabiters, but not for single or married mothers, parenting stress rises with work schedule instability, as depicted in figure 2.

Table 4. Work Schedule Instability Scale and Parenting Outcomes

	Hard to Arrange Care	Miss Work to Care	Work-Life Conflict	Parenting Stress
Schedule instability scale				
0	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
1	0.079	0.006	0.161	-0.004
2	0.249	0.014	0.324**	0.073
3	0.369**	0.029	0.500***	0.107
4	0.348*	0.120	0.591***	0.058
5	0.794***	0.198*	1.045***	0.084
Schedule instability scale	0.123***	.040**	0.176***	0.018
N	2,971	2,971	2,971	2,971

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

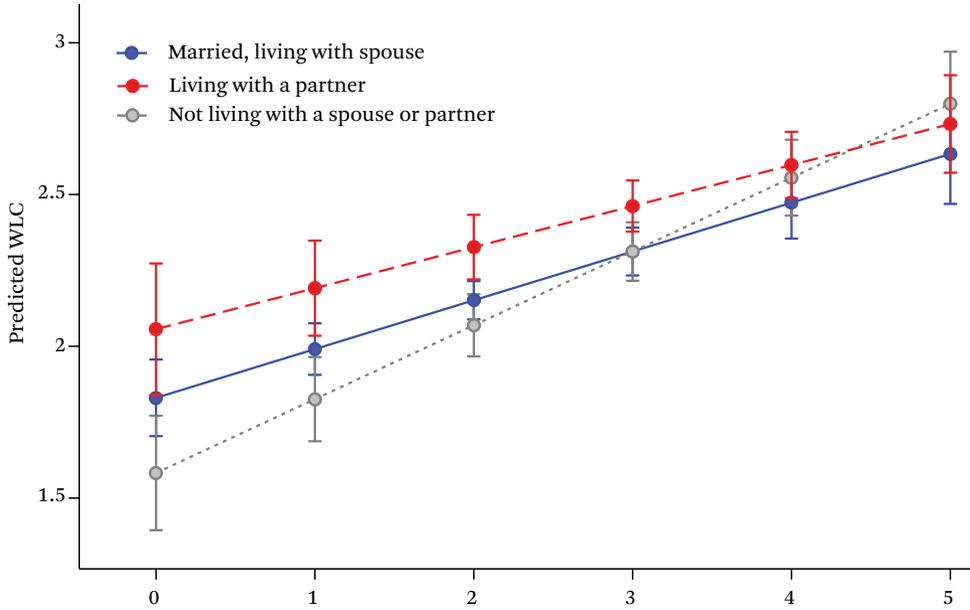
Table 5. Schedule Instability and Parenting Outcomes, Moderation by Family Structure and Race/Ethnicity

	Hard to Arrange Care	Miss Work to Care	Work-Life Conflict	Parenting Stress
Schedule instability scale	0.099* .092**	0.046* .028+	0.161*** .143***	-0.016 -0.005
Marital status				
Married	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Cohabiting	0.030	0.140	0.223	-0.242*
Single	-0.102	0.018	-0.248*	-0.119
Race-ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Black, non-Hispanic	-0.371	0.150	-0.154	-0.442
Hispanic	-0.105	-0.127+	.269*	-0.146
Other race-ethnicity, non-Hispanic	0.173	-0.069	-0.055	0.043
Instability*marital				
Married*instability	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Cohabiting*instability	0.022	-0.035	-0.025	0.096**
Single*instability	0.069	0.010	0.082*	0.039
Instability*race-ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic*instability	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Black, non-Hispanic*instability	-0.109	-0.018	0.046	.138**
Hispanic*instability	-0.084	0.041	.088*	0.046
Other race-ethnicity, non-Hispanic*instability	-0.007	0.048	0.052	-0.022
N	2,971	2,971	2,971	2,971

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

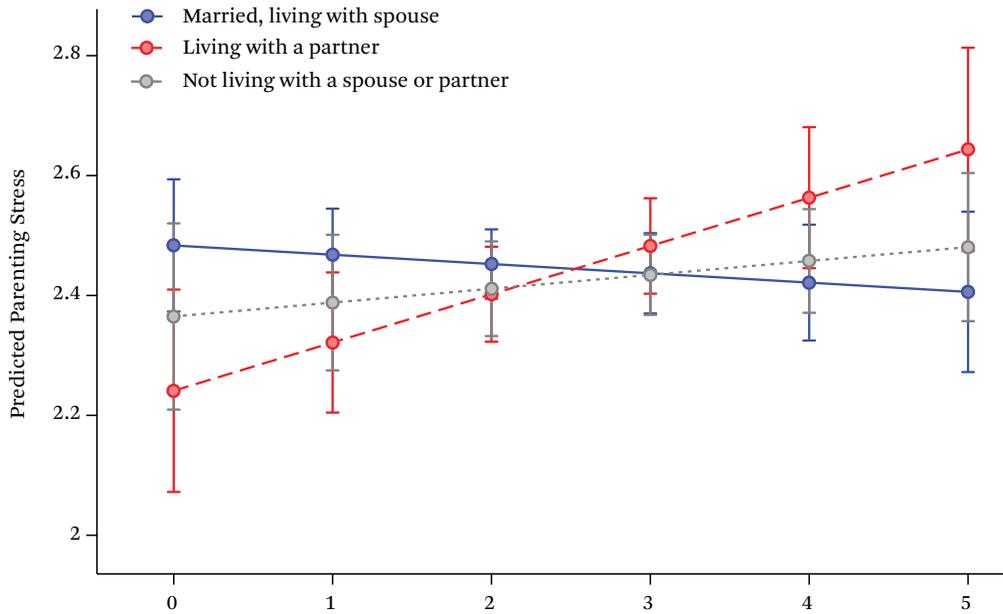
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 1: Work Life Conflict by Schedule Instability and Marital Status



Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

Figure 2: Parenting Stress by Schedule Instability and Marital Status



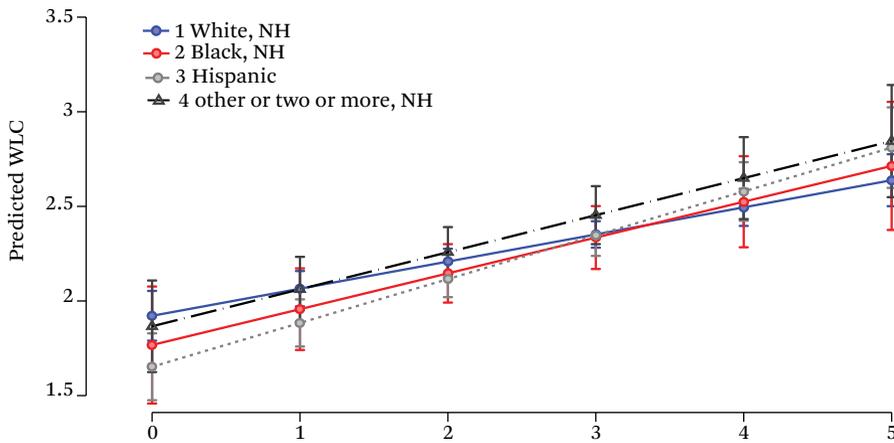
Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

We also examine whether the associations between work schedule instability and outcomes are moderated by race-ethnicity. As we saw for marital status, we see little evidence of significant moderation of the relationship between schedule instability and difficulty arranging care or having to miss work for care by race-ethnicity. Mothers feel these challenges regardless of marital status or race-ethnicity. However, we do find that schedule instability has significantly more pernicious consequences for work-life conflict for Hispanic mothers than for non-Hispanic White moth-

ers. We plot the gradient of work-life conflict by schedule instability by race-ethnicity in figure 3. Although the interaction coefficient is positive, the predicted values plot shows that the substantive differences in the strength of the association are not particularly large between Hispanic mothers and non-Hispanic mothers.

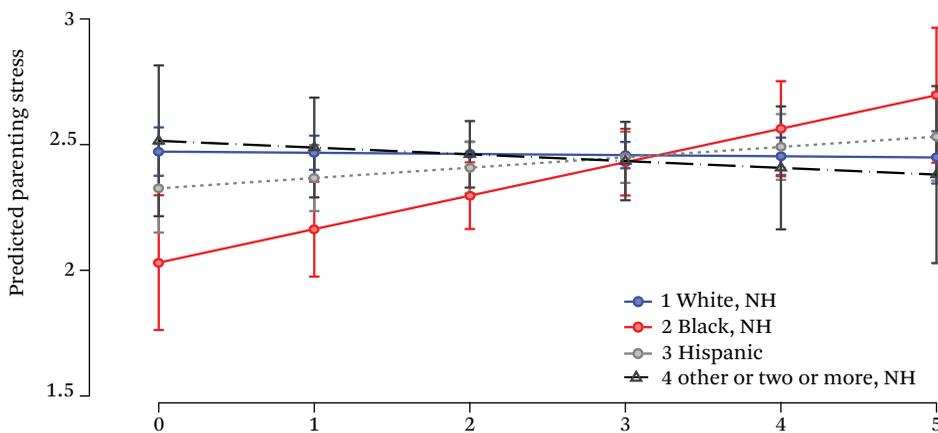
In contrast, when it comes to parenting stress, we find significant moderation by race-ethnicity for non-Hispanic Black mothers, who are more strongly affected than their non-Hispanic White counterparts. Figure 4 plots

Figure 3. Work-Life Conflict by Schedule Instability and Race/Ethnicity



Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

Figure 4. Parenting Stress by Schedule Instability and Race/Ethnicity



Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

predicted values of parenting stress by schedule instability and by maternal race-ethnicity.

Despite an essentially null relationship for non-Hispanic White mothers, Hispanic mothers, and mothers of other race-ethnicities, the gradient is clear and positive for non-Hispanic Black mothers, for whom greater schedule instability is associated with increased parenting stress. We find no such interaction for our other three outcomes, however.

CONCLUSION

Over the last several decades, shifts in both the nature of work and family life have been profound. The share of women working in the paid labor market has increased dramatically in sixty years (Cohany and Sok 2007). Between 1975 and 2017, the proportion of mothers with children under eighteen in the labor force increased from 47 to 71 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017b). Yet many of the jobs available today, especially to workers of color and those with lower levels of education, have grown increasingly precarious (Kalleberg 2009). This is particularly true in the service sector, where workers often confront unstable and unpredictable work schedules in addition to low wages. At the same time, we have also seen marked changes in the composition of families. These include delays in marriage, along with a rise of cohabiting and single-parent households (Cherlin 2005). As the sociologist Arne Kalleberg writes, “The growth of dual-earner families made it more important for workers to have control over their work schedules and the flexibility to attend to non-work, familial activities” (2011, 14). For many service-sector workers, however, this schedule control does not exist (Gerstel and Clawson 2018; Lambert 2008; Schneider and Harknett 2019).

Against the backdrop of rising precarity in the labor market and changes within families, this article examines how unpredictable work schedules affect three important dimensions of parenting: difficulty arranging care, work-family conflict, and parenting stress. It shows that, for a national sample of low-wage mothers working in the service sector and raising children under the age of fifteen, unpredictable work schedules—including on-call shifts, shift timing changes, work-hour volatility, and little

notice of work schedules—are associated with increased work-family conflict, difficulty arranging childcare, and missed work. We do not find evidence of main effects of schedule instability on parenting stress. Because parenting stress specifically refers to the feeling that the demands of parenting exceed the resources available to meet those demands (Cooper et al. 2009), mothers might see their work—however unpredictable—as a way of meeting their parenting demands (Nomaguchi and Johnson 2016).

We also find that marital status moderates the associations between schedule instability and both work-life conflict and parenting stress. The association between schedule instability and work-life conflict is particularly pronounced for single mothers. This linkage is concerning considering that work-life conflict is associated with worse health and well-being overall (Kelly and Moen 2007). We also find that parenting stress rises with work schedule instability for cohabiting mothers, but not for single or married mothers. We initially predicted that single mothers would be the most affected by schedule instability, as they lack partners to “tag team” childcare (Carrillo et al. 2017). It is possible, however, that cohabiting partners are less likely to care for each other’s children or have family members who are willing to step in to help with childcare (Abroms and Goldscheider 2002), thereby increasing parenting stress. Single mothers might have more resources at their disposal than their marital status indicates—including relatives or nonresident partners who are able to help with childcare. We do not find that marital status moderates the association between schedule instability and difficulty arranging childcare or missing work because of not being able to arrange childcare. It is possible that this is in part because, regardless of their marital status, women are expected to be the primary caretakers in their families (Blair-Loy 2009; Ishizuka 2018).

We also find that Black mothers experience the negative effects of schedule instability more strongly than White mothers when it comes to parenting stress. Research finds that Black mothers may experience greater levels of parenting stress more broadly (Nomaguchi and

House 2013; Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson 2010). Our research suggests that unpredictable work schedules could exacerbate these trends, heightening inequality across racial groups. This finding is especially concerning given that Black women are already overrepresented in the low-wage service industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a) where schedule instability is common (Schneider and Harknett 2019).

Some limitations apply in interpreting these results. Although our data do not constitute a probability sample, they have been validated and benchmarked to probability samples (Schneider and Harknett 2022). Still, if mothers who are the most stressed and time-strained are the least likely to respond to our survey, we might underestimate the association between work schedules and parenting outcomes. Our analysis also relies on cross-sectional data. It is therefore possible that some workers might choose some of the schedule types we observe. For example, some researchers argue that workers might choose nonstandard schedules as a way of attaining better work-life balance (Lozano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016). Although workers might strategically ask for night or weekend shifts, however, we doubt that many workers would request schedules with little notice or that are otherwise unpredictable. Further, workers in the low-wage service industry typically have very little control over their work schedules, making it less likely that they choose them (Lambert 2008). Our work is also subject to other threats to causality, including the possibility that workers are negatively selected into unpredictable schedules on unobservable characteristics that also heighten work-life conflict and difficulty arranging childcare. It is possible that some mothers who face extreme schedule instability may drop out of the workforce altogether and are therefore not captured in our sample. Finally, future work might further examine whether and how location shapes these patterns.

Although these data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, we expect that the lives of low-wage mothers working in the service industry became more challenging during the pandemic. Many of the workers in the sample—particularly those employed by grocery

stores and pharmacies—were essential workers who did not have the luxury to work from home. They likely also faced new challenges when it came to arranging childcare, as schools and daycare centers closed. Initial research suggests that Hispanic parents faced particular difficulties in arranging childcare for their children (Karpman, Gonzalez, and Kenney 2020). It is possible that some workers—particularly mothers—may have been forced to reduce work hours or leave the labor force during this period if unable to reconcile the competing demands of work and family (Collins et al. 2020). Future work should further examine the experiences of service-sector workers during the COVID-19 crisis and how they navigated these challenges.

To some extent, the growth in precarious work and job insecurity since the 1970s has affected workers across the socioeconomic spectrum (Hacker 2006; Kalleberg 2011). Research shows that higher-income workers are not immune from the changing demands of work and family life (Kelly and Moen 2020). Yet some workers are more vulnerable to these changes than others. Our research centers work-life conflict among low-wage service workers. Low-wage workers often lack workplace protections and other resources that could help workers in “good jobs” (Kalleberg 2011) mitigate this conflict. We therefore argue that parents working in the service industry are a particularly relevant group to consider for research and policy purposes. Our research shows that, even before the pandemic, mothers working in the low-wage service sector faced heightened work-life conflict and difficulty arranging care when working unpredictable schedules. They were also more likely to miss work. The results of this study add to a small but growing body of evidence that scheduling practices have a meaningful effect on family life. Although evidence on the effects of unpredictable schedules on worker and family well-being is limited, several cities and states have already advanced innovative legislation to regulate these practices. Laws passed in San Francisco, Seattle, New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Oregon seek to regulate or restrict the use of on-call shifts and last-minute shift changes. Those working at large

firms in Seattle, for instance, are now entitled to two weeks' notice of work schedules and unpredictability pay when that requirement is not met (Seattle City Council 2021). Similar legislation has been proposed at the national level.¹ Early evaluations of these policies provide evidence that they have positive effects on worker's lives. A recent examination of the effects of the Fair Workweek Ordinance in Emeryville, California, for instance, suggests that the ordinance decreased schedule unpredictability among parents while improving well-being (Ananat, Gassman-Pines, and Fitz-Henley II 2022, this issue). The ordinance specifically reduced the forms of scheduling unpredictability that we find are especially damaging to mothers, including last-minute shift changes. We see changes in scheduling practices as central to improving the lives of low-wage service workers.

Policies that provide greater access to high-quality, affordable childcare could additionally make it easier for low-wage parents to arrange childcare for their children. Yet childcare providers would need to offer options to accommodate the unpredictable schedules of many service-sector workers to effectively support this group. National Paid Family leave would similarly benefit low-wage service workers, who often do not have access to paid sick leave through their employers (Schneider and Harknett 2020). Our hope is that these future policy changes will make the lives of low-wage workers and their families easier.

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The Effects of the Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on the Daily Lives of Low-Wage Workers and Their Families



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Emeryville, California's Fair Workweek Ordinance (FWO) aimed to reduce service workers' schedule unpredictability by requiring large retail and food service employers to provide advanced notice of schedules and to compensate workers for last-minute schedule changes. From ninety-six workers with young children (N = 78 in longitudinal analyses; 58 percent working in regulated businesses at baseline), this study gathered daily reports of work schedule unpredictability and worker and family well-being over three waves before and after FWO implementation. The FWO decreased working parents' schedule unpredictability and improved their well-being relative to those in similar jobs at unregulated establishments. The FWO also decreased parents' days worked while increasing hours per work day, leaving total hours roughly unchanged. Finally, parent well-being improved and declines in sleep difficulty were significant.

Keywords: service workers, unpredictable work schedules, family well-being, work policies

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, low-income families were grappling with a work landscape that had changed dramatically over the previous half century. Pressures of global-

ization and trade and automation led to job destruction in many industries, particularly those such as manufacturing that in the past led to stability for less-educated workers. In their

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place came service work, with lower wages and more unstable employment and hours (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2013). At the same time, earnings volatility increased across socioeconomic levels, most markedly among lower-income people (Gottschalk and Moffitt 2009; Dynan, Elmendorf, and Sichel 2012; Morduch and Schneider 2017). These characteristics of work left families with high and increasing levels of instability and unpredictability in work and earnings.

Even among stably employed service-sector workers, working parents faced additional forms of uncertainty. Managerial innovations have changed the daily operations of retail and food service firms such that service workers experience considerable daily uncertainty in both pay and hours. For example, the managerial tactic of on-call scheduling, in which employers facing variable customer demand minimize labor costs by requiring workers to be available for work but not compensating them for their availability if they are not needed, introduces significant unpredictability into workers' daily schedules. By increasing uncertainty, on-call scheduling practices as well as last-minute schedule changes and shift cancellations may increase parents' difficulties in balancing work and family demands. That type of schedule unpredictability is shown to be common among low-wage workers (Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly 2014; Schneider and Harknett 2019; Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021). Research has also established that, conditional on family fixed effects, days with schedule unpredictability lead to worse worker health than days in which work schedules go as expected (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021).

Partially in response to concerns about the harms to workers and families from schedule unpredictability, over the last ten years, governments at various levels across the United States have begun considering new regulations to limit unpredictability and compensate workers when it occurs. This article, based on data collected before the pandemic, builds on the emerging research on the effects of such policy changes by examining the effects of the 2017 Fair Workweek Ordinance (FWO) in Emeryville, California, on working parents' work schedules and worker and family well-being. Although the

context of low-wage work has shifted in the wake of the pandemic, understanding the challenges families had previously faced can help us understand how to restructure employment policies going forward.

We focus on a highly policy-relevant group of workers, specifically, parents with young children. In so doing, this study is the first to provide evidence of the effects of a local policy aimed at deterring work schedule unpredictability on working parents' schedules and on worker and family well-being. To do so, the study used a novel sample recruitment strategy with an innovative survey data collection protocol, daily surveys using short message service (SMS) text messages, over three waves of data collection. The study is also the first to investigate this type of policy change in Emeryville, adding to ongoing work in Seattle and Oregon to build the base of knowledge about how schedule stability laws affect working families.

We recruited nearly one hundred Emeryville hourly service workers with young children, a 1-in-6 sample of the universe of affected workers, using venue-time sampling, and surveyed them daily for thirty days over each of three study waves, all prior to the onset of the pandemic (from 2017 to 2018). This approach allowed us to identify how the work and family experiences of affected workers changed after the FWO, relative both to their experiences at baseline and to the experiences of workers who were otherwise similar but worked for Emeryville businesses that fell below the FWO's size thresholds.

WORK SCHEDULE UNPREDICTABILITY

Recent surveys of U.S. workers underscore the ubiquity of several types of schedule precarity, including schedule instability and unpredictability, among low-wage workers. For example, using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), researchers find that 41 percent of workers receive notice of their schedules only one week or less ahead of time (Lambert et al. 2014). Fluctuations in work hours are also substantial, almost 75 percent reporting fluctuations in the number of hours they worked per week over the previous month. Similarly, a survey of hourly workers in large retailers finds

that 60 percent of workers have variable hours, and that 60 percent also have less than two weeks' notice of their work schedules (Schneider and Harknett 2019). In Emeryville, the vast majority, 87 percent, of a representative sample of parents with young children reported some unanticipated work schedule change during a one-month period, 58 percent reporting at least one canceled shift (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021).

Estimates suggest that about one in six hourly workers has a young child (Schwartz et al. 2015), and research has established that schedule unpredictability is associated with worse worker and family well-being. Surveys of low-wage workers at a single point in time show that those with more unstable schedules report more psychological distress, worse sleep quality, and more parenting stress (Schneider and Harknett 2019). Unstable and unpredictable work schedules are also correlated with lower-quality parent-child interactions (Henly, Shaefer, and Waxman 2006) and increased work-life conflict (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue; Henly and Lambert 2014).

Research focusing on day-to-day variation in work schedules underscores the negative effects on workers and their families from unanticipated work schedule changes. In Emeryville, instances of work schedule unpredictability on any given day were related to worse daily mood and sleep quality for working parents (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021). Similarly, research shows that on days when parents are on call for work hours, they report increased daily negative mood (Bamberg et al. 2012, Dettmers et al. 2016) and worse daily sleep quality (Härmä et al. 2018; Sprajcer et al. 2018) than days when they are not on call.

Fewer studies focused on day-to-day variability in work schedules examine the effects of work schedule unpredictability on other aspects of daily family well-being beyond parent mood and sleep quality. However, related literature shows that daily parenting behaviors and child well-being were affected by daily nighttime work hours, such hours being related to less daily parent time spent together with adolescent children, and harsher interactions between parents and children in early childhood (Gassman-Pines 2011; Lee et al.

2017). Increased parental nighttime work also led to less positive daily child behavior among preschool-age children (Gassman-Pines 2011).

The findings from studies examining daily variation in work schedules are consistent with those from cross-sectional studies. Those examining daily variation, however, are able to use family fixed effects to control for all measured and unmeasured stable differences between families that might be related to both work schedule unpredictability and family well-being. Research focused on within-family variation from day to day cannot be biased by between-family differences, such as parental personality or motivation. Thus, taken together, the evidence suggests that schedule unpredictability not only is correlated with worse outcomes for workers and their families, but also actually causes worse well-being.

POLICIES TO REGULATE SERVICE WORKERS' SCHEDULES

Regulation and legal standards played a large role in shaping today's workplaces, such as in establishing minimum wages and workplace safety requirements, and led to current U.S. norms around schedules, such as the eight-hour workday. In recent years, however, labor-market regulation has paid little attention to schedules, despite dramatic shifts in the nature of scheduling practices. Whereas earlier schedule regulations focused on preventing employers from extracting too much labor from workers, many workers today instead fear unpredictability in work and the instability in earnings that results. In response to research demonstrating links between unpredictable work schedules and harm to workers, and in response to concerted labor organizing efforts (Ananat, Gassman-Pines, and Truskinovsky 2021), policymakers in localities and states have passed new regulations related to service workers' schedules. These policies represent an innovative shift for local labor regulation and have been passed in Emeryville, California, Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, and the state of Oregon. Each of the policies are unique but largely have the same general features. In particular, they require large employers to provide advanced notice of work schedules to their hourly workers

and to compensate workers if schedules subsequently change.

Emeryville's Fair Workweek Ordinance

Passed in early 2017, the Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance aims to stabilize schedules of hourly retail and food service workers with several provisions. First, hourly workers must receive two weeks' notice of their schedules. Second, workers have the right to decline previously unscheduled hours without retaliation if they are given less than two weeks' notice of hours. Third, workers are eligible for compensation for schedule changes that occur within two weeks and, in particular, for what is called stability pay of up to four hours or half of a shift paid when a shift is canceled, the amount of pay increasing the closer to the shift the cancellation is made. Fourth, the FWO gives workers the right to decline hours if they are within eleven hours of the previous shift, and workers are to be paid time and a half for shifts that fall within eleven hours of each other (so-called clopenings).

The provisions of the Emeryville FWO apply to large retail and food service employers, defined as more than fifty-five employees globally for retail employers and both more than fifty-five employees globally and twenty or more employees in Emeryville for food service employers. These cutoffs mean some arbitrariness in which firms are treated: the large international sandwich chain Subway, for example, has fewer than twenty Emeryville employees and is untreated, yet some local, single-location stores and restaurants have more than total fifty-five employees and are treated.

The Emeryville FWO was implemented in two phases. Beginning on July 1, 2017, the ordinance officially became effective and the city initiated a so-called soft roll-out. During the soft roll-out, the city investigated complaints but did not impose fines against employers who were not compliant. They also held employer- and employee-focused forums to educate stakeholders on the ordinance's provisions and created and disseminated written educational materials. Beginning on January 1, 2018, the city began full enforcement of the ordinance, including fines for noncompliance. Enforcement is primarily conducted using an

employee-driven complaint system. If employers are found to have violated the ordinance, they can be fined up to \$500 per violation and \$1,000 for each employee retaliated against.

Preliminary Evidence on Effects of Scheduling Policies

Emerging research from Seattle and Oregon sheds light on the effects of such policies on workers as well as on the role of managers in policy implementation. An evaluation of workers with a range of family statuses showed significant changes in workers' schedules after the Seattle policy was implemented. In particular, in the first year, the policy increased the share of workers receiving notice of their work schedule and the share receiving predictability pay when their hours were changed (Harknett, Schneider, and Irwin 2019). In the second year, additional benefits were observed, including a reduction in last-minute schedule changes and improved worker well-being as measured by increases in overall happiness and self-reported sleep quality (Harknett, Schneider, and Irwin 2021). Consistent with the Seattle findings, an evaluation of the early implementation of Oregon's statewide policy also revealed that the majority of workers received notice of their schedule (Loustaunau et al. 2020).

These results generally align with studies that focus on frontline managers as the conduits for policy implementation on behalf of employers. One year after policy implementation, managers in Seattle, for example, largely reported giving workers the required fourteen days' notice of their shifts and following rules around shift cancellations, suggesting that implementing some of the provisions was relatively straightforward (Haley and Lambert 2021). Employers struggled, however, with implementing other aspects of the law. Managers reported lower levels of compliance with rules around extending shifts and offering additional hours to current employees before hiring new ones. Similar patterns were reported by managers in Oregon (Loustaunau et al. 2020). In Oregon, an additional provision enabling managers to maintain voluntary waitlists facilitated frequent last-minute changes, making implementation easier for the employer but reducing the law's reach from employees' per-

spectives. Although the full set of costs and benefits to employers of these types of scheduling regulations is not yet known, related research suggests that employers could expect to see improvements in worker productivity and sales. A randomized experiment of a schedule stability intervention in retail stores showed such improvements in productivity and sales (Williams et al. 2018; Kesavan et al. 2022). Other research also suggests that improved work hours predictability leads to increased productivity (Hashemian, Ton, and Rahmandad 2020).

THIS STUDY

Because only a limited set of localities have passed scheduling regulations, evaluations of policy change in each locality are crucial to building the base of knowledge about how such regulations affect workers and families. This study addresses this need by providing evidence on the effects of the scheduling regulations implemented in Emeryville and by focusing on a highly policy-relevant population that has not been the focus of work investigating the effects of scheduling regulations in other jurisdictions, parents of young children.

Identification

Our main identification strategy is a difference-in-difference approach that compares changes over time in outcomes for workers in treatment jobs—that is, jobs at businesses that meet the size requirements to be regulated under Emeryville’s Fair Workweek Ordinance—to changes in outcomes for workers employed at similar jobs in businesses that fall short of the size requirements. Difference-in-difference designs rely on the assumption of parallel trends: the identifying assumption of our approach is that in the absence of the FWO’s implementation, the over-time changes in outcomes of workers in treatment and control jobs would have moved in parallel, and therefore any deviation in treated workers’ outcome trends from trends for workers in control jobs can be attributed to the effects of the FWO. Workers can and do hold multiple jobs; for outcomes that are defined at the worker-day level, such as sleep quality and interactions with the focal child, we define a worker as treated if they held at least one treatment job, even if they also held

one or more control jobs. In robustness checks, we defined treatment continuously, based on the share of hours worked at baseline in a treatment job; results are substantially similar (results available on request).

A threat to the parallel trends assumption would occur if workers endogenously switch jobs in response to the FWO—that is, if treated jobs become more (or less) desirable because of regulation, then workers with more advantages, such as those with better mental health, might switch sectors in response. Under those circumstances, a simple difference-in-differences strategy, such as the type conducted using repeated cross-sectional surveys to evaluate policy changes, would inaccurately conflate compositional changes in the treated workforce due to the FWO with related changes in individual worker outcomes. However, our panel structure avoids this problem by allowing us to combine the strengths of a difference-in-differences identification strategy with the complementary strengths of an individual fixed-effects approach. Because we follow the same workers over time, we are able to include worker fixed effects and identify only changes in individual worker outcomes over time.

Another potential threat to the parallel trends assumption would occur if regulated versus unregulated businesses faced different shocks during the evaluation period, beyond those induced by the FWO. The somewhat arbitrary and complex size cutoff for regulation—which does not coincide with thresholds for other regulations in Emeryville or with other meaningful market distinctions—makes it relatively unlikely, however, that treated and untreated firms will face different shocks (for example, to consumer demand or to credit access) on other dimensions over the implementation period.

METHOD

Individuals were eligible for this study if they worked in an hourly position in Emeryville and had a child between the ages of two and seven. Recruitment was done in May 2017, after the FWO passed but before it was enacted, using a venue-based sampling approach. For it, we secured from the City of Emeryville a complete list of retail and food service businesses in the

city. Using this list, we constructed a sampling frame of venue (business) day-time units (VDTs), randomly selected VDTs, and identified and recruited eligible individuals present in those VDTs (Muhib et al. 2001). We approached workers at each business, determined their eligibility, and asked those workers to direct us to any other currently present employee with a young child. Across VDTs, we entered each business in the area at least once, talking with more than six hundred workers, including at least one from each retail or food establishment in the city. We estimated, based on recent surveys of hourly retail and food service workers (Schwartz et al. 2015), that about 15 percent of the 3,743 Emeryville hourly retail and food service workers have a young child, suggesting an eligible population of 561 workers. Of these, we spoke with 170, an estimated 30 percent. We successfully recruited ninety-six, approximately 56 percent, of those we contacted. Our sample, although small in absolute size, reflects a substantial 1-in-6 sample of the universe of Emeryville retail and food workers with a young child. The initial sample was balanced across, first, retail and food firms that meet threshold local and global employment levels and are subject to regulation from the FWO and, second, otherwise similar control firms below those thresholds, which are exempt from the FWO.

Procedure and Analysis

At the beginning of the study, respondents were asked about their demographics, health and well-being, work history, each job's hourly wage and whether it is tipped, and reports on children. Then, every day for thirty consecutive days, respondents reported on that day's work and family experiences via text message. Daily survey completion rates among participants in the initial wave were high: 61 percent of participants completed 100 percent of the daily surveys and 89 percent completed the majority (more than fifteen), providing substantial within-person variation for analysis.

We contacted the sample again two times: in the fall of 2017 during the soft roll-out enforcement phase of FWO implementation (wave 2) and in the spring of 2018 during the full-enforcement phase (wave 3). Of the initial

ninety-six participants, seventy-six participated in wave 2 and seventy-one participated in wave 3. At each wave, we gathered information about changes in workers' jobs and job characteristics and again collected reports on the day's work and family experiences via SMS for thirty consecutive days. In wave 2, daily participation was higher than in wave 1. More precisely, 74 percent of participants completed 100 percent of the thirty daily surveys and 98 percent completed the majority of them. In wave 3, daily participation was higher than in wave 1 or wave 2, 80 percent completing all of the daily surveys and 99 percent completing the majority of them.

Participant compensation was structured to incentivize completion of all thirty daily surveys within each wave. In waves 1 and 2, participants received \$1 for each survey completed and were offered bonuses of \$7 and \$10 offered for each week with seven completed surveys, respectively. In wave 3, participants received \$1.20 for each survey completed and a bonus of \$12 for each week with seven completed surveys. An additional completion bonus for those who answered all thirty daily surveys was also offered: \$20 in wave 1, \$25 in wave 2, and \$30 in wave 3.

Our analysis sample included all individuals who participated in at least one of the post-FWO implementation follow-up waves ($N = 78$ parents; $N = \sim 6,000$ person-days for analysis). On average, the analysis sample provided eighty-six days of survey responses across the waves of data collection.

All survey materials were available in both English and Spanish. All aspects of the study were approved by the Duke University Institutional Review Board (protocol #2017-0053).

MEASURES

Daily schedule unpredictability was characterized along several dimensions. We asked a series of questions on as many as three jobs per respondent, based on the number of jobs reported at the initial interview for each wave. For each job, respondents were asked whether they worked that day, and if so when they started and stopped working and whether their hours worked were their originally scheduled hours. If not, they provided their originally scheduled

hours. Thus, for each day that a respondent worked a given job, *we measure whether their hours worked deviated from their originally scheduled hours at that job*. Further, if respondents did not work at a given job on a given day, they were asked whether they were originally scheduled to work. Thus, for each day we measure *whether a respondent had a shift cancelled at that job*. For both changes in work hours and shift cancellations, respondents were asked when they found out about the change: *less than one hour before the shift start time; more than one hour before the shift start time; on the day of the shift; the night before; or earlier*. Those who gave any response other than *earlier* about either a change in hours or a shift cancellation were coded as having a last-minute work schedule change at that job that day.

To find surprise shifts, we looked at responses to the question about originally scheduled hours. In that space, many respondents offered context, stating that they were not scheduled for that day, or stating that they were scheduled for a future day (for example, on Monday saying that they were scheduled to work Tuesday). We classified any of these cases as a surprise shift rather than a change in hours. Finally, surprise shifts, along with changes in hours and canceled shifts, were combined to create an additional measure that indicates whether the respondent had any kind of schedule change at that job on any given day.

Because information was provided about each job on each day, it was possible to examine work schedule unpredictability both by job and by day. For all outcomes discussed above, the unit of analysis was the person-job-day.

Daily family and child well-being outcomes were measured as follows. *Daily mood* was measured with an item that asked respondents how much of the time they felt fretful, angry, irritable, anxious, or depressed on a 3-point scale from *all of the time* to *none of the time*. This question was modified from a question with a four-week recall period from the Health Utilities Index (HUI) (Furlong et al. 2001; Horsman et al. 2003). The single item has been validated as a daily measure of negative mood as it is positively correlated with daily stressors, including daily food insecurity (Gassman-Pines and Schenck-Fontaine 2019) and daily work sched-

ule disruptions (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021). It increased substantially when COVID-19 restrictions were put into place (Gassman-Pines, Ananat, and Fitz-Henley II 2020). A dichotomous indicator was created equal to 1 for those who answered *Some of the time* or *All of the time* and 0 for those who answered *None of the time*.

Daily perceived negative sleep quality was measured with a single item used in other daily survey studies (George et al. 2019): “How well did you sleep last night?” Answers were on a 10-point scale from *Really badly* to *Really well*. We treat self-reported sleep quality as a measure of daily well-being, as perceived sleep quality is associated with daily affect (Bower et al. 2010). The sleep quality measure was reverse coded so that higher numbers indicated worse perceived sleep quality. This measure has been validated, given that it is correlated in expected directions with negative and positive daily mood, daily self-esteem (George et al. 2019), and daily work schedule disruptions, a daily stressor (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021).

Daily parent-child interactions was measured with two questions: “Did you punish your child today?” and “Did you lose your temper with your child today?” Dichotomous indicator variables were set equal to 1 if the parent responded *Yes* and 0 if the parent responded *No*. Both measures have been validated because they were both positively correlated with daily disruptions to school and care during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gassman-Pines et al. 2022).

Finally, *daily child behavior* was measured with two items. Daily child uncooperative behavior was measured with a single item: “How much was your child uncooperative today?” Answers on a 4-point scale included *Not at all*, *Just a little*, *Some*, and *A lot*. This question was modified from an item in the Inattention/Overactivity with Aggression Connors Rating Scale (Loney and Milich 1982), which asks parents to rate how much the adjective describes their child “at this time.” Daily child worry was measured with a single item: “How much did your child appear to be sad or worried today?” Answer choices on a 4-point scale included *Not at all*, *Just a little*, *Some*, and *A lot*. This question was modified from an item in the Preschool Behavior Questionnaire (Behar and Stringfield

1974), which asks parents to rate how much the child exhibits each behavior.

For both child behaviors, research has demonstrated the reliability and validity of multi-item scale versions adapted for measuring daily externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (Gassman-Pines 2015). In this study, single items were used to reduce respondent burden and attrition. Dichotomous indicator variables were set equal to 1 if the parent responded *Some* or *A lot* and 0 if *Not at all* or *Just a little*. These single-item measures have been validated because they were both positively correlated with daily disruptions to school and care during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gassman-Pines et al. 2022).

Job type (such as treatment versus control) was categorized as follows: for each of up to three jobs reported by a respondent, a job was coded as a treatment job if it was an hourly position at a venue listed by the City of Emeryville as regulated under the FWO. A job was coded as a control job if it was at a retail or food establishment in Emeryville listed by the city as not covered under the FWO, or if it was outside Emeryville or outside retail and food. Workers were categorized as in the treatment group if they had at least one treatment job; otherwise, they were classified as in the control group. All respondents had at least one hourly position in food service or retail in Emeryville, but respondents could also have additional jobs outside Emeryville, outside food or retail, or paid other than hourly.

Analytic Strategy

To evaluate the job-experience relationships of interest, that is, effects on schedule unpredictability, the following equation was used:

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Treat_{ij} * After_t + \beta_2 * After_t + \beta_3 * Treat_{ij} + \psi_{ij} + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{ijt}$$

for outcome Y for person i in job j on day t , where ψ represents a vector of individual-by-job fixed effects and τ is an indicator for whether day t falls on a weekend. Research shows that both work and home experiences differ dramatically between weekends and weekdays for workers in these types of jobs (Ryan, Bernstein, and Brown 2010; Shrout et al. 2010; Gassman-

Pines 2011; Gassman-Pines, Ananat, and Fitz-Henley II 2020; Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021). Because of idiosyncratic variation in individual start days, respondents experience different numbers of weekend days, which would, if we simply averaged across days within person and wave, lead to greatly increased noise in our estimates.

$Treat_{ij}$ is an indicator variable equal to one if job j was at a treated firm subject to FWO regulations, and zero otherwise. We measure job-experience outcomes (hours changes, surprise shifts, and canceled shift) at the person-job-day level, rather than person-day, because the variation in those outcomes exists at the person-job-day level. For example, we measure canceled shifts at the person-job-day level because a worker with two jobs might have had a shift canceled at one job on a given day, while on the same day their shift at another job was not canceled. Because we are interested in whether the policy affects scheduling practices such as this, and because the policy can in some cases affect one of a respondent's jobs but not the other, examining job outcomes separately is scientifically appropriate. Most respondents, however, have only one job (table 1), so this has only a minor effect on our sample size.

$After_t$ is an indicator variable equal to one if day t falls after implementation, and zero otherwise. The definition of the post-implementation period is somewhat ambiguous because Emeryville began implementation with a soft roll-out, as discussed. To accommodate this ambiguity, our main results include three approaches to defining pre and post: first, base estimates only on pre-implementation (wave 1) and full-enforcement (wave 3) data, with full-enforcement wave 3 observations defined as post-implementation; second, include all observations and define both soft roll-out and full-enforcement observations as post-implementation; and, three, include all observations and estimate:

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Treat_{ij} * Wave2_t + \beta_2 * Wave2_t + \beta_3 * Treat_{ij} * Wave3_t + \beta_4 * Wave3_t + \beta_5 * Treat_{ij} + \psi_i + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{ijt}$$

This specification allows us to estimate the effect of the FWO during the soft roll-out (rep-

Table 1. Sample Characteristics at Baseline

	Overall	No Treatment Job (C)	1+ Treatment Job (T)	Significant Difference Between T and C
Respondent characteristics				
Age (mean)	29.6	30.9	28.45	+
Female	86.2%	86.7%	85.4%	
Education (mean years)	11.7	12.2	11.4	
Twelve or more years of education	73.4%	76.9%	71.8%	
Age at first birth (mean)	23.5	23.8	23.1	
Ever married	28.2%	36.4%	20.0%	+
Race-ethnicity:				
Hispanic (of any race)	30.6%	31.8%	30.0%	
African American (non-Hispanic)	44.7%	43.2%	45.0%	
Caucasian (non-Hispanic)	8.2%	4.5%	12.5%	
Asian (non-Hispanic)	8.2%	11.4%	5.0%	
Native American (non-Hispanic)	1.2%	0.0%	2.5%	
Multiracial (non-Hispanic)	7.1%	9.1%	5.0%	
Household characteristics				
Number of children (mean)	1.80	1.84	1.77	
Respondent currently married or living with partner	58.3%	61.4%	56.4%	
Respondent lives with a parent	21.4%	23.3%	17.5%	
Focal child characteristics				
Age (mean)	3.6	4.0	3.2	
Female	54.4%	61.4%	44.1%	
Care arrangements				
enrolled in Head Start	35.4%	52.3%	11.8%	**
enrolled in daycare	50.0%	62.8%	32.4%	**
enrolled in afterschool	17.9%	20.9%	14.7%	
receives care from nonrespondent parent	46.8%	39.5%	55.9%	
receives care from other relative	40.0%	26.2%	59.4%	**
Total hours of nonrespondent care per week (mean)	38.2	30.0	47.8	**
Work situation				
at least one treatment job covered by FWO	57.7%	0.0%	100.0%	
# of jobs held by respondent (mean)	1.13	1.10	1.19	
Monthly household income (mean)	\$2,795	\$2,945	\$2,633	
Respondent mental health				
Often or always found it difficult to relax	26.3%	23.3%	31.3%	
Often or always felt downhearted or blue	10.5%	7.0%	15.6%	
Focal child mental health				
Often somewhat or very worried	21.5%	15.9%	29.4%	
Often somewhat or very unhappy, depressed, or tearful	10.1%	9.1%	11.8%	

Source: Authors' tabulations.

$N = 78$; + $p < .10$; ** $p < .01$.

resented by the estimated value of the coefficient β_1) separately from the effect of the FWO during full enforcement (represented by the estimated value of the coefficient β_3). We report the estimates for both effects in our main results.

Worker and family well-being (worker sleep quality and mood, parenting behaviors, and child behavior) exist only at the person-day level, evaluated using the equation

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Treat_i * After_t + \beta_2 * After_t + \beta_3 * Treat_i + \psi_i + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

for outcome Y for person i on day t . $Treat_i$ is equal to one if person i had at least one treatment job, and equal to zero otherwise. All other variables are as defined, and a parallel specification shift was made to estimate our third approach to modeling soft roll-out and full-enforcement effects.

In addition to fixed effects for each respondent, we cluster our standard errors at the person level to reflect that observations for a given respondent across jobs, days, and waves are not independent of one another. Clustering of standard errors relaxes the assumption that errors are independent and identically distributed and allows for errors within a cluster (in this case, a person) to instead be arbitrarily correlated. With seventy-eight respondents in our analytical sample, we have a large enough sample to estimate person-fixed effects, use our average of eighty-six observations per respondent to estimate standard errors clustered on person, and then to estimate effects of the policy.¹

RESULTS

Table 1 reports descriptive results at baseline for the analysis sample, overall and separately for the treatment and control groups (defined at wave 1). Respondents were, on average, thirty years old, had 11.7 years of education, and had their first child at age twenty-four. The majority, 86 percent, identified as female. Just under 30 percent had ever been married. They were

racially and ethnically diverse: 31 percent Hispanic (of any race); 45 percent non-Hispanic Black; 8 percent non-Hispanic White; 8 percent non-Hispanic Asian American; 1.2 percent non-Hispanic Native American; and 7.1 percent non-Hispanic multiracial. On average, they held 1.13 jobs. Respondents' household income averaged \$2,795 per month. The majority of respondents lived with at least one other adult: 58 percent lived with a romantic partner and 21 percent lived with a parent. On average, respondents had 1.8 children. Fifty-eight percent held at least one treatment job.

Financial strain was common among respondents. More than one in five reported generally not having enough money to make ends meet, with another half reporting generally having just enough. Nearly two-thirds of respondents doubted they could access funds to pay for a \$1,000 emergency. About the same number had to borrow from friends or family in the past year to make ends meet; 37 percent had applied for government assistance.

Not surprisingly, given all these stressors, respondents reported mental health challenges as well. More than one in four reported finding it "often or always" difficult to relax, and one in ten "often or always" felt downhearted or blue. Similarly, 21 percent of respondents reported that their focal child was often "somewhat or very" worried, and 10 percent that theirs was often "somewhat or very" unhappy, depressed, or tearful.

Across most characteristics, baseline characteristics were well balanced across treatment and control. Among twenty-four characteristics, two were significantly different between the groups, at the 10 percent level, consistent with chance. This balance suggests that, among hourly service workers with young children, selection is minimal on observables into treatment (larger firm) versus control (smaller firm) jobs.

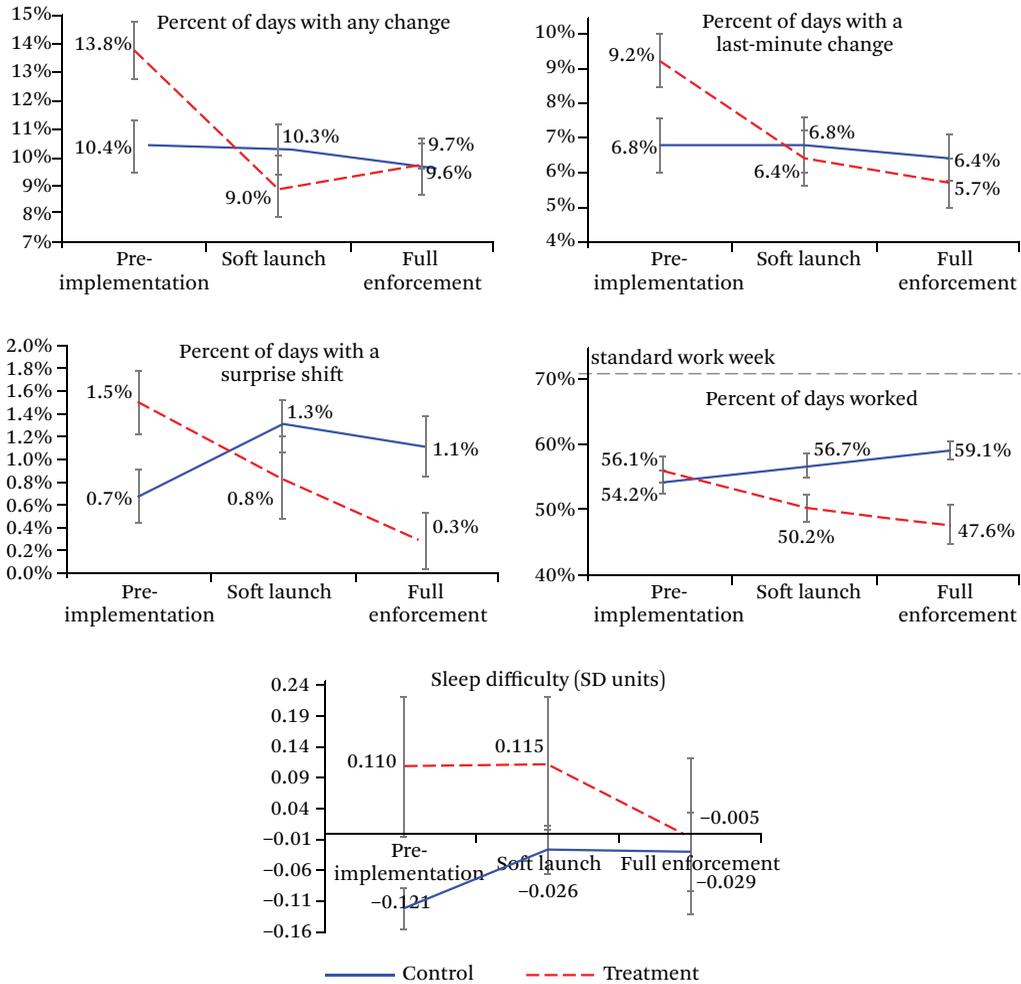
The exception to this balance was differences in childcare arrangements, those in treatment jobs less likely to access formal

1. Our highly racially diverse sample means, however, that we have a small number of respondents of each race-ethnic identity. Estimates with fixed effects and clustering, regardless of how large their total N , do not exhibit large-sample properties when they include only a small set of clusters (Angrist and Pischke 2009), meaning that our sample is unfortunately not adequate to estimate such models.

childcare and more likely to instead rely on relative care, and for more hours per week. We interpret these differences as a reflections of the jobs themselves rather than selection into them; as shown in figure 1, at baseline, treatment jobs were more unpredictable, which, as documented in other work (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue) makes use of formal childcare more challenging. However, even if the difference in childcare suggested imbalance on unobservables between the treatment and control groups, difference-in-difference designs do not require baseline equality between treatment and control; we instead rely on the much weaker assumption of parallel trends.

Table 2 summarizes all daily work and well-being outcomes across people, jobs, and waves. Because differences were significant in these measures across race, we report both overall means and means for non-Hispanic Blacks, non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Asian Americans, and Hispanics (of any race). Overall, some type of schedule change was made on nearly 11 percent of job-days, a significantly greater share of days with a change among Asian American respondents (17 percent) and a significantly lower share among White respondents (8 percent). The majority of schedule changes were last minute, with less than twenty-four hours' notice; White respondents were less likely to experience changes at the last

Figure 1. Effects of the Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on Work and Sleep Outcomes



Source: Author's tabulations.

Table 2. Daily Outcomes Across Waves

	Overall	Non-Hispanic Black	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Asian American	Hispanic (any race)
Person-job-days					
Share with any schedule change	0.106 (0.004)	0.105 (0.006)	0.078 (0.011)	0.173 (0.015)	0.100 (0.007)
Share with last-minute change	0.700 (0.003)	0.073 (0.005)	0.047 (0.009)	0.086 (0.011)	0.076 (0.006)
Share with a change in work hours	0.055 (0.003)	0.051 (0.004)	0.054 (0.009)	0.103 (0.012)	0.051 (0.005)
Share with a canceled shift	0.041 (0.002)	0.043 (0.004)	0.017 (0.005)	0.064 (0.009)	0.040 (0.005)
Share with a surprise shift	0.010 (0.001)	0.012 (0.002)	0.007 (0.003)	0.006 (0.003)	0.010 (0.002)
Share worked today	0.547 (0.006)	0.509 (0.009)	0.503 (0.021)	0.613 (0.019)	0.603 (0.011)
Mean hours worked on work days	7.12	7.15	7.39	6.73	7.17
standard deviation	2.01 (0.03)	2.02 (0.05)	1.62 (0.10)	2.00 (0.10)	1.99 (0.06)
Mean hours worked including nonwork days	3.83	3.49	3.70	4.08	4.11
standard deviation	3.84 (0.05)	3.84 (0.07)	3.87 (0.16)	3.64 (0.14)	3.85 (0.09)
<i>N</i>	6,945	3,107	575	671	1,875
Person-days					
Share parent had negative mood	0.422 (0.006)	0.423 (0.010)	0.598 (0.020)	0.447 (0.020)	0.361 (0.012)
Raw sleep difficulty (1-10 scale) (mean)	2.9	2.8	3.8	2.6	2.8
standard deviation	2.21 (0.03)	2.2 (0.04)	1.92 (0.08)	1.45 (0.06)	2.48 (0.06)
Share lost temper	0.092 (0.004)	0.097 (0.006)	0.078 (0.011)	0.113 (0.013)	0.093 (0.007)
Share punished child	0.084 (0.004)	0.071 (0.005)	0.134 (0.014)	0.108 (0.013)	0.077 (0.007)
Share child was uncooperative most or all of the day	0.139 (0.004)	0.159 (0.007)	0.137 (0.014)	0.187 (0.016)	0.099 (0.007)
Share child was worried most/all of the day	0.054 (0.003)	0.063 (0.005)	0.045 (0.009)	0.087 (0.011)	0.032 (0.004)
<i>N</i>	6,059	2,610	575	611	1,653

Source: Authors' tabulation.
Standard errors in parentheses.

minute (4.7 percent of days versus 7.0 percent for the sample overall).

Among the types of schedule changes, a change in work hours was the most common, occurring on 5.4 percent of days on average but

at almost twice that frequency, 10.3 percent, among Asian Americans. Surprise shifts were the least common type of schedule change, occurring on less than 1 percent of days with no differences across groups. Across all waves, re-

spondents worked on about 55 percent of job-days; Asian Americans and Hispanic respondents were more likely than average to work on a given day. The average shift length on any given work day was 7.1 hours, but was higher for Whites, at 7.4 hours, and lower for Asian Americans, at 6.7 hours.

Finally, in terms of family well-being outcomes, negative mood was fairly common, with respondents overall reporting negative mood on 42 percent of days. White respondents reported significantly more days with negative mood (60 percent), and Hispanic respondents reported fewer (32 percent). Sleep difficulties were greater among Whites and lower among Asian Americans; harsh parenting behaviors were higher among Whites and Asian Americans than among the population overall. Black and Asian American parents reported more days with child uncooperativeness and child worry than the sample overall did. Child behavior problems were relatively infrequent across all groups.

Impacts of the Emeryville FWO

Table 3 reports effects of the FWO on schedule disruption outcomes; given small sample sizes, we were not able to separately estimate effects of the FWO by race and ethnicity, as discussed. Across all models, results showed that the FWO led to a decrease in any schedule change overall, point estimates ranging from 2.5 to 5.5 percentage points, though not all reached conventional levels of statistical significance. Results from model 3 suggest that decreases in schedule changes occurred right away, in the soft roll-out phase of enforcement. The estimates from our third model are also presented in figure 1, which shows that treatment jobs had more frequent schedule changes than control jobs in the pre-implementation period, but that rates of schedule changes for the treatment jobs declined to the same level as the control jobs once the FWO was implemented. As shown in table 3 and figure 1, the same pattern of results was found for last-minute changes: the FWO reduced last-minute schedule changes. Again, although not all estimates reached conventional levels of statistical significance, the pattern of findings is consistent with a decline in last-minute changes following FWO implementa-

tion for the treatment jobs relative to the control jobs.

Among the types of schedule disruptions considered, surprise shifts were most strongly affected by the FWO, whereas point estimates for changes in work hours follow a similar, but not statistically significant, pattern (table 3). Shift cancellations were not affected by the FWO. As shown in figure 1, treatment jobs had more frequent surprise shifts in the pre-implementation period but rates of surprise shifts for the treatment jobs declined once the FWO was implemented and were lower than rates in control jobs by the full-enforcement phase.

Table 4 reports effects of the FWO on daily work and hours outcomes. Results show that the FWO decreased the likelihood of working in a treatment job on any given day. The effect size was substantial, with decreases in wave 3 of about 12 percentage points. As shown in figure 1, the likelihood of working in a treatment or control job on any given day were similar before the FWO was implemented. During the post-implementation period, the likelihood of working in a control job on any given day increased slightly and the likelihood of working in a treatment job decreased.

At the same time, however, results also showed that the FWO increased the length of shifts on work days. By the full-enforcement phase, the increase in work hours was about 0.4 hours, on average. When combining the two effects by considering average work hours including zeroes for nonwork days, the FWO did not significantly affect hours worked within a job. Workers do not appear to have increased work in nonregulated firms in response to changes in their treatment jobs, given that average work hours across all jobs were also not significantly affected by the FWO.

Finally, table 5 reports effects of the FWO on parent and child outcomes. Considering parental well-being, the FWO decreased sleep difficulty (defined by reverse-coding and then normalizing the sleep quality responses that had been gathered using a 1–10 scale), though not all estimates reach conventional levels of statistical significance. In wave 3, sleep difficulty decreased by nearly 0.28 standard deviations for those in treatment jobs, relative to those in

Table 3. Effect of Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on Daily Work Schedule Disruptions

	Wave 3 Only as Post	Waves 2 and 3 as Post	Waves 2 and 3 Unique Effects
Outcome: any schedule change			
Policy impact ^{a b}	-0.037 (0.029)	-.042 ⁺ (0.024)	-0.025 (0.028)
Wave 2 policy impact			-.055* (0.025)
Outcome: last-minute schedule change			
Policy impact ^{a b}	-0.032 (0.022)	-.034 ⁺ (0.019)	-0.029 (0.021)
Wave 2 policy impact			-.039 ⁺ (0.020)
Outcome: change in work hours			
Policy impact ^{a b}	-0.031 (.022)	-0.027 (.021)	-0.021 (.024)
Wave 2 policy impact			-0.031 (.022)
Outcome: canceled shift			
Policy impact ^{a b}	0.012 (.015)	0.002 (.011)	0.014 (.014)
Wave 2 policy impact			-0.008 (.012)
Outcome: surprise shift			
Policy impact ^{a b}	-.019* (.007)	-.017* (.007)	-.019* (.007)
Wave 2 policy impact			-.016* (.008)

Source: Authors' tabulation.

^aTreatment x wave 3 for models 1 and 3

^bTreatment x post (waves 2 and 3) for model 2

* $p < .10$; * $p < .05$

control jobs. As shown in figure 1, those in treatment jobs experienced more sleep difficulty than those in control jobs before implementation of the FWO, with sleep difficulty decreasing substantially during the full-enforcement phase. Effects on daily parental negative mood were also in the negative direction, but did not reach statistical significance. We did not find any effects of the FWO on either parenting behaviors or child behavior.

Robustness Checks

We conducted a variety of robustness checks (all results available on request). First, we ran

all models on a balanced panel of participants who participated in all waves, rather than only in at least one post-implementation wave. Results were substantially similar to those reported here. Second, we ran all models using initial treatment status at the person-level only. Results were in the same direction and of similar magnitude to those described here but were less precisely estimated. Third, we ran all models using a continuous definition of treatment status defined by the share of total work hours worked at a treatment job at baseline; results were substantially similar. Fourth, we ran models of hours worked dropping observa-

Table 4. Effect of Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on Daily Work and Work Hours

	Model 1: Wave 3 Only as Post	Model 2: Waves 2 and 3 as Post	Model 3: Waves 2 and 3 Unique Effects
Outcome: worked today			
Policy impact ^{a b}	-.128*	-.098*	-.118+
	(.064)	(.048)	(.058)
Wave 2 policy impact			-0.082
			(.052)
Outcome: hours worked on work days			
Policy impact ^{a b}	.509*	0.185	.393+
	(.250)	(.254)	(.233)
Wave 2 policy impact			0.009
			(.316)
Outcome: hours worked including nonworkdays			
Policy impact ^{a b}	-0.474	-0.433	-0.381
	(.515)	(.401)	(.479)
Wave 2 policy impact			-0.475
			(.437)
Outcome: hours worked across all jobs (including nonwork days)			
Policy impact ^{a b}	-0.698	0.441	-0.623
	(.743)	(.666)	(.734)
Wave 2 policy impact			1.372+
			(.818)

Source: Authors' tabulation.

^aTreatment x wave 3 for models 1 and 3

^bTreatment x post (waves 2 and 3) for model 2

+*p* < .10; **p* < .05

tions for which hours information was incomplete and had to be imputed; results were substantially similar. Fifth, we estimated all models for demographic subgroups defined by race, ethnicity, gender, and education; unfortunately, sample sizes became too small for interpretation.

DISCUSSION

Low-income families in the twenty-first century, especially those working in the service sector, faced high levels of unpredictability in work hours and pay even before the COVID-19 pandemic and its disruptions to the labor market. Anecdotally, the possibility is minimal that the pandemic and its related economic dislocations have improved predictability. Local regulations aimed at reducing unpredictability in work schedules are an innovation in labor pol-

icy that was gaining traction in many localities, and one state, in the United States before the pandemic, but little is known about such policies' effects and therefore whether predictability for low-income families will be improved by encouraging more localities to adopt them going forward. Emeryville is one of only a handful of localities that has passed such an ordinance. This article thus addresses a gap in the literature by being the first to examine the effect of Emeryville's Fair Workweek Ordinance on working parents and their families.

We find that the Fair Workweek Ordinance succeeded in reducing schedule unpredictability for workers with young children, particularly changes in start and end times of shifts and surprise shifts. The FWO also decreased the number of workdays significantly for treated workers in our sample, increased the

Table 5. Effect of Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on Daily Family Well-Being

	Wave 3 Only as Post	Waves 2 and 3 as Post	Waves 2 and 3 Unique Effects	Wave 3 Only as Post	Waves 2 and 3 as Post	Waves 2 and 3 Unique Effects
Parental well-being						
Policy impact ^{a,b}	-3.740 (5.397)	Outcome: parent negative mood -0.869 (4.172)	-3.839 (5.228)	-281* (0.137)	Outcome: parent sleep difficulty -0.196 (0.124)	-282* (0.136)
Wave 2 policy impact			1.738 (3.991)			-0.118 (0.142)
Parenting behaviors						
Policy impact ^{a,b}	-2.306 (1.976)	Outcome: lost temper -1.693 (1.684)	-2.564 (1.886)	2.507 (2.319)	Outcome: punished child 1.820 (1.846)	1.864 (2.269)
Wave 2 policy impact			-1.031 (2.216)			1.699 (1.999)
Child well-being						
Policy impact ^{a,b}	-1.328 (4.319)	Outcome: child uncooperative -2.168 (3.242)	-2.014 (4.161)	0.893 (2.383)	Outcome: child worried 0.087 (1.878)	0.211 (2.355)
Wave 2 policy impact			-2.539 (3.166)			-0.147 (1.811)

Source: Authors' tabulation.

^aTreatment x wave 3 for models 1 and 3

^bTreatment x post (waves 2 and 3) for model 2

* $p < .05$

hours worked on workdays, and left total work hours insignificantly affected. It is possible that these changes were concentrated among those, like our sample, with caregiving responsibilities, and represent a reassignment by employers of short, unpredictable, or otherwise difficult shifts from such workers to workers without caregiving responsibilities, for whom such marginal shifts are less costly. Future work should examine effects of schedule predictability legislation on different populations of workers.

The regulatory success of the FWO translated into some health benefits for workers in regulated jobs, in particular, improved sleep quality. Thus, even with a relatively small sample size, this article presents important initial evidence that this type of policy change can affect work schedule unpredictability among working parents, and by affecting individual workers rather than merely by shifting sector composition.

These findings are notable in the context of the remarkable changes in work in the last half century, characterized by increasing instability and unpredictability in employment, hours, and pay, especially for workers with less access to formal higher education. Historically, regulations played a large role in shaping today's workplaces, such as through minimum wage and antidiscrimination policy, and created the current U.S. norms around scheduling, including the eight-hour workday and the weekend. In recent years, however, regulation of the labor market has focused little attention on scheduling, even though the nature of work schedules has shifted dramatically. In particular, whereas the earlier generation of scheduling regulation concentrated on preventing employers from extracting too much labor from workers, many of today's workers fear instead too much variability and unpredictability in work and pay. That is, recent concerns focus on employers shifting the risk of variable customer demand from themselves to their employees, by giving workers neither hours nor pay when demand is unexpectedly low. Indeed, the Emeryville ordinance was passed in response to such concerns.

Our results show that the Emeryville FWO decreased schedule changes and, in particular,

last-minute schedule changes. These impacts are notable because these are the dimensions of schedule changes that our research indicates is particularly costly for working parents and their families, in terms of reduced parental well-being (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021). These findings are also consistent with those from an evaluation of Seattle's secure scheduling law that examined all workers (rather than focusing on parents) and found that Seattle's law also decreased last-minute schedule changes (Harknett, Schneider, and Irwin 2021). This convergent evidence suggests that local schedule regulations can be a fruitful way to address unpredictability in work schedules for low-income families. We observe these changes immediately after the law was passed, during the soft roll-out phase of enforcement. Although the city began fining noncompliant businesses only during full enforcement, our results suggest that simply having a law go into effect is a powerful change that leads at least some firms to comply, even if they are not at risk of being fined or penalized.

We also find that changing scheduling practices through this local ordinance leads employers in covered firms to reduce the number of shifts that employees work. However, the FWO leads to increased hours for parents on the days when they do work, leaving no significant changes in average hours worked. Given the fixed costs of working on a given day, including making childcare arrangements and commuting, it is plausible that on net these scheduling changes made workers better off. Consistent with this possibility, the net effect of the Emeryville FWO was to improve workers' well-being as proxied by subjective sleep quality. Working parents, in particular, are likely to place a high value on the stability of work schedules because stable work schedules make balancing the demands of work and family easier (Henly 2004; Henly and Lambert 2014).

The evidence related to the effects of scheduling regulation on worker sleep quality is notable for several reasons. First, these results are highly similar to those found in the Seattle evaluation; Seattle's ordinance also improved subjective sleep quality (Harknett, Schneider, and Irwin 2021). This converging evidence under-

scores the role for scheduling regulation in improving workers' sleep quality. Second, service-sector workers emphasize sleep disruptions and poor sleep as consequences of schedule unpredictability (Human Impact Partners and Center for Popular Democracy 2016), and our own work in Emeryville showed these effects on a daily level (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021). Reductions in work schedule unpredictability may improve sleep quality for a number of reasons, including by helping stabilize daily routines; facilitating circadian rhythms, which can be disrupted by unstable and unpredictable work schedules; and reducing job strain, each of which has been linked to sleep quality (Eriksen et al. 2008; Moss et al. 2015; Kecklund and Axelsson 2016). Other aspects of work life, such as commute time, may also play a role in exacerbating links between unpredictable work schedules and worse sleep quality, as longer commutes themselves are associated with worse sleep (Petrov et al. 2018); the shift to longer work hours on fewer days may have thus contributed to better sleep by reducing total commute time.

Finally, subjective sleep quality is also a marker of well-being and an important input into both physical and mental health (Bower et al. 2010). Worse sleep quality, for example, is related to both heart disease in the adult population (Cappuccio et al. 2011) and depression among parents (Park, Meltzer-Brody, and Stickgold 2013). Poor sleep quality is associated with more harsh parenting behavior (Kelly et al. 2021), and worse daily sleep quality has been found to exacerbate the effects of chronic and daily stressors on daily negative parental mood (da Estrela et al. 2018; Lillis et al. 2018; Mihaila and Hartley 2018). Thus, improvements in sleep quality may have the potential to lead to longer-term improvements in family functioning and child well-being, such as more positive parent-child interactions, reduced parental stress, and improved child behavior. Future research should investigate the mechanisms connecting unpredictable work schedules to worse sleep quality, the family well-being consequences of improved sleep quality, and moderation by other aspects of work, such as commute time. Although the small population of Emeryville means we were

underpowered to detect downstream effects on children's well-being even in a 1-in-6 probability sample, the implications are conceptually clear, as children are influenced and constrained by their parents' experiences in the labor market (Ananat et al. 2017). Links between parental well-being and child adjustment are well established (Cummings and Davies 1994; Cummings, Keller, and Davies 2005; Cummings, Davies, and Campbell 2020). Parents who are experiencing psychological distress tend to have more difficulty acting as sensitive caregivers, which can lead to increased behavior problems and other difficulties for children (Dix et al. 2004).

Our sample included only working parents with young children, a group that is particularly strongly affected by work schedule unpredictability but not representative of all workers in the treatment firms. It is possible, for example, that workers without young children (the majority of workers) may have experienced an increase in work shifts due to the Emeryville FWO if they were willing to add shifts on short notice. Our results are not meant to generalize to all Emeryville retail and fast-food employees, but only to employees with young children, a group of concern given both their vulnerability and their relevance to public policy.

Our methodological approach, pioneered in this study, has several strengths that enhance the contribution of this work. First, our use of a venue-time sampling strategy resulted in a sample that, although small, is representative of Emeryville workers in retail or food service with a child between the ages of two and seven. Given that such a population is unrostered and difficult to enumerate, implementing a representative sampling strategy was a major innovation. Second, we followed our sample longitudinally, which avoids bias from compositional changes in the workforces of firms after they become regulated. Our results therefore cannot be explained by, for example, covered businesses becoming more attractive to workers with better mental health after FWO implementation. Finally, work schedule disruptions were measured by daily surveys, which avoids recall bias, a problem we have shown in previous work to be sizable in reporting the fre-

quency of schedule changes (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021).

However, despite our ability to follow the same representative sample longitudinally, it is still possible that endogenous sector-switching in response to time-varying worker characteristics could be driving some results. For example, if employment in covered businesses became more attractive after implementation, and therefore workers who experienced changes (such as becoming newly partnered and therefore better able to manage childcare) that made them more desirable employees became more likely to switch into the covered sector than in the absence of the FWO, that could threaten the validity of our findings if the same changes also had direct impacts on worker well-being. The waves, however, were fielded only a few months apart, so any changes in employee characteristics, subsequent changes in employee desirability, and resulting changes in employment would have had to unfold quite quickly.

Additionally, our small overall sample size prevented us from examining subgroup effects. Understanding the heterogeneity in effects of schedule regulations for workers with different characteristics is important for future study, and will be facilitated by research with larger sample sizes. Finally, examining effects on employers was outside the scope of this study. Emerging literature would suggest that employers likely faced some challenges in implementing the law's provisions, but also that they may have benefited in terms of enhanced worker productivity and sales. Additional research should investigate effects on employers to understand the comprehensive impacts of scheduling regulations.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To summarize, the Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance reduced schedule unpredictability for working parents of young children, a group that has particular difficulty balancing work and family and is of policy concern. The FWO also decreased the number of work shifts, but increased shift length, leaving total work hours unchanged. It improved one measure of well-being, however: sleep quality. This is important initial evidence that secure scheduling policy

changes can affect work schedule unpredictability among working parents, and, ultimately, these parents' well-being.

Parents working in the service sector face a myriad of challenges in balancing their work and family demands, which have plausibly only worsened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Work schedule unpredictability is a particularly salient and ongoing challenge highlighted by workers, labor organizers, and social science scholars. Emeryville's law improved schedule predictability and well-being for working parents, suggesting that such laws are a potentially fruitful pathway to increasing predictability for low-income families.

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Families' Job Characteristics and Economic Self-Sufficiency: Differences by Income, Race-Ethnicity, and Nativity



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Policy debates about whether wages and benefits from work provide enough resources to achieve economic self-sufficiency rely on data for workers, not working families. Using data from the Current Population Survey, we find that almost two-thirds of families working full time earn enough to cover a basic family budget, but that less than a quarter of low-income families do. A typical low-income full-time working family with wages below a family budget would need to earn about \$11.00 more per hour to cover expenses. This wage gap is larger for black, Hispanic, and immigrant families. Receipt of employer-provided benefits varies—health insurance is more prevalent than pension plans—and both are less available to low-income families, and black, Hispanic, and immigrant working families. Findings suggest that without policies to decrease wage inequality and increase parents' access to jobs with higher wages and benefits, child opportunity gaps by income, race-ethnicity, and nativity will likely persist.

Keywords: wages, self-sufficiency, race-ethnicity, nativity, low-income

The notion that parents' jobs provide enough resources to attain economic self-sufficiency has broad appeal: it helped fuel welfare reform policies, including the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996 (Loprest and Nightingale 2018) and undergirds today's work-based safety net (Heinrich and Scholz 2009). Concerns that the resources provided by parents' low-wage jobs were inadequate to raise children led to calls to "make

work pay" (Ellwood 1988) and to enact universal work-family policies such as childcare (Wolfe 2002) and parental leave (Kammerman 2000). As Marcia Carlson, Christopher Wimer, and Ron Haskins (2022) outline in the introduction of this issue, in the twenty-five years since welfare reform, scholars continue to sound the alarm about poor job quality, particularly in the lower rungs of the labor market, due to declines in real wages (Howell and Kalleberg 2019) and

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employer-provided benefits (Schmitt, Gould, and Bivens 2018), and limited work-family policies that support families' work and caregiving (Boushey 2016).

Economic self-sufficiency is one of the goals of welfare reform, but the level of resources needed from parents' jobs to achieve it has not been defined officially. Policy debates about self-sufficiency generally rely on two resource thresholds: family poverty or family budget. For working families with children, a family budget consists of the estimated costs of basic needs (housing, food, medical care), work (transportation, childcare), and minimal household expenses. This article focuses on economic self-sufficiency defined as the ability to cover a basic family budget with labor-market earnings. We provide new estimates of families' job characteristics measured by wages, health insurance, and pension benefits, and assess whether family earnings are enough for self-sufficiency. This analysis is one of the first to estimate the family budget gap, that is, the difference between how the earnings from parents' full-time work stack up against the resources needed to meet a family budget. This analysis covers the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period, which establishes a baseline of job characteristics for families to be used in future studies that compare to the post-pandemic period.

It is well documented that racial inequities in compensation are a fixture in the U.S. labor market and reflect historical and current policy choices and continued structural racism (Deroncourt and Montialoux 2021). Declining real wages and lower access to employer-provided benefits have hit black, Hispanic, and recent immigrant workers the hardest (Howell and Kalleberg 2019; Orcutt Dulee and Dowhan 2008). The disparate negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic's economic and health crises on black, Hispanic, and immigrant families raised awareness that addressing racial equity will require more inclusive federal policies (Gonzalez et al. 2021; Lopez, Hart, and Katz 2021). To advance equity for all families and address underlying systemic racism, an executive order requires that federal agencies conduct equity assessments of systematic differences in program access and policy effectiveness by

race-ethnicity and other factors (White House 2021). To inform the development of equitable policy solutions, we estimate income, racial-ethnic, and nativity differences in families' resources from their jobs that cover basic family budgets and provide health insurance and pensions.

We make two contributions to the parental employment and economic self-sufficiency research and policy literatures. First, recent estimates of working families' wages and benefits are not available to policymakers. Our estimates add to previous studies by focusing on families rather than on individual workers (Howell and Kalleberg 2019), working parents (Adelstein and Peters 2019), or low-income families receiving welfare benefits and transitioning to work (Johnson and Corcoran 2003). Measuring job characteristics at the family level means the earnings and benefits of multiple earners are considered to be available to invest in children, rather than assuming, as many studies do, that families have only one earner (Cooper 2018). Second, most studies assess the quality of wages using a threshold of good versus bad wages or poverty-level wages for full-time workers. We use more than 450 family budgets that account for the number of earners and children in families and their state of residence to estimate whether parents' earnings from full-time work are enough to meet a basic family budget. This contribution is significant because it provides the field with a more accurate picture of whether working families with children earn enough to meet a basic budget that supports children's healthy development.

We find that more than one-third of working families do not earn enough from full-time, year-round work to cover a basic needs family budget, one-quarter do not have access to health insurance, and half do not have access to an employer-pension through their employers. Most low-income families working full time earn more than the official poverty line, but more than one in ten do not earn over the poverty threshold. If policymakers expect low-income families to reach economic self-sufficiency through full-time work alone, the results of our study are discouraging. More than three-quarters of low-income families do not earn enough to cover a basic needs family

budget, two-fifths do not have health insurance, and two-thirds do not have access to pension benefits. More than one-quarter of low-income families working full time cannot cover even half of a family budget. This study also confirms significant differences in wages and employer-provided benefits for working and low-income working families by race-ethnicity and nativity after controlling for job and family characteristics. Without policies to decrease wage inequality and increase parents' access to jobs with higher wages and benefits, child opportunity gaps by income, race-ethnicity, and nativity will likely persist.

WORKING FAMILIES' JOB CHARACTERISTICS

Though parents' jobs have financial (such as wages and benefits) and nonfinancial (such as schedule stability) factors that affect the health and well-being of all family members, wages are the primary resource that determines whether families achieve economic self-sufficiency. Yet over the past four decades, wages have not kept up with inflation for workers outside the top echelon of the wage distribution due to structural changes in the labor market and policy choices (Donovan and Bradley 2020; Mishel and Bivens 2021). Median hourly wages in 2020 (BLS 2021a) are effectively lower than the minimum wage in 1968, had wages kept up with inflation and productivity growth (Baker 2020). Declining or stagnant wages decrease purchasing power and lower the chances that workers in the middle and lower end of the wage distribution can attain economic self-sufficiency from earnings alone. At the same time, access to employer-provided benefits, such as health insurance and pensions, which can defray lower real wages and increasing health-care costs, have decreased over time for the median worker (Schmitt, Gould, and Bivens 2018). Access to employer-provided work-family benefits are even more rare. A minority of workers have access to subsidized childcare (11 percent) or paid family and medical leave (23 percent), and access to these benefits for low-wage workers is much lower (BLS 2021b). Without work-family benefits to supplement low wages and subsidize childcare costs or the cost of maternity and paternity

leave, families face greater challenges to meet a family budget and maintain stable employment around childbirth and when children are young (Hill et al. 2017).

Why should policymakers be concerned about declining resources provided by working families' jobs? Economic and psychological theories suggest that work has benefits and costs for children (Becker 1981; Repetti and Wang 2014). Parents' earnings and benefits directly benefit children by providing financial and health resources, whereas other job characteristics, such as work schedules, affect children through their parents' health and well-being or their childcare arrangements (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue). Exposure to lower earnings and benefits can decrease family economic resources and increase family stress, with detrimental consequences for families' and children's well-being (Parcel and Menaghan 1997). Higher earnings and benefits are expected to have the opposite effect and lead to more parental investments. A growing evidence base confirms that parents' low-quality jobs are negatively associated with parents' health and well-being and children's developmental outcomes, especially in low-income families (Heinrich 2014; McPherran Lombardi and Coley 2013).

Differences in Job Characteristics by Income, Race-Ethnicity, and Nativity

Significant racial-ethnic inequities in wages and employer-provided benefits are driven by structural features of the labor market, including increasing occupational segregation, rising nonstandard work arrangements, persistent racial-ethnic discrimination in hiring and promotion, and declining worker protections and enforcement (Shakespeare, Katz, and Loprest 2021). Housing, criminal justice, and education policies also contribute to lower wages for black and Hispanic workers by restricting access to good jobs and schools through high levels of residential segregation (Brown 2020), restrictions in paid employment and wages during and after incarceration (Smith and Simon 2020), and uneven school spending (Jackson, Johnson, and Persico 2016). Evidence is accumulating that policies that establish worker protections and minimum wages such as the

Fair Labor Standards Act can decrease black-white wage gaps (Derenoncourt and Montialoux 2021). Racial-ethnic wage gaps are much higher at the top of the wage distribution because black and Hispanic workers are more likely to be excluded from high-wage jobs (Donovan and Bradley 2020).

These policies and labor-market practices undergird the lower wages of black and Hispanic workers across the wage distribution (at the 10th, 50th, or 90th percentiles). Because black and Hispanic workers are overrepresented in the bottom half of the wage distribution, declining wages contribute to persistent and widening overall black-white and Hispanic-white wage gaps that vary by gender (Bayer and Charles 2018; Mora and Dávila 2018). The wage gaps for black and Hispanic workers relative to white workers are much higher at the top of the wage distribution. For example, the difference in hourly wages between Hispanic and white women in the 10th percentile of the wage distribution is \$2, but \$15 at the 90th percentile (Donovan and Bradley 2020). On average, immigrant working parents earn significantly lower wages (Earle et al. 2014).

Racial-ethnic gaps in employer-provided health insurance and employer-provided pension benefits are even larger than wage gaps and have increased over time (Kristal, Cohen, and Navot 2018). Coverage rates for black and Hispanic workers started off lower than white workers in 1980 and declined more sharply. By 2015, only 28 percent of Hispanic workers were covered by pensions, versus 44 percent of white workers. Relative to white working parents, black, Hispanic, and immigrant working parents have lower access to employer-provided health insurance and employer-provided pensions (Earle et al. 2014). Hispanic and immigrant working parents also have lower access to any type of paid leave and sick leave through their jobs (Adelstein and Peters 2019). Without employer-provided health insurance plans, work-family supports, and pensions, black, Hispanic, and immigrant families face more

resource constraints to invest in children and spend disproportionately more family income to pay for health insurance plans or to keep up with rising childcare costs.

Defining Family Budget and Wage Thresholds that Reach Economic Self-Sufficiency

A key question for policymakers is how declining wages and benefits affect whether families can be self-sufficient and have enough resources to support healthy child development. Economic self-sufficiency through work is an explicit goal included in the 1996 welfare reform legislation, but no threshold of family income or earnings has ever been officially defined in ensuing policies or regulations. Research on the origins and history of economic self-sufficiency point to two main requirements: employment and little to no receipt of public assistance (Daugherty and Barber 2001), which implicitly means that earnings is the main component of family resources needed for self-sufficiency. More recent definitions of self-sufficiency recognize that working families should have an above-poverty standard of living but do not specify what the standard should be (Heinrich and Scholz 2009).

In this article, we focus on economic self-sufficiency defined as the ability to cover a basic family budget with labor-market earnings. A family budget consists of the total annual cost of a standard set of family expenses estimated by the prices of goods and average expenditures. Two family budget measures are well known: the Economic Policy Institute's Family Budget Calculator (Gould, Mokhiber, and Bryant 2018) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Living Wage Calculator (Glasmeyer 2020).¹ Both measures include a comparable set of monthly costs of basic needs for working families with children, including the costs of childcare, medical care, transportation, taxes, and other expenses such as broadband or telephone and household supplies. These family budgets are adjusted based on the number of working adults and children in the

1. Other well-known family budget measures include the Center for Women's Welfare Self Sufficiency Standard (Manzer and Kucklick 2021) and the National Center for Children in Poverty's Basic Needs Budget Calculator (Alden Dinan 2009). Although these measures allow for greater diversity in family composition, they are not available for all states and are not up to date.

household and geographic variation in prices at the county level, which means hundreds of family budget thresholds. An embedded assumption in the estimation of annual family budgets is that working adults work full time and year round because expenses like childcare are calculated for full-time year-round care. The annual costs of family budgets are converted to family budget hourly wages by assuming full-time (forty hours per week) year-round work (fifty-two weeks per year).²

The estimates of basic family needs budgets and family budget wages from both sources are similar, though the Family Budget Calculator estimates are slightly lower.³ A key difference for our family-focused analysis is that the Family Budget Calculator is estimated for two family types (one working adult or two working adults), whereas the Living Wage Calculator includes an additional family type: two adults, with only one working. To account for a broader array of work and family arrangements, our analysis uses the Living Wage Calculator (family budget threshold). Within a state, family economic needs may vary across small geographic areas such as counties; however, we are unable to assign county-level family budget thresholds to families because the Current Population Survey does not identify families' county of residence. We therefore use state-level budget thresholds, which are unweighted averages aggregated up from county-level thresholds.

The Living Wage Calculator estimates that nationally a family budget wage in 2019 is \$25.46 for a single full-time working parent

with one child. For a family with two full-time working adults (a dual-earner family) and one child, the two earners would need to make a combined \$28.14. The average family budget wage for a family of three with one working adult and one nonworking adult (a single-earner family) is \$24.00—lower than a single working parent (\$25.46) and a dual-earner family (\$28.14) because it is assumed that the nonworker provides full-time childcare and the household has no out-of-pocket childcare expenses.⁴ Dual-earner families have to earn more combined wages to support two adults, but each parent can earn lower wages and still adhere to a family budget.

Although most of the labor force works full time, 17 percent of workers are employed part time (Dunn 2018). Calculating family budgets based on full-time work leaves out working parents who want to be working full time but are not offered more hours or who can only work part time for health or caregiving reasons. Part-time workers can be economically vulnerable because they are more likely to earn lower wages (Golden 2020) and less likely to have access to benefits (Bishow 2015). Although family budgets are predicated on full-time work, given the precariousness of part-time wages and benefits, we estimate the gaps between earning a family budget and access to benefits for all families working any combination of hours and weeks.

A more basic family budget is derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's poverty threshold, which is based only on food costs and basic expenses (the official poverty measure). The pov-

2. For example, at the national level the MIT Living Wage Calculator estimates that a total family budget for a two-parent two-child family working full time is \$68,808. To convert the family budget into hourly wages, the family budget amount is divided by 2,080 hours (40 hours by 52 weeks). Thus, a family budget hourly wage for a dual-earner family working full time year round is \$33.08, which is the total hourly wage that needs to be earned by two people.

3. For example, based on a family needs budget, the EPI Family Budget Calculator wage threshold for a two-parent two-child family working full time in a low-income area, Benson County, North Dakota is \$18.18 for each parent relative to the MIT living wage of \$18.69 for each parent in 2020. Similar patterns hold for San Francisco County, a high-income area.

4. The family budget wages needed to support a family vary by states due to different costs of living. For instance, a single full-time working parent with one child would need to earn \$21.14 in Mississippi and \$32.12 in Massachusetts. For a family with two full-time working adults and one child, the two earners would need to earn a combined \$23.76 in Mississippi and a combined \$34.72 in Massachusetts. Each state's family budget wage is the unweighted average of each county's family budget wage.

erty threshold for a family of three is \$21,330 and for a family of four is \$25,750 in 2019 (OASPE 2019). Although we calculate gaps in family budgets based on poverty thresholds, many policymakers, researchers, and agencies, including the Census Bureau, do not consider the poverty threshold as a measure of what families need to live on (Fremstad 2020; U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Indeed, most government programs serving low-income families set income eligibility requirements above the poverty line (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2019).

THIS STUDY

To help inform policy responses to declining wages and benefits available to support children, this study focuses on families and not individual workers. This approach estimates whether up to two adults in a family earn enough to cover a basic family budget. We estimate the extent to which two employer-provided benefits, health insurance, and pension plans are available to families.

We address five research questions: What proportion of working families with children earn enough to achieve economic self-sufficiency thresholds (poverty and family budget)? What proportion of a family budget is covered by labor-market earnings? How much more additional hourly wages are needed to cover a family budget? What proportion of working families with children have jobs that provide access to health insurance and pensions? What proportion of working families do not earn enough to attain a family budget and have no access to employer-provided benefits?

For each of these questions, we examine how the results vary for low-income families and by race-ethnicity and nativity. We also compare how the estimates of economic self-sufficiency and access to benefits differ for families with earners who work full time year round and all working families with any combination of hours and weeks worked.

METHODS

This study draws on the 2015–2019 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The annual ASEC sample size is about ninety-eight thou-

sand households, which includes an oversample of Hispanic households. To ensure adequate sample sizes by race-ethnicity and nativity, we pooled five years of cross-sectional data.

To estimate earnings and access to employer-provided health insurance and pensions for families with children, we use the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) unit, which includes all related family members living in the same household and assumes that all family members share resources. The SPM family unit is different from the household unit in the CPS ASEC because multiple SPM families can exist within the same household. This analysis restricts the sample to SPM family units where the head of the family unit is a parent and has at least one child (biological, stepchild, or adopted) under age eighteen. Because of small sample sizes, we excluded Native American, Alaskan Native, and other race respondents. We excluded families with non-working-age parents (outside the ages of eighteen through sixty-nine), unpaid family or self-employed workers, workers in noncivilian occupations, or cases with missing information on job outcomes or nativity.

The total universe of employed families with children working any combination of hours and weeks is 90,275. About 66 percent of families have only full-time full-year workers, 22 percent have a combination of full- and part-time workers, and 12 percent have only part-time or part-year workers. Because family budget thresholds assume that expenses like childcare are based on full-time work, our primary analytical sample includes families with only full-time year-round workers. This sample excludes dual-earner couples that have one full-time earner and one part-time earner. We define full-time work using the Bureau of Labor Statistics definitions of full-time (at least thirty-five hours) and full-year (fifty to fifty-two weeks) work (BLS 2020). The resulting analytical sample is 59,225 working families with full-time year-round workers.

To generate the sample of low-income working families, we further restrict the full sample of working families with children to SPM units where the total family resources was no more than two times the SPM family resources

threshold. The resulting sample is 39,781 low-income working families with children. The analytical sample for low-income families where all working adults worked full time and year round is 23,231.

Measures

Self-Sufficiency Thresholds and Access to Benefits. This analysis estimates earnings relative to self-sufficiency thresholds. We consider annual earnings for up to two workers within each family unit. For dual-earner families, family earnings are the sum of the annual earnings from parents or guardians and their spouses or partners. Earnings are measured in 2019 constant dollars. In the case of a single parent with no spouse or partner who lives with another working adult who is usually a relative (such as a grandparent or adult sibling), we include the earnings of the working parent and the working adult relative in family earnings.⁵ We also consider the earnings of another adult in single-earner couples when the spouse or partner is not working and the household includes adult working relatives.

We compare whether total annual family earnings are above two measures of economic self-sufficiency: the official poverty measure's income threshold and a family budget threshold. For each family, we estimate the ratio of total annual earnings to the poverty and family budget thresholds. We create a binary indicator to measure whether a family's earnings are equal or higher than each threshold or below the threshold and a variable showing the proportion of families that fall within each earnings bin (90 to 99 percent of the family budget, 80 to 89 percent, and so on).

For families that do not earn enough to cover a family budget, we estimate the budget wage gap, that is, the difference between family

wages and the family budget wage threshold. We estimate hourly wages by dividing annual earnings and annual work hours for each full-time worker in the family. The family wage is the sum of the hourly wages for each earner. We estimate the family budget wage thresholds by dividing the family budget threshold needed to cover expenses by the annual hours that families worked.⁶

We assume that children only have access to employer-provided benefits through their parents and guardians, and not through other working relatives who they live with. Similar to other studies that draw on the CPS, working families are coded as having health insurance if at least one working parent or working spouse or partner is the policyholder in an employer-provided plan. This measure is a take-up measure and thus could underestimate whether workers have access to employer-provided health insurance. Families' access to pensions is measured by whether working parents are offered employer- or union-provided pension plan.⁷ Dual-earner families are at an advantage because their chances of receiving benefits are double that of single-earner families. A limitation of the CPS is that it does not measure the quality of employer-provided benefits, which can vary widely by employers. Health insurance plans that charge high premiums or pension plans that require employee contributions may present access barriers to benefits even if they are offered. To capture the most economically vulnerable working families, we create a measure of the lowest quality jobs that do not include any access to family budget wages and employer-provided benefits.

Race-Ethnicity and Nativity. Our key stratifying variables are race-ethnicity and nativity. Race and ethnicity for each parent includes non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Asian or Pa-

5. Because family budget thresholds are estimated for a maximum of two working adults, wage contributions are capped at two adults. In single-earner families with one working parent, if the family includes more than two working adult relatives, we include the adult relative who worked the most hours and had higher wages.

6. This approach to calculating family budget wages modifies the MIT Living Wage Calculator's approach, which divides the family budget by 2,080 hours. Dividing the family budget by workers' actual annual hours accounts for variance in the number of hours of full-time work (for example, thirty-five hours a week versus forty hours a week) and provides a more accurate estimate of the wages that families need to earn to meet a family budget.

7. The CPS does not provide information about the type of pension plan available (defined benefit versus defined contribution).

cific Islander, non-Hispanic black, and Hispanic (of any race). For single-earner families, we define family race-ethnicity based on the full-time working parent.⁸ In dual-earner families with two full-time workers, race-ethnicity is measured by the parent who has the higher annual earnings. If both parents work full time and have the same annual earnings, the race-ethnicity of the family is defined based on the CPS designated head of the family. In dual-earner families with one full-time working parent and one other working adult (nonparent or guardian), the family's race-ethnicity is based on the parent.

Nativity is a binary indicator measuring whether any parent or spouse-partner in the family is an immigrant. Using the Bureau of Labor Statistics definition (BLS 2020), adults are considered to be immigrants if they were born outside the United States or territories such as Puerto Rico. If adults born outside the United States were a citizen at birth, we coded them as a nonimmigrant.

Empirical Model

First, we examine family budget earnings, wages, and benefits descriptively for full-time year-round working families and for the total population of families working any combination of hours and weeks. To confirm any identified racial-ethnic differences in job characteristics in the descriptive analysis, we then run multivariate models estimating differences by race-ethnicity and nativity controlling for other factors for full-time working families only. We estimate two logistic regression models for each of the four outcomes. The first model estimates family budget earnings and benefits for the sample of full-time full-year working families and the second model estimates the same outcomes for full-time full-year low-income working families. For full-time full-year working families that do not earn more than a family budget, we estimate a quantile regression model to test for significant racial-ethnic and nativity differences in the proportion of the

family budget covered by earnings (ranging from >0 to <100 percent). Quantile regression is preferable to ordinary least squares due to the left skewed distribution of earnings relative to a family budget.

Each model includes covariates that influence parents' earnings and benefits and vary by race-ethnicity and nativity. Family characteristics include the number of children and work and family composition, measured by single working parent, single-earner family, and dual-earner family. Because of a high correlation between each adult's job and human capital characteristics in dual-earner families, we include covariates based only on the parent who works more hours and has higher earnings. Job characteristics include occupation, industry, sector (public versus private), and firm size. Human capital and demographic characteristics include gender, highest level of education, age, and age squared. Local economic environment is measured by urbanicity and survey year, which account for national economic trends. All analyses use SPM-based sampling weights.

RESULTS

Our research questions focus on whether families' earnings from full-time work cover basic needs, what proportion of a family budget is covered by earnings, whether jobs provide access to benefits, and whether there are differences by income, race-ethnicity, and nativity status. Descriptive analyses show that wages from working full time cover minimum levels of basic needs, as measured by the official poverty line, for most working families (94 percent of all full-time working families and 87 percent of all full-time low-income working families). A lower proportion of full-time working families earn a family budget (65 percent of all working families and 23 percent of all full-time low-income working families). The degree to which families' wages fall short varies by income, race-ethnicity, and nativity. Black, Hispanic, and immigrant families (including all families and low-income families) have the lowest

8. For families with only part-time or part-year workers, race-ethnicity is assigned based on the parent with higher earnings. If both workers have the same earnings, race-ethnicity is defined based on the CPS designated head of the family. For dual earners with full-time and part-time workers, race-ethnicity is based on the full-time worker.

hourly wages and access to benefits, which highlights the need for equitable work-family policies that supplement low wages and benefits and reduce caregiving costs.

Table 1 shows that almost 65 percent of families working full time earn enough to meet a family budget and that an additional 10 percent of families are close to earning a family budget (could cover 80 to 99 percent of a family budget). The racial-ethnic differences in families working full time and earning less than a family budget are large. Only 48 percent of black and 41 percent of Hispanic families earn a family budget, versus 75 percent of white families and 77 percent of Asian. A 34-percentage point gap separates Hispanic and white families earning a family budget and a 27-percentage point gap separates black and white families. The 12-percentage point gap between nonimmigrant (68 percent) and immigrant (56 percent) families is smaller yet still significant.

The picture looks very different for low-income families. Table 2 shows that fewer than 25 percent of low-income families working full time earn enough to cover a family budget and most earn far less than is needed. Another 17 percent are relatively close to making the budget wage (80 to 99 percent). More than 25 percent earn less than half. The pattern of racial-ethnic differences is similar, but the magnitude is smaller relative to the total population of working families. Fewer than one in five low-income black families (16 percent) and low-income Hispanic families (16 percent) could cover a family budget versus the 30 percent of white families and 36 percent of Asian. A 14-percentage point gap separates both black and white families and Hispanic and white families. A much greater proportion of black and Hispanic families are further away from earning a family budget. About 35 percent of black and Hispanic families earn less than half of the income needed to cover family expenses. The difference between the proportion of low-income immigrant (24 percent) and nonimmigrant (22 percent) families is much smaller.

Policymakers are interested in how much wages would need to be raised or supplemented to attain family budget wages. Figure 1 presents the family budget wage gap—the ad-

ditional hourly wages that low-income full-time working families need to live within a family budget. The extent of additional wages needed to supplement wages from full-time work varies widely. Full-time low-income working families need between a little more than \$1.91 to more than \$23 per hour for self-sufficiency. The median low-income family would need to earn \$11.02 more hourly. The median low-income black family and Hispanic family need to earn \$12.30 and \$12.49, versus \$9.10 for low-income white families. The median low-income nonimmigrant family would need to earn an additional \$10.43 in hourly wages, versus \$11.93 for the median low-income immigrant family.

Results show that families have variable access to employer-provided benefits through full-time work. More families have employer-provided health insurance (75 percent for all families, 59 percent for low-income families) than pension benefits (50 percent for all families, 33 percent for low-income families). A full 31 percent of low-income families did not earn enough to cover a basic family budget and did not have access to any employer-provided benefits relative to 14 percent of all working families. These jobs, which do not pay family budget wages and provide no benefits to wage and salary employees for full-time work, are the most concerning in terms of providing adequate resources for families with children.

We find significant heterogeneity in the employer benefits of families working full time by race-ethnicity and nativity. Confirming other research studies, Hispanic families, low-income or not, have the least access to employer-provided benefits. Low-income Hispanic families have extremely limited access (48 percent have health insurance and 24 percent have pensions). Almost twice the number of low-income Hispanic families do not earn a family budget or have access to employer benefits (43 percent) than their white counterparts (24 percent) (see table 2). Immigrant working families have lower wages and less access to benefits than nonimmigrant families. Two in five low-income immigrant families have jobs that do not provide enough earnings to cover a family budget or employer-provided benefits. Although many families need access to public benefits to supplement these shortfalls in job

Table 1. Job Characteristics of Full-Time Full-Year Working Families

	Total	Race-Ethnicity					Nativity	
		Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Asian	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic	Non-immigrant	Immigrant	
Total sample (share)		58	8	13	21	73	27	
Family earnings greater than threshold (share)								
Poverty	94	97	97	91	89	96	91	
Family budget								
>=100 percent	65	75	77	48	41	68	56	
90-99 percent	5	4	3	6	6	5	5	
80-89 percent	5	4	4	5	7	4	5	
70-79 percent	5	4	3	6	8	4	6	
60-69 percent	5	3	3	7	8	4	6	
50-59 percent	5	3	3	7	9	4	6	
40-49 percent	5	3	3	8	8	4	6	
30-39 percent	4	2	2	7	7	3	5	
20-29 percent	2	1	1	4	4	2	3	
10-19 percent	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	
0-9 percent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Employer-provided benefits (share)								
Health insurance	75	82	80	71	59	79	66	
Pension	50	57	49	45	34	54	39	
Families with jobs without family supporting earnings and benefits (share)	14	8	9	18	30	10	23	
Sample size	59,225	37,081	4,202	6,078	11,864	44,748	14,477	

Source: Authors' calculations based on Current Population Survey, 2015-2019 (Flood et al. 2021).

Note: Shares may not total to 100 due to rounding.

Table 2. Job Characteristics of Full-Time Full-Year Low-Income Working Families

	Race-Ethnicity					Nativity		
	Total	Non-Hispanic		Non-Hispanic		Hispanic	Non-immigrant	
		White	Asian	Black	Hispanic		immigrant	Immigrant
Total sample (share)	87	42	7	18	33	64	36	84
Family earnings greater than threshold (share)								
Poverty	87	90	90	84	83	88	84	
Family budget								
>=100 percent	23	30	36	16	16	24	22	
90-99 percent	8	10	8	8	7	9	8	
80-89 percent	9	10	9	8	9	10	9	
70-79 percent	10	11	10	10	11	11	10	
60-69 percent	11	10	9	11	12	11	11	
50-59 percent	11	9	9	13	13	11	11	
40-49 percent	11	9	8	14	13	11	11	
30-39 percent	9	6	6	11	11	8	10	
20-29 percent	5	4	3	7	7	5	6	
10-19 percent	2	1	1	3	2	2	1	
0-9 percent	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	
Employer-provided benefits (share)								
Health insurance	59	67	64	62	48	65	50	
Pension	33	40	35	34	24	38	25	
Families with jobs without family supporting earnings and benefits (share)	31	24	25	29	43	26	41	
Sample size	23,231	10,763	1,421	3,444	7,603	15,408	7,823	

Source: Authors' calculations based on Current Population Survey, 2015-2019 (Flood et al. 2021).

Note: Low-income is defined as two times the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). Shares may not total to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 1. Additional Hourly Wages Needed by Low-Income Working Families to Earn a Family Budget at the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles



Source: Authors' calculations based on Current Population Survey, 2015–2019 (Flood et al. 2021).

Note: Wages presented in 2019 constant dollars. Estimates are for low-income, full-time, year-round working families who earn less than a family budget.

resources, low-income Hispanic and immigrant families are particularly in need because they disproportionately work for employers that do not offer benefits.

The number of families covering their budgets and having access to employer-provided benefits decreases in the context of the full sample of working families, both part-time and part-year working families. Table A.1 shows that the proportion decreases from 65 to 59 percent when part-time and part-year working families are included. The proportion of low-income families that earn enough to cover a family budget also decreases from 23 to 19 percent (table A.2). These results are consistent with the literature demonstrating that part-time work is associated with lower wages and benefits.

The purpose of these descriptive analyses is to identify differences in families' job characteristics and to document the need for work-family supports that could supplement wages

needed to earn a family budget and benefits. Research shows that family, human capital, and employment characteristics account for some of the variation in wages and benefits by race-ethnicity and nativity, though there remains unexplained variation generally attributed to structural factors and discrimination. Table A.3 confirms well-documented racial-ethnic and nativity differences in characteristics such as education, occupation, industry, public sector, and firm size that can help explain some of the differences. Having two earners reduces the wages that each family member needs to make and increases the likelihood of employer-provided benefits, whereas single-earner families face more economic risks if the working parent needs to take family leave or loses a job. Black, Hispanic, Asian, and immigrant working families are more likely to be single-earner families, and white and non-immigrant working families are more likely to have two earners.

Multivariate Results

Table A.4 presents the results of models for each of the four measures of earnings and benefits for all full-time and for full-time low-income working families. These models confirm the descriptive results that black, Hispanic, and immigrant families are significantly less likely to meet a family budget, be enrolled in employer-provided health insurance, be offered an employer-provided pension plan, or have any good job characteristics than white and nonimmigrant families. These patterns of racial-ethnic and nativity differences hold true in the total population of working families and low-income working families. Table A.5 also confirms the descriptive analysis that the median earnings of black, Hispanic, and immigrant families covered less of a family budget than those of white and nonimmigrant families. Racial-ethnic differences in the ratio of earnings to family budget thresholds are significant in both samples.

DISCUSSION

Policy debates about improving children's well-being by closing opportunity gaps and addressing racial-ethnic inequities in health and education outcomes often do not address the declining wages and benefits available from parents' jobs. To help bring parental job quality into these child policy deliberations, we estimate the resources that employment provides to a working family relative to two thresholds of economic self-sufficiency used in policy debates. We rate family earnings against a minimal standard of living, family poverty, and family budget, which includes the costs of basic needs such as housing and food and of work-related expenses such as transportation and childcare. We expand the research on the quality of wages and benefits by examining families rather than individual workers, using the family budget threshold as an indicator of economic self-sufficiency, and examining differences by income, race-ethnicity, and nativity.

Most families with children working full time earn wages over the official poverty line. This finding is not surprising given the decline in child poverty, which is largely attributed to increasing maternal employment (Chen and

Corak 2008). Still, more than one in ten low-income families who work full time earn poverty-level wages. Because the official poverty threshold is a statistical yardstick rather than a measure of family needs (U.S. Census Bureau 2021), we compare the resources from full-time employment with a family budget. Almost 65 percent of families earn enough and about 10 percent could cover 80 to 99 percent. For low-income families, the results are discouraging. Only 25 percent working full time earn enough for economic self-sufficiency; 18 percent could earn between 80 and 99 percent; and almost 25 percent earn less than 50 percent. This shortfall highlights that many low-income families cannot attain economic self-sufficiency, defined by covering the costs of basic needs, from full-time work alone. Instead, they need resources from other sources. If they do not, income-based child opportunity gaps will persist.

Similar to studies of individual workers, this study finds significant differences in full-time working families' compensation by race-ethnicity and nativity. More than half of black and Hispanic families working full time, versus a quarter of their white and Asian counterparts, do not earn enough to meet a family budget. Declining real wages, policy choices, and structural racism in the labor market have disproportionately harmed black and Hispanic working families and created significantly greater financial hurdles in supporting children. For low-income families, the pattern of racial-ethnic differences in family budget wages is similar, but the racial gaps are smaller. Immigrant families are also less likely to earn a family budget wage than their non-immigrant counterparts. These results underscore the need to consider race-ethnicity and immigrant status together to identify the most economically vulnerable groups for policy assistance.

This study pushes the field forward by taking a family-level approach to measuring wage quality and access to benefits. However, some of its limitations can be addressed in future research. First, like other studies of wage quality, we do not fully account for part-time and part-year work and how work hours affect gaps in family budget wages. Current measures of fam-

ily budgets assume full-time year-round work by at least one working parent, and costs such as childcare are not prorated for part-time work hours. Some low-wage workers have trouble getting enough hours to work full time, despite wanting to do so (Golden 2020). Other workers are limited to working part time because of family responsibilities or their own health issues (Dunn 2018). Assuming that all working families can cover a family budget through full-time work does not reflect the realities of some families' caregiving and health needs or low-wage sectors where involuntary part-time work is more prevalent. More research in establishing economic self-sufficiency standards for part-time and part-year workers is needed. Second, this study does not address within-state differences in the costs of living between counties or rural, suburban, and urban communities. Accounting for the geographic variation in the costs that make up family budget thresholds may reveal even larger racial-ethnic inequities, given that previous research has documented geographic and racial-ethnic inequities in costs of living, that is, housing and transportation costs (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2016). To more accurately estimate families' earnings sufficiency, future research should account for within-state differences. Third, given limitations in the questions asked about employer-provided benefits and work schedules in the Current Population Survey, this study focuses on employer-provided health insurance and pensions but does not measure the quality of these benefits. The CPS also excludes other job quality factors that affect resources available to children such as childcare benefits, paid leave, or schedule stability. To adequately monitor job quality, additional measures of employer-provided benefits and work schedules should be added to national surveys. Finally, our study does not address the diversity of immigrants' labor-market experiences and wages depending on race-ethnicity, country-of-origin, occupational enclave, or length of time in the United States (Hamilton 2019). Further study is needed to unpack the variation in job characteristics for families based on disaggregated categories of race-ethnicity and nativity.

Families face a significant gap between the costs of raising children and wages and bene-

fits that their employers provide. These gaps are particularly problematic for low-income families whose private safety nets, including family and friend networks, provide much smaller cash transfers to supplement low wages (Garfinkel and Pilkauskas 2016). To make ends meet, low-income families reduce expenses by using informal childcare or doubling up on housing, and by increasing family income by receiving help from local community groups, working informal jobs, or taking on debt (Abraham and Houseman 2019; Edin and Lein 1997; Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015; Seefeldt and Sandstrom 2015).

The social safety net provides income support and in-kind assistance that helps to cover the cost of basic expenses. Income support programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) that target low-income working families supplement low wages, reduce child poverty, and positively affect child health (National Academies 2019). However, not all low-income working families can access this support. Because of restrictive eligibility requirements based on immigration status and living arrangements, the EITC underserves some working families. It also excludes low-income immigrant working families with U.S. citizen children if one parent does not have a Social Security number (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021a, 2021b). Thus the EITC does not serve about 17 percent of U.S. citizen children in poverty because they live in families who file their taxes without a Social Security number (National Academies 2019). As Katherine Michelmore and Natasha Pilkauskas (2022, this issue) note, not all eligible families apply for the EITC, and black working families may have less access due to differences in family living arrangements, further exacerbating differential access to resources by race-ethnicity.

Other income and in-kind supports such as the Child Tax Credit and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) increase family income and offset food expenses. Similar to the EITC, both the CTC and SNAP significantly reduce child poverty but underserve immigrant families. Relative to the EITC, the CTC and SNAP do better at serving U.S. citizen children in immigrant families because child eligibility does not depend on parents' Social Secu-

rity numbers or immigration status. But changes included in a 2017 tax law made approximately one million immigrant children ineligible for the CTC because they have Individual Tax Identification Numbers rather than Social Security numbers (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021a). U.S. citizen children in immigrant families also have reduced access to SNAP because of categorical eligibility restrictions based on parents' immigration status, lower benefit amounts due to income deeming, and additional administrative burden often due to misunderstanding of rules by service agencies and families (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021b). These barriers to program participation based on immigration status disproportionately affect Hispanic children, since 54 percent live in immigrant families (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021a).

Across the income distribution, employers provide only limited work-family benefits such as childcare or paid family and medical leave, and Hispanic workers have much lower access (Bartel et al. 2019). Low-income working parents are less likely to be offered work-family benefits and may not earn enough to purchase childcare in the private market or have enough savings to take unpaid leave (Adelstein and Peters 2019). Two public work-family policies, childcare subsidies and paid family and medical leave, directly support parental employment and care for children, and offset low wages. Both also support healthy child development, although for childcare subsidies, positive effects depend on the quality of the care (Johnson, Martin, and Ryan 2014). Burgeoning research shows that paid family and medical leave programs and childcare subsidies reduce the high costs of unpaid leave and childcare, yet are not equally accessible for black, Hispanic, and immigrant families due to affordability constraints (Baldiga et al. 2018; Joshi et al. 2019), lower take-up rates (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021b; Rossin-Slater, Ruhm, and Waldfogel 2013), more limited knowledge about programs (Alvira-Hammond and Gennetian 2015; Goodman, Elser, and Dow 2020); eligibility rules (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021b; Joshi et al. 2020); and administrative burden like extensive application documentation, interim reporting, and benefit or leave reassessments (Adams and Matthews 2013; U.S. Department of Labor 1993).

Recent studies document racialized administrative burden in the childcare subsidy system for black, Hispanic, and immigrant families, including disparate treatment by subsidy caseworkers (Barnes and Henly 2018), limited translation of paperwork and websites (Hill, Gennetian, and Mendez 2018), and caseworkers' confusion about eligibility due to anti-immigrant policies (Barnes and Gennetian 2021). By addressing these access issues and making income and work-family support policies more inclusionary, the programs can be more equitable and more effective at serving all families.

In policy discussions about improving parents' jobs and work-family policies to support low-income families, it is becoming more difficult to ignore the dramatic changes in the racial-ethnic and family nativity composition of the U.S. child population. By race-ethnicity, the proportion of U.S. children who are Hispanic increased from about 6 percent in 1970 to 26 percent today. By family nativity, the proportion of U.S. children in immigrant families also rose from about 6 percent to 26 percent during the same period (National Academies 2019). Low-income Hispanic and immigrant families have the lowest job quality and the least access to work-family policies. The implication of these demographic changes is that a growing number of children are living in families with fewer resources to promote their well-being. As federal agencies that serve low-income children seek to meet the new requirements included in the Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity to document and design solutions to promote equitable policy access for underserved groups (White House 2021), estimating the magnitude of the racial-ethnic and nativity differences in job quality and access to work-family policies can help inform policy changes.

The gaps in each of these policy responses have become more consequential under the coronavirus pandemic because a high proportion of black, Hispanic, and immigrant workers are in frontline jobs and have disproportionately suffered related health and economic impacts. COVID-19 exacerbated and exposed inequities in working conditions of frontline workers, access to childcare, and paid leave.

Going forward, recovery and long-term policy responses providing income support, educational, and human capital opportunities should address these inequities. Expanding paid family and medical leave and childcare subsidy policies that lower the cost of taking temporary leave and the high cost of childcare can decrease the earnings needed to cover a family budget. It is essential not only to increase access through program funding, but also to follow policy principles that create inclusive eligibility rules, especially for children

in immigrant families (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021a), and to eliminate the administrative burden that prevents eligible families from accessing essential resources. Because the majority of low-income families and half of black and Hispanic full-time working families do not have the earnings that reach a basic family budget and have limited employer supports, these public policies are essential to ensure their well-being and to reduce inequities in child opportunity by race-ethnicity and nativity.

Table A.1. Job Characteristics of Working Families

	Race-Ethnicity					Nativity	
	Total	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Non-immigrant	Immigrant
		White	Asian	Black			
Total sample (share)		59	7	13	21	74	26
Family earnings greater than threshold (share)							
Poverty	90	93	94	81	83	90	87
Family budget	59	69	71	40	35	62	49
Employer-provided benefits (share)							
Health insurance	70	77	77	62	53	73	60
Pension	47	54	48	40	31	51	36
Families with jobs without family supporting earnings and benefits (share)	19	12	12	27	36	16	28
Sample size	90,275	57,008	5,750	9,239	18,278	68,692	21,583

Source: Authors' calculations based on Current Population Survey, 2015-2019 (Flood et al. 2021).

Note: Includes all families working any combination of work hours and weeks (full-time, full-year, part-time, and part-year).

Table A.2. Job Characteristics of Low-Income Working Families

	Race-Ethnicity					Nativity		
	Total	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Non-immigrant	Immigrant
		White	Asian	Black	Hispanic			
Total sample (share)		44	6	18	32	66	34	
Family earnings greater than threshold (share)								
Poverty	78	81	84	70	76	77	78	
Family budget	19	24	29	12	13	20	18	
Employer-provided benefits (share)								
Health insurance	52	59	58	51	42	56	45	
Pension	30	37	34	29	22	34	24	
Families with jobs without family supporting earnings and benefits (share)	39	31	31	41	50	35	47	
Sample size	39,781	19,256	2,258	5,819	12,448	27,030	12,751	

Source: Authors' calculations based on Current Population Survey, 2015-2019 (Flood et al. 2021).

Note: Includes all low-income families working any combination of work hours and weeks (full-time, full-year, part-time, and part-year). Low-income is defined as two times the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM).

Table A.3. Characteristics of Full-Time Working Families

	Race-Ethnicity				Nativity		
	Total	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Asian	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic	Non-immigrant	Immigrant
Female (share)	37	34	29	60	34	40	28
Age	40	41	42	39	39	40	41
Work and family composition (share)							
Single employed parent	19	16	7	43	19	22	10
Single-earner family	29	28	40	16	35	24	41
Dual-earner family	52	56	53	41	46	53	49
Geographic location (share)							
Rural	12	16	2	7	6	15	4
Central city	27	18	41	39	39	22	40
Suburban	49	50	51	44	46	48	49
City status unknown	13	16	6	10	9	15	7
Number of children (share)							
1	48	47	48	53	47	49	47
2	34	36	41	30	31	34	34
3+	17	17	11	17	22	17	19
Education (share)							
Less than high school	8	3	4	4	26	3	20
High school	23	21	14	26	31	23	23
Some college	16	15	7	23	15	18	9
Associate's degree	11	12	5	13	8	12	6
Bachelor degree and above	43	50	70	34	19	44	41
Average hours worked per week	43.5	44.3	42.8	42.2	42.5	43.8	42.8
Second earner average hours worked per week	41.5	41.8	41.5	41.3	40.5	41.7	40.9
More than one employer last year (share)	8	9	7	9	7	9	7

(continued)

Table A.3. (continued)

	Race-Ethnicity					Nativity		
	Total	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Non-immigrant	Immigrant
		White	Asian	Black	Black			
Occupation (share)								
Professional and specialty	26	28	45	25	12	26	25	
Management, business, and financial	21	25	21	14	12	22	16	
Technicians, sales technical and admin support	17	17	12	21	16	19	12	
Services	12	9	8	20	18	11	15	
Blue collar	24	21	14	19	39	21	30	
Agriculture	1	0	0	0	2	0	2	
Industry (share)								
Trade	11	11	10	9	11	11	10	
Manufacturing	14	15	15	10	14	14	15	
Services	9	7	9	8	13	8	11	
Professional and related services	33	33	41	42	25	34	31	
Finance, insurance, real estate	8	9	9	8	6	9	7	
Public administration	7	7	4	9	4	8	4	
Transportation and communications	9	8	9	10	8	8	9	
Agricultural, forestry and fishing, mining, construction	10	9	3	4	19	8	14	
Class of worker (share)								
Wage or salary, private	84	83	90	79	90	82	90	
Public worker	16	17	10	21	10	18	10	
Number of employees at firm (share)								
<10	9	8	9	6	15	8	13	
10 to 99	21	20	16	17	29	20	24	
100 to 499	15	15	13	13	14	15	13	
500 to 999	6	7	5	7	5	7	5	
1,000+	49	50	58	57	37	50	44	

Source: Authors' calculations based on Current Population Survey, 2015–2019 (Flood et al. 2021).

Note: All demographic, human capital, and work characteristics are measured for the target full-time working parent. Shares may not total to 100 due to rounding.

Table A.4. Logistic Regressions Predicting Job Characteristics for Full-time Working Families

	Family Budget		Employer Health Insurance		Employer Pension		No Family Budget Earnings or Employer Benefits	
	Total	Low-Income	Total	Low-Income	Total	Low-Income	Total	Low-Income
Race-ethnicity								
Non-Hispanic Asian	0.788*** (0.050)	0.828* (0.077)	0.987 (0.058)	0.995 (0.083)	0.868** (0.040)	0.892 (0.074)	1.109 (0.099)	0.999 (0.097)
Non-Hispanic Black	0.538*** (0.025)	0.644*** (0.046)	0.759*** (0.032)	0.884* (0.049)	0.754*** (0.027)	0.782*** (0.042)	1.384*** (0.083)	1.176** (0.074)
Hispanic	0.490*** (0.020)	0.585*** (0.038)	0.745*** (0.028)	0.836*** (0.042)	0.740*** (0.024)	0.754*** (0.039)	1.597*** (0.081)	1.312*** (0.073)
Immigrant family	0.653*** (0.027)	0.815*** (0.049)	0.682*** (0.025)	0.686*** (0.034)	0.722*** (0.022)	0.729*** (0.037)	1.736*** (0.087)	1.531*** (0.083)
Family work composition								
Single earner parent	0.0626*** (0.003)	0.0559*** (0.005)	0.450*** (0.016)	0.540*** (0.028)	0.474*** (0.015)	0.548*** (0.027)	4.914*** (0.254)	2.715*** (0.160)
Single earner family	0.169*** (0.006)	0.315*** (0.015)	0.429*** (0.013)	0.550*** (0.024)	0.479*** (0.012)	0.546*** (0.024)	3.824*** (0.170)	2.186*** (0.110)
Female	0.376*** (0.014)	0.481*** (0.027)	0.695*** (0.023)	0.713*** (0.035)	0.866*** (0.023)	0.842*** (0.040)	1.828*** (0.092)	1.427*** (0.080)
Age	1.227*** (0.015)	1.218*** (0.024)	1.131*** (0.012)	1.091*** (0.016)	1.091*** (0.010)	1.078*** (0.016)	0.882*** (0.013)	0.910*** (0.015)
Age-squared	0.998*** (0.000)	0.998*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	1.001*** (0.000)	1.001*** (0.000)
Number of children								
Two	0.642*** (0.021)	0.567*** (0.028)	1.017 (0.029)	1.021 (0.042)	1.058* (0.025)	1.090* (0.045)	1.140** (0.047)	1.097* (0.050)
Three plus	0.298***	0.301***	0.814***	0.815***	1.050	1.121*	1.599***	1.337***

(continued)

Table A.4. (continued)

	Family Budget		Employer Health Insurance		Employer Pension		No Family Budget Earnings or Employer Benefits	
	Total	Low-Income	Total	Low-Income	Total	Low-Income	Total	Low-Income
Education								
Less than high school	(0.506*** (0.029)	(0.018)	(0.600*** (0.028)	(0.037)	(0.635*** (0.031)	(0.053)	(0.075)	(0.606)
Some college	(1.447*** (0.060)	(0.048)	(1.207*** (0.046)	(0.034)	(1.157*** (0.039)	(0.060)	(0.097)	(0.824*** (0.045)
Associates	(1.959*** (0.094)	(0.078)	(1.419*** (0.064)	(0.059)	(1.289*** (0.049)	(0.075)	(0.035)	(0.618*** (0.044)
Bachelors	(4.771*** (0.207)	(0.118)	(1.805*** (0.071)	(0.092)	(1.531*** (0.050)	(0.083)	(0.020)	(0.513*** (0.035)
Geographic location								
Rural	(0.856*** (0.040)	(0.517*** (0.041)	(0.938 (0.040)	(0.942 (0.055)	(1.092* (0.040)	(0.971 (0.060)	(1.006 (0.058)	(1.088 (0.070)
Suburban	(1.213*** (0.042)	(1.203*** (0.061)	(1.046 (0.032)	(1.032 (0.042)	(1.101*** (0.029)	(1.045 (0.044)	(0.865*** (0.037)	(0.893* (0.041)
City unknown	(1.009 (0.048)	(0.805** (0.060)	(0.878** (0.037)	(0.903 (0.053)	(1.102** (0.039)	(1.015 (0.060)	(0.959 (0.057)	(1.040 (0.068)
Public employee	(0.621*** (0.033)	(0.778** (0.067)	(1.332*** (0.074)	(1.533*** (0.122)	(2.290*** (0.096)	(2.679*** (0.184)	(0.544*** (0.054)	(0.464*** (0.050)
Multiple employers	(0.960 (0.049)	(0.990 (0.077)	(0.863*** (0.037)	(0.781*** (0.047)	(0.835*** (0.032)	(0.779*** (0.049)	(1.289*** (0.075)	(1.275*** (0.082)
Firm size								
Less than 10	(0.415*** (0.021)	(0.417*** (0.032)	(0.241*** (0.010)	(0.247*** (0.013)	(0.330*** (0.013)	(0.246*** (0.017)	(5.141*** (0.260)	(4.731*** (0.264)
10 to 99 employees	(0.609*** (0.021)	(0.657*** (0.035)	(0.513*** (0.015)	(0.523*** (0.021)	(0.548*** (0.014)	(0.467*** (0.020)	(2.524*** (0.102)	(2.325*** (0.101)
Occupation								
Executive	(1.240*** (0.061)	(1.094 (0.088)	(0.896* (0.040)	(0.837* (0.065)	(0.976 (0.032)	(0.964 (0.069)	(1.078 (0.085)	(1.223* (0.115)
Technical	(0.404*** (0.020)	(0.451*** (0.036)	(0.746*** (0.036)	(0.788*** (0.056)	(0.831*** (0.032)	(0.856* (0.058)	(1.921*** (0.145)	(1.584*** (0.133)

Service	0.235*** (0.014)	0.297*** (0.025)	0.506*** (0.025)	0.494*** (0.034)	0.695*** (0.030)	0.697*** (0.048)	3.512*** (0.264)	2.584*** (0.211)
Blue-collar	0.335*** (0.018)	0.420*** (0.035)	0.651*** (0.033)	0.658*** (0.049)	0.877*** (0.035)	0.850* (0.061)	2.445*** (0.192)	1.922*** (0.167)
Farming	0.132*** (0.021)	0.146*** (0.035)	0.434*** (0.055)	0.461*** (0.072)	0.650*** (0.082)	0.630* (0.113)	4.735*** (0.765)	3.224*** (0.546)
Industry								
Trade	0.838*** (0.045)	0.835* (0.069)	0.878** (0.042)	0.842** (0.054)	1.021 (0.042)	1.000 (0.066)	1.215** (0.080)	1.138 (0.081)
Manufacturing	1.197*** (0.061)	1.056 (0.088)	1.423*** (0.069)	1.348*** (0.094)	1.197*** (0.045)	1.277*** (0.087)	0.695*** (0.049)	0.707*** (0.055)
Services	0.633*** (0.037)	0.647*** (0.056)	0.663*** (0.031)	0.684*** (0.040)	0.714*** (0.031)	0.644*** (0.043)	1.675*** (0.100)	1.580*** (0.099)
Finance	1.407*** (0.085)	1.346** (0.126)	1.281*** (0.074)	1.367*** (0.119)	1.122** (0.048)	1.358*** (0.109)	0.637*** (0.058)	0.646*** (0.066)
Public administration	2.897*** (0.233)	2.255*** (0.278)	1.240* (0.104)	1.858*** (0.257)	1.224** (0.076)	1.120 (0.119)	0.371*** (0.068)	0.421*** (0.086)
Utilities	1.821*** (0.113)	1.518*** (0.140)	1.039 (0.056)	0.878 (0.068)	1.183*** (0.051)	1.082 (0.081)	0.879 (0.070)	1.017 (0.089)
Agriculture	1.753*** (0.107)	1.400*** (0.129)	0.989 (0.051)	0.914 (0.067)	0.982 (0.044)	0.860 (0.067)	0.923 (0.065)	1.061 (0.083)
Survey year								
2016	1.120** (0.047)	1.177** (0.071)	0.936 (0.034)	0.915 (0.045)	0.828*** (0.026)	0.840*** (0.042)	1.035 (0.052)	1.082 (0.058)
2017	1.215*** (0.052)	1.041 (0.068)	0.952 (0.035)	0.884* (0.044)	0.763*** (0.024)	0.763*** (0.040)	0.979 (0.049)	1.063 (0.058)
2018	1.086* (0.045)	0.904 (0.059)	0.952 (0.035)	0.888* (0.045)	0.760*** (0.024)	0.799*** (0.042)	1.026 (0.052)	1.087 (0.060)
2019	1.428*** (0.066)	1.138 (0.082)	1.841*** (0.086)	2.494*** (0.172)	0.783*** (0.026)	0.929 (0.055)	0.340*** (0.026)	0.353*** (0.029)
Observations	59,225	23,231	59,225	23,231	59,225	23,231	59,225	23,231

Source: Authors' calculations based on Current Population Survey, 2015–2019 (Flood et al. 2021).

Note: Coefficients are presented as odds ratios. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Low-income is defined as two times the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM).

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table A.5. Quantile Regression Predicting Median Wages Relative to Family Budget Threshold for Full-Time Working Families

	All Working Families	Low-Income Working Families
Race and ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic Asian	-0.046*** (0.009)	-0.043*** (0.009)
Non-Hispanic black	-0.047*** (0.006)	-0.037*** (0.006)
Hispanic	-0.041*** (0.005)	-0.041*** (0.005)
Immigrant family	-0.024*** (0.005)	-0.020*** (0.005)
Family work composition		
Single earner parent	-0.238*** (0.005)	-0.243*** (0.005)
Single earner family	-0.166*** (0.005)	-0.153*** (0.005)
Female	-0.070*** (0.005)	-0.069*** (0.005)
Age	0.013*** (0.001)	0.011*** (0.001)
Age-squared	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
Number of children		
Two children	-0.052*** (0.004)	-0.054*** (0.004)
Three plus children	-0.112*** (0.005)	-0.121*** (0.005)
Education		
Less than high school	-0.046*** (0.006)	-0.045*** (0.006)
Some college	0.028*** (0.005)	0.029*** (0.005)
Associates	0.045*** (0.006)	0.044*** (0.006)
Bachelors	0.089*** (0.006)	0.087*** (0.006)
Geographic location		
Rural	0.002 (0.006)	-0.012* (0.006)
Suburban	0.017*** (0.004)	0.014** (0.004)
City unknown	0.003 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.006)
Public employee	0.018* (0.007)	0.015 (0.008)
Multiple employers	-0.019** (0.006)	-0.020** (0.006)

Table A.5. (continued)

	All Working Families	Low-Income Working Families
Firm size		
Less than 10	-0.069*** (0.005)	-0.069*** (0.005)
10 to 99 employees	-0.029*** (0.004)	-0.026*** (0.004)
Occupation		
Executive	0.016 (0.008)	0.021* (0.009)
Technical	-0.060*** (0.007)	-0.047*** (0.007)
Service	-0.120*** (0.007)	-0.103*** (0.007)
Blue-collar	-0.066*** (0.008)	-0.056*** (0.008)
Farming	-0.122*** (0.016)	-0.105*** (0.016)
Industry		
Trade	-0.027*** (0.007)	-0.025*** (0.007)
Manufacturing	0.022** (0.007)	0.022** (0.007)
Services	-0.030*** (0.006)	-0.027*** (0.006)
Finance	0.028** (0.009)	0.034*** (0.009)
Public administration	0.054*** (0.011)	0.056*** (0.012)
Utilities	0.037*** (0.008)	0.040*** (0.009)
Agriculture	0.033*** (0.008)	0.032*** (0.008)
Survey year		
2016	0.011* (0.005)	0.011* (0.005)
2017	0.020*** (0.005)	0.018*** (0.005)
2018	0.013* (0.005)	0.013* (0.005)
2019	0.054*** (0.006)	0.053*** (0.006)
Constant	0.656*** (0.029)	0.671*** (0.030)
Observations	20,192	17,806

Source: Authors' calculations based on Current Population Survey, 2015–2019 (Flood et al. 2021).

Note: Coefficients are presented as odds ratios. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Low-income is defined as two times the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM).

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

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How Can the Labor Market and Public Policy Respond?

“Disconnected” Men: Understanding Men’s Joint Roles as Workers and Romantic Partners



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A growing portion of men are disconnected from the formal labor market. Scholars have relied on men’s absence from the pool of “marriageable men” to explain declining marriage rates. Using interviews with sixty-one prime-age men who are out of the labor force, we examine the understanding men in nonmetropolitan areas have about how their workforce status conflicts with, comports with, or is unrelated to their role in a romantic union. Most do not judge their work status as making them “unmarriageable.” Some cite relationship obligations as conflicting with employment; others believe they fulfill the provider role through activities such as cash work and self-provisioning. Researchers should recognize the alternative ways men fulfill roles as resource providers, which we find go beyond formal employment. Men do value work, but they do not always define and prioritize work in the ways that have been the dominant focus of research.

Keywords: labor-force participation, romantic relationships, work, employment

More men are disconnected from roles in the worlds of work and family than in the past. In 1964, only 3 percent of prime-age men (twenty-five to fifty-four years old) with a high school degree or less did not participate in the U.S. labor force (were neither employed nor actively seeking employment); some fifty years later, the rate had quintupled, to about 15 percent (Breitwieser, Nunn, and Schambaugh 2018), the decline among less-educated men in nonmetro-

politan areas steeper than among their urban counterparts (Ziliak 2018). Labor-force participation rates declined during the Great Recession and never fully recovered, then steeply declined again during the COVID-19 pandemic (Guilford and Cambon 2020); the degree to which individuals will reenter the labor force remains to be seen.

Long-term changes in labor-force participation have taken place alongside deep changes

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in family life. A growing proportion of Americans are unmarried and cohabitation is not a stable partnership alternative to marriage in the United States (Cherlin 2009, 2014). As with labor-market trends, less-educated men and women have seen the most dramatic alterations to family life (Kreider and Ellis 2011), and the declines in marriage have been steeper in rural areas (Ziliak 2018). Taking these changes in work and family life together, a growing portion of American men are facing a fundamentally different social and economic world than previous generations did. Ariel Binder and John Bound (2019) argue that current explanations for the declining labor-force participation among prime-age men that focus on changing economic conditions or men’s health cannot comprehensively explain the change over time; they ask whether men’s changing family roles may be implicated.

In contemporary U.S. culture, men’s romantic partner roles include economic provider expectations that are distinct from the expectations for women (Parker and Stepler 2017). This suggests that gainful employment functions as a prerequisite for men entering a romantic union or to fulfilling the role expectations that come with it. Although more than half of prime-age men in the labor force are married, the same is true for only a third of those out of the labor force (Krause and Sawhill 2017). They may not operate under the same relational pressure to participate in the workforce, or they have more difficulty finding a partner because they are not employed. It may also signal a broader retraction from institutionally organized life in the realms of both work and romantic relationships. The cultural importance of formal employment in the United States has seen heightened visibility in policy debates about work requirements or disincentives connected to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) during the Donald Trump administration (Waikar 2020) and to the expansions of Unemployment Insurance and the Child Tax Credit during the Joe Biden administration (Jaffe and Boak 2021; Stein and Viser 2021). We need to know more about how men’s nonworking status coincides or conflicts with their understanding of expectations in romantic partnerships. Without knowing their per-

ceptions of the opportunities and constraints they face, we cannot understand their work and family decisions or their reactions to related policies, such as those that incentivize, support, or require formal employment.

To address shortcomings in research, we draw on in-depth interviews with sixty-one prime-age men who were out of the labor force in rural Wisconsin. We analyze men’s discussions of how their workforce dislocation relates to their understanding of role expectations in romantic unions. We focus on nonmetropolitan areas given the important variation in a wide array of factors between metro- and nonmetro areas. For example, nonmetropolitan areas have disproportionately been the site of the opioid crisis (Keyes et al. 2014) and have higher disability rates (Sage et al. 2019). They have lower growth rates among new businesses (Renski 2008), higher rates of residents being out of work or among the working poor (Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2018), and higher rates of informal work (Jensen, Tickamyer, and Slack 2019; see also Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018). Nonmetro residents also have more favorable attitudes toward marriage (Snyder 2011; Snyder, Brown, and Condo 2004). Recent research points to white, prime-age men in rural areas as particularly at risk for the negative social and psychological consequences of being out of the labor force (Graham and Pinto 2019). Men—but not women—in rural areas show an increased likelihood of mental health struggles in response to stressors compared to their metropolitan counterparts (Hoyt et al. 1997). Men’s experiences being outside the labor force, therefore, may be distinctive in nonmetropolitan settings.

BACKGROUND

Work—for its meaning, not just its income—is central to men’s identities (Cassar and Meier 2018; Morse and Weiss 1955; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010; Tausky 1969; but see Eberstadt 2016), for both those presently working and among the long-term unemployed (Kaplan and Tausky 1974). Tropes about the importance of work are so ingrained in American culture that even during the Great Recession as many experienced long-term joblessness, public discussions still often blamed those who were out

of work rather than the macroeconomic situation (Kenworthy and Owens 2011; Shear and Bararo 2012). The stigmatization of lacking employment seems even more pronounced in rural areas, where residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to fault a lack of adequate work effort as the reason for people's poverty (McCoy 2017).

Although both men and women who are out of the labor force report lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction than their employed counterparts, the differences are starkest for men (Krueger 2017; Mossakowski 2009). Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2017) point to declining labor force participation as one of the culprits behind rising rates of substance-use-related deaths and suicides (see also Pierce and Schott 2016). Numerous studies detail the crushing social, psychological, and physical consequences of job loss, especially when followed by a prolonged period of joblessness and in cultural contexts in which work is highly valued (Carmichael, Hulme, and Porcellato 2013; Oliffe and Han 2014; Rueda et al. 2012; Stavrova, Schlösser, and Fetchenhauer 2011; Strully 2009; Winkelmann 2009; Young 2012). Further, part of the pain of job loss, at least for some, comes from their consequent inability to fulfill their family economic contributor role (Lassus, Lopez, and Roscigno 2015; Newman 1988; Rao 2017; Sherman 2013). Without work, therefore, we should expect men to feel more of a loss associated with their labor-market position than their female counterparts because it so directly contradicts the gendered expectations that come with their family roles (Michniewicz, Vandellos, and Bosson 2014; see also Basbug and Sharone 2017).

Researchers often focus on formal work as a key area of boundary work, individual and cultural determinations of deservingness being made on the basis of formal employment status (Lamont 2000; Sherman 2009; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). A few scholars, however, delineate hierarchies among those working outside the formal labor market in urban areas. For example, Mitchell Duneier (1999) finds that

street vendors present themselves as superior to those who panhandle or engage in illegal (as opposed to their own illicit) activities. Teresa Gowan (2010) shows that those who scavenged recycling materials to sell found self-respect and feelings of productivity in these activities. It is an empirical question for romantic relationships whether the claim to a formal worker identity is what is key, or whether alternative, informal activities can similarly represent contributions toward personal identity and obligations in romantic unions.

Prime-Age Men

Prime age encompasses men's primary years for building a career and forming a family, absences from the labor force potentially having substantial implications in both realms. Previous studies of disconnected men have often focused on late adolescence and young adulthood, in which disconnection from school and employment can be seen as a phase in ongoing development, and one that a young person could grow out of (Roy and Jones 2014) or transition out of with assistance (Hoffman, Hemmeter, and Bailey 2017). However, disconnection at the start of adulthood could be a sign of what is to come across the life course, rather than a temporary low point (Mortimer et al. 2008; Settersten et al. 2014; Sum et al. 2014). Further, taking on family roles earlier in life may put men on more stable employment paths moving forward (Koenigsberg, Garet, and Rosenbaum 1994).

Unlike women, men who are out of the labor force and not in school are often disconnected from core social institutions, such as employers, marriage, and parenthood. Whereas 60 percent of prime-age women cite unpaid caregiving or taking care of the home as their reasons for being out of the labor force, a comparable proportion of prime-age men cite their own illness or disability (Krause and Sawhill 2017). Disconnected men are more likely than their female counterparts to live in a household in the bottom income quintile (Schanzenbach et al. 2017).¹ Although nine in ten prime-age men

1. Household statistics such as this may underestimate specific members' income and work effort; they also do not represent individuals who do not reside in households because they are unhoused, incarcerated, or highly transient.

who are out of the labor force have worked full time at some point in the past, only a quarter ever earned more than \$40,000 a year (Appelbaum 2014). In national surveys, prime-age men who are out of the labor force report a desire to work, but not necessarily in the job options available to them (Leonhardt 2014), meaning that they see their lack of employment as a less preferred option. Men who are disconnected from the workforce must manage the implications of this status in other arenas of life, as with current or potential romantic partners.

Work and Romantic Unions

The prevailing view among researchers is that men’s success as workers determines their ability to form partnerships and fulfill role expectations in those unions. William Julius Wilson and others laid out an argument—the “marriageable men” hypothesis—that maintains, most basically, that marriage rates decline when men are less economically attractive partners (Wilson 1987; Wilson and Neckerman 1987). Men’s economic prospects are predictive of marriage rates, but the strength of this association remains in question (Harknett and Kuperberg 2011; Lichter et al. 1992; Lichter, McLaughlin, and Ribar 2002; Mare and Winship 1991; Sassler and Goldscheider 2004; Schneider and Reich 2014). Nonetheless, researchers often rely on the idea underlying the marriageable men hypothesis—that being in a bad financial position means a man is not partner material—to help explain differences in marriage by race and socioeconomic status (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2019; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Smeeding, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2010; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). Daniel Schneider, Kristen Harknett, and Matthew Stimpson write that “The idea that men are expected to possess some threshold level of economic resources to be normatively marriageable is longstanding in demography” (2018, 792).

Wilson’s original argument focused on explaining marriage trends in urban areas; subsequent research has shown that the same relationship between economic factors and romantic relationships holds in nonmetropolitan areas (Betz and Snyder 2017) and for

nonmarital relationships (see, for example, Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Oppenheimer 2003; Schneider, McLanahan, and Harknett 2016; Zavodny 1999). Although studies have almost exclusively focused on these questions for opposite-sex couples, the egalitarian division of labor and finances common in same-sex relationships means that the need for men to find labor market success is similarly likely to be an issue in same-sex relationships (for further discussion, see Burns, Burgoyne, and Clark 2008). A related literature details the earnings and employment boost seen with the transition to fatherhood (Glauber 2008; Hodges and Budig 2010). Whether romantic unions and fatherhood are a “package deal” for men (Townsend 2010) or father-child bonds are primary and the relationship between parents secondary (Edin and Nelson 2013), parenthood may also create factors that shape men’s labor-force participation and the need for them to manage their economic status within their family relationships.

Recent research suggests a more nuanced understanding of the variation among men who have limited economic prospects. John Coglianesse (2018) distinguishes between prime-age men’s permanent versus temporary exits from the labor force, finding that an increase in temporary exits accounts for about one-third of the decline in labor-force participation among prime-age men since the 1970s; notably, about half of these temporary exits are by married or cohabiting men, whose partners’ rising earnings help explain their ability to detour out of the formal labor force. In contrast with a core tenet of the marriageable man hypothesis, then, family support may enable some men to withdraw from employment (but see Tüzemen 2018).

A key limitation of many of the studies predicting marriage from men’s economic status is that they focus on factors like wages or hours worked, which mathematically makes it appear as though a man having no formal earnings is functionally equivalent to having nothing to offer as a potential partner. However, we do not know enough about the practicalities and symbolism of being partially or entirely disconnected from the formal labor market in terms of how people evaluate themselves as current

or potential partners. That is, when it comes to romantic relationships, do all men similarly see themselves, or believe that they are seen, as “not partner material” if they are out of the formal labor market? How is disconnection from the workforce understood in ongoing unions? How might informal work or other avenues of resource generation matter?

Assessments of men as partners may go beyond the expectation of economic provision. For example, criminal records might affect both work and romantic opportunities given that low-income women report men’s criminal involvement as a factor in ending their relationships (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Reed 2005). However, Katie Derzon (2018) indicates that some women may not see a man’s history of incarceration as a disqualifying characteristic in evaluating a potential relationship partner; because some women have commonly seen family members and friends incarcerated, the experience is less stigmatized. These same women also reported expecting their children’s fathers to be involved in their lives, but not necessarily to be primary economic providers, especially if factors like a felony record limited their employment opportunities. That is, women expected efforts at involvement, not success economically, in assessing men’s fulfillment of their family roles. Indeed, formerly incarcerated men who are not searching for jobs often report being engaged in household and care work (Sugie 2014). Because these studies take place in urban settings, it remains an empirical question whether this will hold in nonmetro areas as well.

The present study investigates men’s views of themselves in regard to their financial and family roles in a nonmetropolitan setting; this allows us to see whether the perspectives the men express align more closely with the marriageable man perspective or an alternative, such as Derzon presents, in which efforts at fulfilling family roles, rather than formal financial or labor market accomplishments, are a key metric in assessing men’s potential for successful role fulfillment.

DATA AND METHODS

Our study draws on interviews with sixty-one “disconnected” men between the ages of

twenty-five through fifty-four from nonmetropolitan Wisconsin counties. Men in our study self-identify as neither having a formal job nor actively seeking a formal job. We do not use the Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of being “out of the labor force,” which specifies that workers have forgone job search activities for the past month, because previous research indicates that the distinction between this state and that of long-term unemployment can be fuzzy (Goldsmith, Veum, and Darity 1995; see also Coglianesi 2016, 2018; Elsby, Hobihh, and Şahin 2015). Generally, the respondents in our sample had not applied for formal jobs recently; a few described some half-hearted efforts, such as Garrett, thirty, who recalled during the interview that he had put in an application at a fast-food restaurant a few weeks back, prompting him to speculate that it would be a good idea for him to follow up with them.

We interviewed respondents between September 2018 and January 2020, finishing before the deep social and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Wisconsin, where the study was situated, labor-force participation rates among prime-age men varied widely across the state, nonmetro county rates ranging from 61 to 93 percent prior to data collection. Since the Great Recession, Wisconsin had seen ongoing job growth and a relatively low unemployment rate, yet income growth had been limited at the lower end of the distribution, unionization had declined substantially, and the middle class had shrunk (Dresser, Rogers, and Whittaker 2017; Kaeding 2017). Some factory owners in the state decried the lack of available workers and turned to automation as a result (Harlan 2017). Therefore, the men in our study were not often in a position of there being no jobs available whatsoever, as it was a tight labor market in the state; the characteristics and locations of the jobs available, however, often did not match what they were willing or able to do.

We recruited participants using a variety of methods, our primary techniques being distributing flyers and posting ads in the gigs section of Craigslist. We posted flyers in convenience stores, game stores, technical colleges, an aging and disability resource center, medical centers, a veteran’s service office, laundro-

mats, public libraries, grocery stores, Head Start centers, food pantries, smoke shops, and pain clinics. We did not gather data on the ways men learned about the study, but do know they came through a variety of recruitment channels based on what they said while chatting before or after interviews. All who responded to these posts were asked whether they self-identified as men, were age twenty-five to fifty-four, were not formally employed or actively seeking formal employment, and lived in one of Wisconsin's nonmetro counties. Respondents were offered \$40 for their time in participating in the study. We conducted semi-structured interviews in person, which typically lasted about 1.5 hours (from 52 minutes to 4 hours 17 minutes) and were recorded and transcribed, and wrote field notes to document events or tone from the interview that would not be captured in the transcripts. The interviews asked men about their experiences with education and parents' employment while growing up, their own work and family histories, their attitudes toward work, their views of their current work opportunities, abilities, and financial support options, how they spent their time and made ends meet, and what hopes and expectations they had for the future in terms of employment and family. In the results, all respondents are identified by pseudonyms.

For this study, we coded the interviews in two ways. First, we used deductive coding to document the presence or absence of the themes the interviews were intended to elicit, including coding all excerpts that pertained to men's perspectives on and experiences with romantic relationships. Second, we took the excerpts initially coded as having to do with men's reports about and perspectives on romantic relationships and coded them based on whether and how they were related to men's views of themselves as workers, employees, providers, contributors, and so on. Two researchers primarily did the coding, and the research team participated in regular coding reliability checks to ensure that codes were being applied similarly by both coders, any differences being discussed and reconciled. We then analyzed the patterns in how these roles of worker and romantic partner hung together to derive the set of groups presented here.

RESULTS

Drawing on our interview data, we describe patterns in disconnected men's views of how their work status relates to current or potential romantic partnerships; we identified four groups. The first group saw their work status in much the same way as anticipated by the marriageable man hypothesis, that is, as dominating their actual or potential success as a romantic partner. The second group presented their family care obligations as competing with the obligation to work, thus precluding their participation in the formal labor market. The third group saw work and partner roles as independent concerns. The final group maintained that they had alternative approaches to contributing economic resources to their households and thereby of fulfilling their obligations as romantic partners.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of our participants overall, as well as broken down by group. Given the small sample sizes, we do not focus on comparing demographic characteristics among groups. As in most qualitative work, our aim is not to have a representative sample; rather, we were aiming to see the types of experiences and perspectives that exist across members of this population. We therefore pay only limited attention to the numbers of study participants in each group because we are not trying to generalize from their proportions to a larger population. Also, we do not argue that these groups represent permanent perspectives men hold because men's life circumstances, as well as the views they hold, may change over time. For example, some cases display perspectives that partially fit with multiple analytic categories (for example, a man might contrast a previous and a current relationship); here we focus on their primary groupings, that is, those they describe as most relevant to their present circumstances. We therefore treat each group in the typology as providing useful analytic information about how men can understand their work and partnership obligations, which may be competing, mutually reinforcing, or unrelated at various points in their life course and in context-specific ways.

Similar to the overall makeup of the state of Wisconsin, the vast majority of the men in our

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (N = 61)

	Group 1: Work First (N = 15)		Group 2: Balancing Act (N = 5)		Group 3: Beside the Point (N = 19)		Group 4: My Way (N = 22)		Total (N = 61)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age (mean)		(38.5)		(38.6)		(41.3)		(41.4)		(40.4)
White	13	86.7	5	100.0	16	84.2	20	90.9	54	88.5
Currently in a Relationship	6	40.0	4	80.0	2	10.5	19	86.4	31	50.8
Marital status										
Currently married	0	0.0	2	40.0	0	0.0	7	31.8	9	14.8
Previously married	3	20.0	0	0.0	3	15.8	3	13.6	9	14.8
Has children	8	53.3	4	80.0	10	52.6	15	68.2	37	60.7
Coresides with Children	4	26.7	3	60.0	4	21.1	7	31.8	18	29.5
High school diploma or GED	12	80.0	4	80.0	16	84.2	15	68.2	47	77.0
Jail or prison	7	46.7	1	20.0	7	36.8	13	59.1	28	45.9
Cites substance use as obstacle to work	5	33.3	1	20.0	5	26.3	4	18.2	15	24.6
Disability benefits										
Receiving	1	6.7	1	20.0	5	26.3	4	18.2	11	18.0
Under review	3	20.0	0	0.0	3	15.8	2	9.1	8	13.1
SNAP receipt	6	40.0	3	60.0	12	63.2	13	59.1	34	55.7
Has health insurance	9	60.0	5	100.0	17	89.5	19	86.4	50	82.0

Source: Authors' calculations.

study are white (Kemp 2018). Slightly more than half are in relationships at the time of the interview, including a minority who are married (14.8 percent). Although a majority have children (60.7 percent), less than one-third live with a child presently (29.5 percent). Men in this study are highly reflective of the educational levels most associated with increases in labor-force nonparticipation—those with a high school degree and some college experience (Tuzeman 2018): more than three-quarters have at least a high school diploma or GED (General Educational Development) but few completed postsecondary education. A majority of men receive SNAP, in line with the estimate that 45 percent of households with disconnected men are in the bottom income quintile (Schanzenbach et al. 2017); 82 percent have some kind of health insurance. In line with estimates that one-third of disconnected prime-age men are disabled (Krueger 2017), 18 percent of participants receive some form of disability benefits, including Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income, and another 13.1 percent are awaiting disability case review; disability is not unique to any one of the four groups. Although we did not systematically collect incarceration histories, participants did include such experiences as they described their life history. At least 45.9 percent spent time in jail or prison, which is higher than estimates from a national poll of prime-aged nonworking men, in which one-third reported having a criminal record (Appelbaum 2014); incarceration history is distributed fairly evenly across the four groups. Because many men do not have clear “exit dates” from the labor force (Coglianese 2018), often cycling in and out, we do not report men’s length of time out of formal employment.

Group 1: Work First

About one-quarter of participants ($n = 15$) describe their dislocation from the formal labor force as undermining their ability to fulfill the role expectations of a romantic union. One way in which men in this group espouse the notion that they should be a provider in a relationship is by presenting themselves as outside the relationship eligibility pool. For example, Greg, a fifty-three-year-old man, has had only one seri-

ous relationship in his life, which he ended because he believed he could not fulfill his role. He says he has “something wrong,” explaining that it takes him a long time to understand and figure out new situations, new instructions, and so on. When he ended his relationship, he decided he could not pursue another because he saw the problem as lying in him, not with the partnership. Specifically, he cites his personal limitations as preventing him from earning an adequate income, which he believes one must have to be married and have children. “I knew I had something wrong. And I thought, ‘Well, don’t go having a bunch of kids. Don’t get married and pull some poor woman into this.’ . . . But if you want to get married, you got to have money, you can’t be saying, ‘Oh, I can’t afford diapers . . . or a laptop.’ I mean you got to be willing to spend some money if you’re going to get married. So, I kind of look at it like, I’m probably better off not to.”

Greg’s self-assessments demonstrate how men can internalize social norms regarding the qualifications for a committed relationship instead of simply being rejected by potential partners. Whereas Greg sees this as an enduring obstacle to future partnerships, others see their circumstances as not reflecting their personal value. Gene, forty, describes himself as unattractive to potential partners because of his current work status and lack of income, and says that, as a result, he has avoided dating. In doing so, he cites his anticipation that he would not be “well-received” on dating apps. Notably, he still believes that he has “a great deal to offer” a potential partner, but his fears about others’ judgments of his work and income status have meant he has not been willing to take the risk of putting himself out there. Unlike Greg, however, Gene does not seem reconciled to this situation, noting, “I haven’t been trying. And there’s a cost to that. It’s very lonely.”

Men who view their work status as an obstacle see participation in the work force as a necessary precondition to future romantic success. Garrett, thirty, explains: “Well, I’m not looking for females like I used to. I’m just trying to, you know, set things that I know I can accomplish. One thing at a time. Getting a job. And the next thing is getting a car and then af-

ter that it's going to be getting my own place. And then after that is when I might start looking for a woman, but right now that's how it's going to go: job, car, house, relationship, possibly family, marriage." In Garrett's description, we see that his outlook is fixed on a causal chain leading from work to romantic relationship success, as in the marriageable man hypothesis.

Men who convey the Work First perspective and are in serious relationships see their partner roles as troubled by their disconnection from the formal labor force. Some explain that they fail to meet their partners' expectations. For example, thirty-three-year-old Sam says his partner has a strong work ethic and is an independent person who can provide for herself and their two-year-old without him, should she choose to do so. Although he would like to pull his own weight, he says his struggles with anxiety prevent him from working. He describes the frustration he feels because his girlfriend continues "belittling and berating [me] because I don't have a job. 'You're not a real man.' You know, 'I could find a real man out there.'" Sam's girlfriend draws on a well-known norm about men's obligation to work, citing his failure to do so as diminishing his social status; Sam sees her as having weaponized this norm, alleging "they use it against us." Ironically, he says, his girlfriend's response to his lack of employment has exacerbated his anxiety, making it that much harder for him to seek work. Likewise, thirty-five-year-old Ian sees getting a formal job as necessary to stepping it up in his relationship. He and his girlfriend of three years are both addicted to heroin, and his use recently led to a three-month stint in jail. Neither of these factors, in Ian's mind, stand in the way of his relationship's future; his lack of a job, however, does.

I have finally realized after all these years, I really need a job, and the only way she's going to, you know, want to stay with somebody, you know, is if I have a job, you know. If somebody does not have work, you know, you're a loser, you're lazy, you know. . . . I want to show her that she can depend on me and not have to worry about, you know, oh, if we get a place together is she the only one going to be pay-

ing the bills, you know. I don't want her to have to worry about that because she always has.

In other cases, men express feelings of failing as romantic partners despite believing that their partners did not blame them for their work status. James, forty-one, a former assembly worker suffering from chronic back pain, lives with his long-time fiancée and her teenage daughter. He says, "Nobody gives me a hard time, except myself. I'm the hardest person on me." He explains that not working is a blow to his sense of self. "I've always worked. I've been working since I was nine, and having no money to support your family, and nothing to do all day, is pretty tough." From James, we hear how financially providing is only one piece of the puzzle. He expects to be approved for SSDI and thus to be able to contribute financially to the household again. But this would not make up for the fact that work itself—apart from offering financial resources—is something important to his sense of self. He suspects he will rely on SSDI for the long term, which leaves him feeling dejected. Work, he says, "is the only way to make money," implying that other ways of procuring resources are less valid. Perhaps his partner's acceptance of his circumstances has allowed their relationship to continue, unlike Greg and Gene, who have withdrawn from their search for romantic partners.

For each case in the Work First group, men see their status as disconnected workers as discrediting. They treat their work status as a reflection of their personal deficiencies or as a social marker that precludes opportunities for forming romantic relationships. Men who are already in relationships likewise describe their work status as diminishing their standing within the relationship, either in their partner's eyes or their own. Across these varied circumstances, the men in this first group share an understanding of the financial provider role, fulfilled through employment, as essential to their ability to take on and succeed in romantic partnerships. This perspective aligns with the expectations of research focused on the marriageable man hypothesis. Nonetheless, we see that only a minority of the men in our sample held this view.

Group 2: Balancing Act

The second group identified by our analysis represents a reprioritization of men’s obligations to be employed. In this group, men account for their disconnection from the labor force as deriving from obligations tied to their romantic unions. That is, the expectations of a romantic union involve responsibilities beyond providing income. Efforts to balance conflicting expectations may lead a man not to pursue formal employment. Although the number of cases that fit squarely with this pattern is small ($n = 5$), the category is analytically important because it captures how men negotiate multiple aspects of their partner roles and how those aspect may at times conflict with one another.

Caretaking responsibilities emerge as a deterrent to some men’s participation in the workforce. Most often, the duties that they cite involve caring for children, but some men also reference caring for aging parents or partners with health problems. Although these caretaking obligations might be argued to be associated with their roles as parents or adult children, negotiations over these expectations and who should fulfill them are presented as a matter taken up in men’s romantic unions. This made the distinction between partner and parent roles, for example, seem artificial, leading us to consider such expectations as part of men’s romantic partner “role-set” (Merton 1968), or the patterned expectations of conduct attached to a confluence of roles one has by virtue of interconnected social statuses, such as partner-parent. Further, for some men, romantic partner and parenting roles are tied together as part of a “package deal” (Townsend 2010).

Some men see their care obligations as taking precedence over their work obligations. Conrad is now married and in his mid-thirties. Several years back, he was working in restaurants when he and his then-girlfriend found out that they were having a child. He decided he needed to get more serious about the relationship and get his life together. “Holy crap. I got to buy a house. Got to hunker down; got to get ready. You know what I mean, like, the kid is coming.” Conrad’s response to parenthood followed the model of a traditional male-

breadwinner household organized around him working and his partner parenting. He recalls thinking of his then-girlfriend, “Kids are coming. You don’t have to work, honey.”

His thinking changed after their son was born with a debilitating medical condition that requires constant care. The demands of their child’s health issues are so great that Conrad feels he cannot regularly leave his wife alone to deal with extreme health events. He doesn’t trust that his wife or the ambulance service would respond fast enough to one of his son’s health crises, so Conrad wants to constantly be on standby to drive to the hospital. As a result, neither adult works outside the home, and the family makes ends meet with their son’s disability benefits and other public assistance resources. Conrad presents himself as displeased with, but reconciled to, this state of affairs. “I’m not applying for jobs because every job requires a specific set of time and dedication to that job. And at some point . . . I’m going to have to look at that job and say, ‘No, you do not control how much time I spend with my son. End of story,’ and walk away” (on the challenges of managing childcare without control over one’s work schedule, see Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue).

Conrad views himself as both the most able income earner and the most able caretaker in a crisis, and so also sees himself as making a moral choice between staying home to triage a health emergency and improving the living standards of his family by earning a better income. However, Conrad says his wife thinks that he should work but still “be close to the phone and get ready to react.” Conrad feels this would be a violation of his duty to her. “That’s where it’s just like, well, I have to help. Like, I can’t just shove this all on her.” Rather than breaching his duty to provide economically, Conrad sees himself as fulfilling a more pressing obligation to care for his son and, through that, his wife.

A man may attribute his ongoing disconnection from work to childcare responsibilities, even when a separate issue prompts his exit from the labor force. At thirty-six, Jonathon lives with his wife, their three children, his wife’s mother, his wife’s sister, the mother’s boyfriend, and the sister’s boyfriend in a two-

bedroom apartment. He has another child with a former partner but has little contact with them. He has been formally employed only once in his life and quit this job because of the wage garnishments for child support. “I know I’ve got to pay child support but, I don’t know, they ain’t got to take so much. They take so much then I just get down on myself and I just quit.”

Being out of the labor force has meant that Jonathon takes on much of the work of caring for his children while his wife is at work. He says he would like to find a job but is precluded from such opportunities by his caretaking role; his mother says she would watch the kids, but given their rocky history, he doesn’t feel he can trust her. His wife disagrees. “We always get into a lot of fights because I always bring up, you know, who’s going to watch the kids. . . . If I leave, I want to know they’re okay, you know, instead of going to work or something and getting a call.” In framing his concerns this way, Jonathan enacts the very caretaking role in question and demonstrates that, for him, the issue is whether he can balance this primary obligation with the expectation to work outside the home. His wife doesn’t share his assessment of their options, but because the couple treats her primary role as the earner and his as the caretaker, the situation has remained as it is, despite their disagreement (for further discussion of childcare challenges, see Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henly 2022, this issue).

Because of other resources available to their households, such as their partner’s labor or public benefits, the men in the Balancing Act group may have been able to make a choice to prioritize direct care over providing additional resources to their household. They construct their disconnection from the labor force as reflecting the moral ranking of the multiple obligations they see attached to their unions. Rather than as an abandonment of the obligation to work, they frame their separation from the formal workforce as deriving from their moral assessment of competing obligations. Indeed, it is the valuation of working outside the home that renders their care work a moral triumph (for more on men’s involvement with their children, see Rangel and Peck 2022, this issue).

Group 3: It’s Beside the Point

A third group consists of men who describe their disconnection from the workforce as unrelated to the expectations of a romantic union. The great majority of the nineteen men who fit this pattern were not in a relationship at the time of the interview. Some of these men may prefer to be alone, an increasingly common preference in contemporary U.S. society (Klinenberg 2013), meaning the romantic partner role is not a salient consideration for them; alternatively, they may simply see their economic success as “beside the point” and separate from their attractiveness as a partner. Although some men in group 1 are not currently partnered or pursuing relationships, their orientation is distinctive from those in group 3. Whereas men in group 1 saw their relationship status as troubled or precluded by their lack of formal employment, men in group 3 did not discuss their relationship status as contingent on their employment status, nor did they present improving their economic status as desirable in providing a path to partnership.

Henry, twenty-nine, questions the relevance of queries about his previous relationships during his interview, after describing a relationship in which he “probably didn’t carry my weight for the most part.” When the interviewer asks him more about how he and his partner managed their finances, he draws on the description of the research interview as focusing on men’s employment experiences, responding, “I don’t know. I prefer to not talk about the relationship. Do you feel like that has like something to do with this? Or are you just covering everything?” With this, Henry rejects the notion that his romantic unions were relevant terrain in a discussion of his employment experiences; notably, he does not similarly reject questions about his prior educational experiences or childhood.

Other men describe factors, such as chronic health conditions, that preclude them from both employment and romantic partner roles. For example, Craig, a forty-seven-year-old with considerable work experience, lives with kidney failure. A serious romantic relationship had ended before he was diagnosed, and he now sees his health as preventing him from even considering the possibilities of either

work or a partnership. Likewise, at forty-nine, Wes lives a reclusive life, spending most of his time in the apartment he shares with his son. Obesity limits how far he is able to travel and what he can do; other health complications, such as COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), also affect his lifestyle. Like Craig, he sees his health as impeding his search for both work and a romantic partner. Of the four groups, men in the Beside the Point group were the most likely to report currently receiving or being in the application process for disability benefits, suggesting these health factors may be key. For them, simultaneously lacking employment and romantic partners may be a “spurious correlation.”

Other men in the Beside the Point group, including those without addiction or health issues, similarly describe priorities other than pursuing a relationship. For example, Waylan, a man in his late thirties who had become jaded with office politics and decided to instead work short-term and cash jobs that provided a greater variety of experiences, describes his ambiguity toward seeking out a romantic union, “It’s not like a super—my priority, and I don’t, like, want to go out searching—I used to go out searching for it, I suppose, and it never turned out. It never worked out that great.” For Waylan and some other men who see their disconnection from formal labor as Beside the Point, any aspirations to work were not presented as a means of entering a romantic relationship, in contrast with the unattached men in the Work First group.

Men in the Beside the Point group share the perspective that romantic partnerships neither propel them to desire financial success nor are an option that greater financial success would earn them. Their worker and partner roles are not strongly integrated, as underlined by Henry’s confusion about us discussing both as part of the same interview. Other men in this group, such as Craig and Wes, faced health issues that precluded the practicality of either employment or a romantic union, making the connection between these roles “beside the point.”

Group 4: I Do It My Way

The final group breaks from dominant norms about men as employed providers within rela-

tionships. About one-third of the men in our study ($n = 22$) describe their efforts at gathering resources outside formal work as compatible with the role-set attached to romantic partnerships. For some men in our study, the absence of formal work does not mean an abandonment of the provider role, but a modification of it. As with the Work First perspective, these men convey an expectation that they are meant to contribute resources to their relationship; in contrast with the Work First view, however, they do not maintain that their contribution must be earned through formal employment.

Some men in the My Way group see their disability benefits as a way of credibly fulfilling their provider role in their relationships, despite the modest sum that these benefits provide. Kevin, fifty-one, is a former construction worker who has suffered multiple heart attacks and now relies on SSDI to make ends meet for himself and his partner. His partner is not working because of her own serious health problems, but her application for SSDI has been repeatedly denied. He presents himself as a provider, saying, “I do what I’ve got to do for me, nobody else. Oh, and my missus, I’ve got to take care of her too.” Kevin sees himself as fulfilling the sense of obligation he has successfully, even if the income he uses to cover their needs comes from government benefits rather than current employment.

Some men find other ways to secure resources and fulfill expectations as a provider in their relationships. Many such alternatives rely on informal economic activities, such as cash work, bartering, or self-provisioning (living off the land). For some, having a formal job matters less than the ability to assemble whatever work they can to get by. Tony, twenty-six, refers to this approach to life as “throwing my hands in.” Tony is not currently in a relationship; he lives with a woman he calls his sister because their families were so close when they were growing up. He has moved between formal and informal work throughout his adult life. Working in his sister’s driveway, he now fixes cars and trucks for cash or barter, as well as taking whatever other cash work crosses his path. Reflecting on his circumstances, he speaks about his approach to making ends meet and implies a moral triumph in it. “You put a rich person

on the street, they're just going to a [soup] kitchen for food versus you put someone like me on the street who's been there, done it, and all that, I'm more than likely going to survive. They're more likely to not. Because they're used to throwing money to solve their problems versus I'm used to throwing my hands in."

Tony's approach is not a rejection of formal employment but an openness to all forms of working to get by. He even sees in it a pathway to more normative advancement. He views fixing up and selling cars as a way to saving the money to purchase a bar with his sister. He calculates that for each car he sells, he will earn \$3,500, and so he will need to sell twenty cars to save up the money he needs to buy a bar in cash, loan-free, in their rural area. As part of his imagined future, Tony figures he will "find the right woman" and settle down. He expects a future partner will "keep me in line," by which he means that she should hold him accountable to their financial obligations: "Like if I just want to go cruise around and spend my fifty bucks and they say, 'No, we have bills.'" So, although Tony pictures a traditional future with himself as the primary earner in a relationship and a nagging wife to keep him in line, he also sees that as compatible with his untraditional approach to earning. Notably, he does not view his current pursuits as stigmatizing—an excusable transgression on his way to living right—but as representing qualities he sees as admirable, such as doing whatever it takes to put together a life.

In contrast to Tony and Kevin, other men describe relying on their partners to be the primary earners in their relationships. Most often, this is not a wholesale reliance on a partner to provide all the household's income, but rather an organization of labor and earning that has the man working in a supporting role, breaking from the traditional gendered division of labor.

Grant has spent most of his life doing hard, physical labor on farms and small-scale construction projects, usually being paid under the table. At fifty years old and now in his third marriage, his body is beginning to tire. He worries that he will need vocational training if he wants to continue to work, an educational venture that he is not sure he can successfully tackle. Both he and his wife view themselves as

workers, but Grant sees the flexibility of his work situation as relying on the stability of his partner's formal employment and income.

We don't really struggle financially. I'm out there all the time. Some people can do, and some people can't. I have the ability to do it. So, I mean, some weeks are, you know, \$1,500 weeks. You know, some weeks are only \$400 or \$500. But you put it away, and when you need it, you use it. So, I'm not a materialist person. So, it's not like I need material things to make me feel good. . . . Her attitude is the same way as mine. She is more of a worker. She works full time, so she kind of holds more of the stability of it together. Times have changed in that, that some relationships are like that. It don't bother her. It don't bother me. You know, so, it works for us.

Grant recognizes here that traditional norms would dictate that his wife see him as falling short, and he speaks to these norms, explaining that these cultural tropes about men's and women's roles in unions do not hold sway in his relationship. It is not that he is unaware of the ideas implicit in the marriageable man hypothesis, but instead that he rejects them and believes his wife does, too.

Like Grant, other men speak similarly about how their partners do not mind being the primary earner. Jesse, in his forties, was working at a diner when he met his future spouse. He later suffered a series of knee injuries that sharply curtailed his ability to work a formal job. He now sees himself as contributing through his domestic labor while his wife works full time. He explicitly describes what he understands his role to be and his confidence that his partner is satisfied with the roles they each take. "She doesn't mind being the sole income winner, you know, because she sees beyond that to what I do, you know, that I'm a valued homemaker, you know." Jesse's homemaker role involves an array of traditionally masculine activities (like fixing things around the house and salvaging) in addition to traditionally feminine ones (cooking), as well as more gender-neutral tasks, such as growing much of their food in their garden.

Some men describe relying on their partners' resources even when their partners are not working. This includes couples relying on a partner's disability benefits. For example, Will, age fifty-two, has worked as a carpenter in a mix of payroll and cash jobs. Issues with his back and arms have led him to file for disability; while he waits for his claim to be adjudicated, he has worked only cash jobs because formal work could derail his claim. In the meantime, he and his wife of thirty-three years get by on a mix of her disability benefits and any cash he brings in from informal work. Although he presents himself as his own boss, he and his wife jointly decide whether cash jobs are worth the financial risks. For example, he complains about a job for which he had to front the cost of materials, only to see the client refuse to reimburse him. Because he was working under the table, he was left without legal recourse, and so, based on his wife's recommendation, he says, "I don't take nothing big anymore." Making ends meet is a shared venture for the couple and navigating the ins and outs of their finances is part of rather than a threat to their union.

A romantic relationship may also function as the gateway to informal work or exchange. This is the case for Lenny, forty-three, who lives with his girlfriend, her parents, and her grandparents. In his earlier life, Lenny describes having a well-paying job he enjoyed, a wife and three children, a boat, and all the trappings of a happy American life. His divorce, he says, stripped him of this dream. After a period of decline, he found himself without a job, in need of a place to stay, and behind on child support payments. His girlfriend's parents offered him room and board. In exchange, he does work around the house, which varies widely, from patching the roof to taking care of their animals. His relationship, then, gives him access to an informal exchange arrangement. As he sees it, "Right now, my girlfriend's family's pretty much helping me out, otherwise I'd be screwed, you know? I have nowhere to live, and I have nowhere to eat, you know? But I help them out. I do a lot of work around the place if they need something done." Lenny does not describe this as a permanent situation but also does not see it as threatening his relationship.

For him, the reciprocal nature of the arrangement offers some dignity.

Other men in the My Way group take a more extreme turn away from the formal economy and mainstream society. For example, Donny, a man in his mid-thirties with little formal work experience, sees himself and his girlfriend as modern homesteaders. They live in a trailer parked next to his parents' house in a remote, wooded area. From gardening, bow hunting, trapping, and bartering, they are self-reliant, he says. Donny describes his partner, whom he met while living in a homeless community, as sharing his vision for a life off the grid.

Although Donny is more extreme in distancing himself from mainstream society, we see across the men in the My Way group a greater willingness to depart from dominant norms around work and romantic partner roles than we see from the men in the Work First group. As is true for many of the men in the My Way group, a romantic relationship is the locus of resource provision and exchange for the couple. For men who see their work and partnerships as being conducted "my way," the form and formality of these arrangements often veers from traditional notions of men as primarily tasked with bringing home a paycheck through formal employment. In line with some previous research (Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010), we see that alternative forms of productivity can offer a positive sense of self. From this perspective, lacking formal work is not an endorsement of "sloth, idleness, and vices" (Eberstadt 2016, 5), but instead the pursuit of alternative productivity and the claims to worthiness that such efforts imply. Crucially, men who fit in this group portrayed the moral vision of their labor as congruent with the expectations of their romantic partners.

DISCUSSION

Over the past half century, the worlds of work and family have changed enormously, especially for men with less formal education (Breitwieser, Nunn, and Schambaugh 2018; Cherlin 2014). A growing portion of men are disconnected from the formal labor market, and researchers speculate that changing family roles may in part explain this trend (Binder and

Bound 2019). Simultaneously, family studies scholars have relied on less-educated men's increasingly poor financial position, and thus their absence from the pool of marriageable men, to explain declining marriage rates and to predict women avoiding or exiting unions with these men (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2018). In this article, we examine the understanding disconnected men in nonmetropolitan areas have about how their workforce status conflicts with, comports with, or is unrelated to their role in a romantic union.

The overwhelming majority of men in this study endorsed work as a personally held moral imperative—they see themselves as workers, even if not as employees. Some depict their disconnection from employment as arising from constraints, whereas others portray it as an alternative track, another way of procuring resources for life. Despite this variation, men generally affirm the importance of productive activity in their lives. The major differences among them have to do with what they understand their disconnection from formal work to mean for fulfilling the expectations of a romantic union. Although a substantial minority of men—those in the Work First group—express the perspective expected by the marriageable man literature, the majority do not. Some see the relation between their work and partner roles as unrelated or Beside the Point; they often cite other factors that preclude employment and relationship success or demand their attention. Other men cite relationship obligations as engaging them in a Balancing Act between conflicting responsibilities, as well as those who draw on alternative means of fulfilling the provider role according to their own conceptions and standards—rejecting traditional norms to, instead, do it My Way.

These varying perspectives underline the need to recognize alternative ways men have of fulfilling roles in their relationships, particularly the resource provider role, which we find can go beyond formal employment. Thus scholars' reliance on measures of formal employment and formal earnings to assess work

effort and as the metrics of marriageability may be misleading, at least in nonmetropolitan settings. It is not that men do not value work, but that they do not always define and prioritize work in ways that have been the focus of research to date. In line with previous work (Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010), we see men deriving meaning and role fulfillment in alternative activities outside the formal labor market. Those writing and implementing policy can consider whether and how these forms of productivity and household contribution ought to be treated as fulfilling requirements for employment-contingent benefits, such as Medicaid or SNAP (Gomez et al. 2021; Waikar 2020); this could mean relaxing or eliminating work requirements for those deemed “able bodied adults without dependents”² or offering alternative activities outside the labor market that could fulfill requirements for work activities.

We see men navigating a complex connection between prevailing gender norms around work and romantic relationship roles. Those in the Work First group accept traditional norms and judge themselves (or feel judged by their partners) as failing by these standards. Those who see their work status as Beside the Point refrain from entering themselves in the “race” to be partner material; they have other concerns that displace or deprioritize a focus on romantic unions. Men in the Balancing Act and My Way groups are involved in alternative activities to formal work. However, whereas those in the My Way group see themselves as fulfilling their provider roles, those in the Balancing Act group view their alternative activities as preventing them from doing so, seeing the demands of relationships, which sometimes come intertwined with fatherhood roles, as being more essential than are the dictates of the male worker role. More flexible notions around gender and what it means to provide are both at play here. The men in the Balancing Act and the My Way groups do not conform to traditional gender role norms. It is not that they are unaware of these norms but rather that they do not accept the appropriateness of these norms to their relationships, or they reject the priori-

2. This category includes all working-age adults who are not on disability, regardless of their actual health, and can include parents if they do not have custody of a child.

tization of formal work above care work that these norms require. These more nuanced understandings of male roles in work and relationships, and their relative frequency compared to what would be expected by the traditional perspective, call into question the accuracy of the assumptions of the marriageable man hypothesis in previous research, at least for this nonmetropolitan setting and among disconnected men.

It is possible that these four groups could be found across geographic settings, but the nonmetropolitan setting may offer unique opportunities and constraints. For example, the options for alternative resource provision, beyond illicit pursuits, such as hunting, gardening, and bartering goods or services might be greater outside urban areas (Jensen, Tickamyer, and Slack 2019; Sherman 2021). Further, because both those inside and outside the formal labor market may undertake these activities, the acceptability and lack of stigma associated with them may make them uniquely suited to allowing men to feel they are fulfilling their economic obligations in their relationships, despite their lack of formal employment. Future research should explore these patterns in other settings.

This study is, of course, not without its limitations. First, we cannot generalize from this set of interviews, particularly across geographic areas and racial-ethnic groups; as Pamela Joshi and her colleagues (2022) discuss in this issue, work conditions vary substantially by race and ethnicity, and romantic union and employment patterns do as well (BLS 2019; Horowitz, Graf, and Livingston 2019). Nevertheless, the study suggests that future research should take a more expansive approach to understanding the ways in which men’s work and family roles are conceptualized and may interact, and future work can examine whether this pattern of findings is present in different regions or within different demographic groups. Second, because we capture only the perspectives of men, not of their partners, we do not know whether their understandings reflect their partners’ beliefs. Future research could include couple interviews to allow for comparison of each partner’s views. Third, because this is not a longitudinal study,

we do not know how stable these perspectives might be over time. The question remains whether men’s views change based on their stage in the life course, economic or romantic situations, length of time out of formal employment, and so on.

These findings have several implications for policy. First, policymakers should not rely on the idea that a return to higher marriage rates will propel men into the formal labor force. Although for some men, taking on the role and identity of husband may have this effect, as we see here, other obligations can trump men’s economic provider role or couples may accept men as fulfilling the expectation to contribute resources through alternate means (such as cash work, bartering, or self-provisioning). Second, policymakers might focus on pathways and incentives to formalize the existing productivity of these men, who may feel that current policies denigrate their morally upright, partnership-sanctioned efforts; such efforts could include, for example, excluding family caregivers from work requirements to qualify for assistance programs. This approach follows from calls to treat with dignity, rather than regard with suspicion, those with lower incomes applying for government assistance (Edin, Shaefer, and Tach 2017). Considerable focus has been on making public benefit receipt contingent on work, take SNAP, for example (Mead 2012; Waikar 2020). This includes in recent debates about the continuation of the expanded Child Tax Credit. Senator Manchin’s statement that “people should make some effort” if they want to receive any support is one example. Such requirements necessarily exclude men—such as those in the Balancing Act and My Way groups—who are engaged in a wide variety of activities that contribute to their families but do not count as formal employment. Currently, policy is written to not count these activities as “some effort,” which treats people as undeserving, despite the array of ways in which they provide for their families.

Third, although the availability of better jobs would draw some of the men we interviewed into the formal labor force, it would not draw a substantial portion of them. Many in our sample struggle with work-limiting health issues—just over half described having mental

or physical health issues and nearly one-quarter described having addiction issues, which means that they are often unable to work formal jobs even if they want to do so. Physical and mental health issues can make it challenging for some people to be reliable employees, at least without accommodations. Because the disability claims process can take so long, and yet requires people to show that they have extremely limited earnings (Autor et al. 2015), we see men engaging in under-the-table work, as opportunities arise and their health conditions allow, while they wait for a disability claim to come through. Because the process is so arduous to navigate in the first place, men are reluctant to pursue formal employment once they receive disability, for fear that a reoccurrence of their health issues would push them out of the job, starting them down an unstable, under-resourced path once again. This concern suggests the need for a more dignified process that recognizes the difficulties applicants face. Easier access to jobs for less-educated men that offer the flexibility to accommodate a variety of health limitations could help keep some men in the formal labor force and limit the support they require from disability benefits.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for the economy have meant a steep drop in the labor-force participation rate. It remains to be seen whether and how quickly the economy will rebound, pulling those shed from the labor force's ranks back in. After the Great Recession, it took more than a decade before labor-force participation rates rebounded. Some economists speculate that the post-pandemic economy will be permanently altered with particular realignments at the low-wage end of the labor market (Guilford and Cambon 2020). The issues we raise here are thus likely to be a presence for more men and more families across the United States; these insights could and ideally will inform policy discussions about what direction to go in reinstating and strengthening work requirements for various support policies, such as SNAP, Medicaid, and the Child Tax Credit. For research, a narrow focus on the wages or annual income that come with formal employment, for example, ignores the multifaceted way many men see themselves as contributing to

their romantic partnerships through their care work and their alternative ways of providing for their families. To fully understand how economic events and conditions spill over into relationship formation, stability, and dissolution, scholars need to recognize the more complex and comprehensive set of roles that prime-age men are navigating around economic provision and romantic partnership.

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Making Sense of Childcare Instability Among Families with Low Incomes: (Un)desired and (Un)planned Reasons for Changing Childcare Arrangements



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Childcare instability can negatively affect family well-being. Yet not all childcare changes are bad for families. This qualitative study (N = 85) examines work, family, provider, and subsidy-related factors contributing to childcare changes among families with low incomes. We focus on the desirability—the extent to which parents wanted to leave their provider—and the planned nature of childcare changes—the extent to which parents anticipated the change and had time to plan. We find that although nearly all desired changes were planned, undesired changes were both planned and unplanned. Planning was important but not enough for finding care that aligned with family needs, and undesired changes, especially sudden changes, were often driven by the loss of a childcare subsidy, sometimes accompanied by a job loss. We discuss how these findings can help researchers and policymakers understand the implications of complex childcare trajectories for family well-being and early care and education policy.

Keywords: childcare, early care and education, instability, childcare subsidies, low-income families

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Finding and maintaining high-quality and affordable childcare in the United States is a key challenge for working parents. Childcare has become an even more critical issue in the context of changing family and employment trends that characterize the twenty-first century and that are the subject of the current volume (see Carlson, Wimer, and Haskins 2022). Single parents and those with low incomes face particular difficulties given constrained socioeconomic resources, limited government funding to assist with childcare, and an increasingly precarious employment environment (Howell and Kalleberg 2019) where nonstandard forms of employment proliferate, job turnover is high, and work hours are frequently unstable and unpredictable (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022; Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019; Henly, Sandstrom, and Pilarz 2017). In such an environment of declining job quality, holding onto a childcare arrangement amid earnings instability and intermittent eligibility and benefits receipt is particularly difficult. Family living arrangements shape childcare needs and likely affect childcare instability as well. On the one hand, the rise in extended household living arrangements among families with children, which are more prevalent among families of color (Cross 2018; Michelmore and Pilkauskas 2022, this issue; Pilkauskas and Cross 2018), can increase the availability of informal caregivers and could mitigate the negative effects of childcare instability. On the other hand, in complex and dynamic family structures, in which the number of adults available to support caregiving often changes, childcare challenges can be heightened and precipitate changes to care arrangements (Crosnoe et al. 2014) as well as affect eligibility for childcare subsidies.

Although any family can experience childcare instability, children of color and those in families with low incomes are more vulnerable to care disruptions because of unstable parental employment, household income, and childcare subsidy use (Chaudry 2004; Weber 2005). A study of families with predominantly low incomes from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study showed that children changed care arrangements 1.2 times on average be-

tween birth and age three, and more than 30 percent of children had two or more changes (Pilarz and Hill 2014), meaning they essentially experienced a different care arrangement each year. Although some changes in childcare arrangements during the early childhood years are expected as children's and families' needs change, instability that threatens the well-being of children and families raises concerns. Stable caregiving relationships are important for healthy early childhood development and frequent transitions to new arrangements can be stressful for children and their parents (Sandstrom and Huerta 2013). Stable childcare is also a critical work support to help parents remain stably employed, as the COVID-19 pandemic clearly indicated to the nation (Schochet 2019).

Although the early care and education field has viewed childcare changes as potentially problematic and framed continuity of care as the goal, a closer examination reveals that some change in providers is expected across the first five years of life and that not all changes represent a negative form of instability (Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015). Parents' reasons for changing providers are often driven by changing family needs and contexts—changes in employment, housing, and financial resources as well as children's developmental needs—and the underlying motivation for the change—whether the change was planned and intentional versus sudden and undesired—may have implications for whether the change is detrimental to or supportive of family well-being (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Scott, London, and Hurst 2005; Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015). For example, a change from a childcare center to an unlicensed neighborhood caregiver because of an unexpected childcare subsidy loss is more likely to be detrimental to the family than a planned and desired change from grandparent care to a preschool program.

Understanding parents' reasons for leaving a care provider, how those reasons may differ depending on family characteristics such as race and ethnicity, and whether childcare changes lead to more or less desirable care is essential for furthering knowledge on how and under what conditions childcare changes mat-

ter for children. This study offers insight into low-income parents' reasons for leaving a childcare provider and how they assess the desirability of a provider change and the extent to which the change was planned. We address two key research questions: What are parents' perceptions of the desirability and planned nature of their childcare changes? Do parents' expressed reasons for changing providers differ by the desirability and planned nature of childcare changes? To examine these questions, we use in-depth, qualitative interview data from the Illinois and New York Child Care Research Partnership Study, a study of childcare subsidy clients from four regions in New York and Illinois (for a full description, see Henly et al. 2015). Because these four regions represent diverse policy, demographic, and geographic contexts, we examine differences in parents' perceptions of childcare changes across study sites. Although we examine work, family, and childcare provider-related factors contributing to such changes, we pay particular attention to the role of the childcare subsidy program in contributing to or curtailing childcare instability. This examination offers particularly useful information that addresses policymakers' concern that families receiving subsidies may have greater difficulty accessing and retaining high-quality care.

We also apply a racial equity lens to our analysis. Racial disparities in access to childcare, particularly a supply of affordable, high-quality childcare options, stem from a long history of structural racism. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, children in predominantly Latino neighborhoods were more likely to live in a childcare desert, that is, have few care options (Malik et al. 2018), and African American children experienced more childcare changes, on average, than other children (Bratsch-Hines et al. 2015). Discrimination in the labor and housing markets that contributes to lower job quality and job and housing instability among families of color could also precipitate more childcare changes (Quillian et al. 2017; Pager and Shepherd 2008). Given this evidence, we consider how the experiences of childcare changes, whether desired and planned, may differ systematically by the race and ethnicity of our study participants.

WHY CHILDCARE CONTINUITY MATTERS

Stability is keenly important to children's development because they thrive with predictable schedules and routines and familiar settings and people with whom they feel secure (Sandstrom and Huerta 2013). Some changes in early care and education arrangements are normative and supportive of child well-being, such as moving from a home-based childcare setting to a prekindergarten (pre-K) program as a child ages. Yet frequent childcare changes can disrupt children's relationships and attachments to their caregivers, which are foundational to their early learning and social competence (Howes and Hamilton 1993; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). Childcare changes also disrupt families' and children's routines, which may increase child and parent stress and lead to poorer child self-regulation and behavioral functioning (Fiese et al. 2002; McLoyd 1998; Pilarz and Hill 2017; Yeung, Linver, and Brooks-Gunn 2002). Indeed, research consistently finds that experiencing multiple childcare changes is associated with adverse child socioemotional outcomes in early childhood, including more child behavior problems (NICHD 1998; Pilarz and Hill 2014) and poorer social competence (Bratsch-Hines et al. 2015, 2020).

Childcare instability can also cause problems for parental employment and vice versa. The COVID-19 pandemic made this point dramatically clear to the nation; when childcare issues such as sudden childcare closures and restricted hours arise, parents, predominantly mothers, are often forced to cut hours, change jobs, or leave the workforce (Heggeness 2020; Kochhar 2020). These challenges have been particularly detrimental to Black and Latino parents, who are less likely to have control over their work hours and be able to work from home (Smith and Reeves 2021). Research that has attempted to tease apart the influence of job instability on childcare instability and vice versa suggests the relationship is quite nuanced. Childcare disruptions can be detrimental to job stability, but more frequently job changes precipitate childcare changes (Miller 2006; Scott and Abelson 2016). Also, parents with precarious work schedules are more likely to have difficulty arranging childcare and to

miss work because of lack of care, potentially threatening their employment (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue).

Researchers have begun to unpack the conditions under which continuity of caregivers and settings are most important for children's learning and development and when changes may be more or less disruptive to families. Qualitative research from Katherine Speirs, Colleen Vesely, and Kevin Roy (2015) demonstrates that although some changes are planned and families can prepare for the transition, other changes are forced and likely more disruptive. Drawing on interviews with African American, Latino, and White families with low incomes, they find that when transitions were planned, families moved to a preferred arrangement that supported family well-being. Forced transitions, on the other hand, occurred when mothers were satisfied with their care provider but had to quickly make a change and usually transition into a less preferred or temporary arrangement, often because of unexpected changes in employment or school schedules or the provider's ending the arrangement. Such forced transitions, and the associated stress from the experience, characterize instability that Speirs and her colleagues argue can be harmful for children. Although the study included a racially and ethnically diverse sample, the authors did not explore differences in families' experiences of childcare transitions by race and ethnicity.

Follow-up research from Kaitlin Moran (2021) with a sample of African American families applies the framework of planned versus forced transitions and finds that key reasons for planned changes were a desire for a more educational environment and concerns over socialization opportunities, children often moving from home-based to center-based care between ages two and three years. Forced transitions occurred when families could no longer pay a provider or a provider closed or relocated. Moran (2021) identifies a third transition type, abrupt changes, the result of unexpected events reflecting poor care quality and untrustworthy providers. Abrupt transitions were especially disruptive because families had to go without care while searching for alternative arrangements. Yet parents were ultimately relieved

knowing their children were out of an unsafe or poor-quality setting. The extent to which care changes adversely impact children's developmental outcomes likely depends on the quality of care before and after the transition and the extremity of the disruption itself. For example, a change to a higher-quality setting may be temporarily disruptive but benefit children in the long term, whereas stability in an arrangement that is poor quality may be detrimental to child well-being (Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015).

Bringing together these notions of planned, forced, and abrupt changes (Moran 2021; Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015), we suggest two unique dimensions of changes related to the *desirability* (desired or undesired) and *planned nature* (planned or unplanned) of the care transition. Studies have confounded these two dimensions by assuming that planned childcare changes are desirable and that forced childcare changes are sudden and unplanned (Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015). We hypothesize that this is not necessarily the case. On the one hand, a change may happen suddenly and unexpectedly (unplanned) but ultimately be desired because the change places a child in a safer or healthier situation. Other changes could be unplanned and undesirable, as in an unexpected subsidy loss resulting in a move from a high-quality early care and education program to unlicensed, informal care. On the other hand, changes may be planned but not desired, such as unwillingly changing providers after an anticipated residential move that places the family too far away. Or changes can be planned and desired, such as a long-awaited move from in-home care to a preschool setting when a child turns three years old. This study explores the value of such a framework that decouples the desirability and planned nature of changes as a means of classifying childcare changes and also explores differences in families' experiences of (un)desired and (un)planned childcare changes by parents' race and ethnicity and geographic site. We describe parents' experiences of childcare changes as they remember them—some changes driven by factors outside parents' control and others within. We aim to characterize the nature of the changes themselves rather than the parents' behavior as being more

planful or better prepared, though in some cases parents did have greater awareness and resources to plan ahead.

REASONS FOR CHILDCARE CHANGES

Available evidence points to several factors that contribute to childcare changes, including parental employment reasons; parents' ability to pay for care; child developmental reasons; and childcare provider-related reasons, such as the caregiver ending the arrangement, logistical concerns, and dissatisfaction with the arrangement (Adams and Rohacek 2010). Because childcare is critical for parents with low incomes in their ability to work, changes in parental employment are key in driving childcare decisions and parents' search for new care arrangements (NSECE 2014; Sandstrom and Chaudry 2012). Work reasons for childcare instability can take multiple forms. For example, a job change can require a childcare accommodation, especially when accompanied by a new work schedule, and a job loss can make it difficult to afford care at all, leading parents to end an arrangement (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Lowe, Weisner, and Geis 2003; Scott and Abelson 2016). Among parents in the service sector, just-in-time scheduling and lack of schedule control make it difficult for parents to arrange childcare and force many parents into a childcare scramble that results in care disruptions (Carrillo et al. 2017; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022; Henly and Lyons, 2000; Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue). Because parents of color and immigrant parents are disproportionately likely to work in low-wage and low-quality jobs (see Joshi et al. 2022, this issue) and workers of color in the service sector are more likely to experience precarious work schedules (Storer, Schneider, and Harknett 2020), we would expect them to be at particular risk for work-driven childcare changes.

Regarding affordability, the loss of a childcare subsidy can also trigger child care changes. Parents who work jobs with precarious schedules—jobs that are disproportionately held by workers of color and those with low incomes (Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019)—might have a more difficult time accessing or maintaining a subsidy because temporary fluctuations in work hours could push their income above the

eligibility threshold (Henly, Sandstrom, and Pilarz 2017). Among families using the subsidy program, parental job loss and precarious work conditions (such as lack of input into work schedule) are associated with a higher risk of exiting the program (Henly et al. 2017). High rates of exit from the subsidy program during families' last month of eligibility suggest that administrative hassles during the eligibility re-determination process also contribute to subsidy exits, and that families in states with shorter eligible periods experience shorter subsidy spells (Davis, Krafft, and Forry 2017; Henly et al. 2015). Following a subsidy loss, families with low incomes often move to less formal (and more affordable) care arrangements (Henly et al. 2015; Krafft, Davis, and Tout 2017), and when families experience multiple subsidy spells, children experience more changes in subsidized providers (Ha, Magnuson, and Ybarra 2012; Pilarz, Claessens, and Gelatt 2016).

Child developmental reasons and provider-related reasons also motivate childcare changes, as evidenced by the normative practice of transitioning children to a center-based setting around age two or three years to promote early learning and socialization (Moran 2021). Other parents report wanting to wait until their child can talk and alert them as to whether they are being mistreated by the provider to make this transition (Pacheco-Applegate et al. 2020). Yet concerns with care quality can also prompt abrupt transitions at any age (Moran 2021). Childcare changes related to dissatisfaction with the current arrangement are particularly concerning and may be more common in communities with a limited supply of licensed and high-quality care providers. In one qualitative study, parents cited problems with their childcare provider as the primary reason for changing arrangements (Scott and Abelson 2016).

Our goal in this study is to advance understanding of the diversity of reasons why families change childcare arrangements. Building from recent qualitative literature, we use a framework that allows for transitions between childcare arrangements to represent negative instability or positive change for families by systematically analyzing changes in terms of the dimensions of desirability (desired versus

undesired) and planned nature (planned versus unplanned). We focus on a sample of subsidized families from four diverse study sites and hone in on subsidy-related factors, as well as employment, residential, and provider-related factors, that can fuel childcare changes. Because families' experiences of employment, childcare, and subsidy programs are shaped by their race and ethnicity, we examine differences in parents' experiences of childcare changes by parents' race and ethnicity. Due to key policy, geographic, and demographic differences across study sites, we also examine differences in findings across sites.

METHOD

This study is based on qualitative interview data collected from a sample of eighty-five parents with low incomes, primarily mothers, who at the time of recruitment had recently received a childcare subsidy for a young child not yet in school. The qualitative interview data are part of a multimethod project "Determinants of Subsidy Stability and Continuity of Child Care" that included an analysis of administrative program data, a telephone survey of a random sample of 612 subsidy participants drawn from the administrative data, and a qualitative study of eighty-five survey respondents who participated in the in-depth interviews (for a full description, see Henly et al. 2015). The study took place in four regions: two in the state of Illinois—Cook County, a dense metropolitan area that includes the city of Chicago, and one region in the southwest of the state that includes both a small city and several more rural counties—and two suburban counties outside New York City—Westchester and Nassau. In addition to population density, the four sites differ in subsidy program policies and administration. Illinois's subsidy program is state administered via local childcare resource and referral agencies and had a six-month eligibility period, whereas New York's program is county administered via local social services departments and had a twelve-month eligibility period (for more, see Henly et al. 2015).

To draw the purposive qualitative sample, study staff reached out to 172 of the 612 survey respondents. Of those, 111 were successfully reached and 85 completed interviews. Although

not drawn to be a representative sample, no significant differences were found between the interview participants and the full survey sample in terms of race-ethnicity, primary home language, country of origin, education level, marital status, and residence with a partner or other adults. The only observed difference was the age of the youngest subsidized child in the family; qualitative interview participants had slightly younger children on average (3.1 versus 3.5 years). The purposive sample was drawn to reflect diversity in race-ethnicity and immigrant status, employment circumstances (such as work schedules and jobs since entry into the subsidy program), and number of subsidized children in the family, and to obtain diverse participant trajectories on the subsidy program (that is, stable subsidy use since program entry, a subsidy exit but quick return, and a subsidy exit but no return). The qualitative interviews took place between March and November 2013—before the 2014 Reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)—and from fourteen to thirty-seven months (an average of twenty-two months) after participants entered the childcare subsidy program. The interviews averaged approximately ninety minutes. Each participant was offered a gift of \$40 cash and a children's book at the end of the interview. Table 1 presents the characteristics of families who participated.

A team of two researchers conducted the interviews in participants' homes or other convenient locations the participant preferred, often a fast-food restaurant or library. Sixteen of the eighty-five interviews (nine in New York and seven in Illinois) were conducted in Spanish by a native fluent speaker. Interviews explored themes related to families' experiences with the childcare subsidy program as well as details on all childcare arrangements used and jobs held during those months from initial subsidy receipt to the present. Interviewers also probed on the childcare search process and reasons for changing childcare arrangements. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Only one participant in Illinois declined being recorded. In that case, the interviewers took detailed handwritten notes and subsequently wrote a memo, which was used in the analysis, containing a full account of the interview.

Table 1. Participant Descriptive Characteristics

	N	Percent or Mean (SD)
Female	81	95.3
Race and ethnicity		
White	18	21.2
Black	40	47.1
Latino	24	28.2
Asian or multiracial	3	3.5
Highest level of education		
High school diploma or less	28	32.9
Some college or associate's degree	41	48.2
Bachelor's degree or higher	16	18.8
Household structure		
Living with partner	18	21.2
Single, living with other adults	19	22.4
Single, living with no adults	48	56.5
Immigrant	23	27.1
Interviewed in Spanish	16	18.8
Age of focal child at subsidy program entry	85	1.8 (1.3)
Multiple children receiving subsidy at program entry	34	40.0
Worked two or more jobs since subsidy program entry	51	60.0
Worked nonstandard hours at any job	56	65.9
TANF receipt	15	17.6
Type of subsidized provider used at program entry^a		
Center-based care	44	51.8
Family childcare	29	34.1
License-exempt relative care	13	15.3
License-exempt nonrelative care	6	7.1
Residential move since subsidy program entry	31	36.5
Geographic study site		
Cook County, Illinois	35	41.2
Southwestern Illinois	11	12.9
Nassau County, New York	18	21.2
Westchester County, New York	21	24.7

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: N=85; SD=standard deviation.

^aSix respondents reported using multiple subsidized providers at program entry. Total N of subsidized providers is ninety-two.

The research team developed a coding scheme based on the key research questions and coded and analyzed a priori themes as well as emergent themes across interviews using NVivo qualitative analysis software. The analytic approach included line-by-line document reading, coding of text "chunks" according to

interview topics (determined a priori) and themes that were identified *in vivo* through the coding process and clarified through discussion in research team meetings (Miles and Huberman 1994; Ryan and Bernard 2000). Analysts completed intensive training on the coding scheme. Reliability checks were conducted on

the first two interviews coded, and every fifth interview was double-coded and reliability again assessed to prevent drifting over time. Reliability among coders was high, generally above 90 percent agreement. All discrepancies were resolved through team meetings.

The analytic process included the construction of a matrix in Microsoft Excel that identified every childcare change recorded for every participant and extracted coded text from NVivo that provided information about each change. The authors analyzed the matrix content to identify key themes, such as reasons for leaving a care provider, whether changes were planned or desired, effects of the change on families, and characteristics of the arrangements before and after the transition. Patterns that emerged from matrices were compared with exemplar interviews and interviewer memos to guard against misattribution of the meaning of text chunks and to further elaborate understanding of the themes.

RESULTS

We first describe the type and frequency of childcare changes reported by study participants. We then describe the desirability and planned nature of changes and factors that contributed to different types of changes. Lastly, we examine differences in parents' experiences of childcare changes by their race and ethnicity and across geographic sites.

Types of Childcare Changes

In examining parents' perceptions of childcare changes, we focused on two dimensions, desirability and planned nature. *Desirability* refers to the extent to which a parent describes wanting to leave their current childcare provider. Although in some cases parents expressed a desire to change to a different provider (*desired change*), in other cases they would have preferred to stay with their current provider when the circumstances no longer permitted it (*undesired change*). Because we focused on the extent to which the parent wanted to leave the provider, an undesired change in childcare arrangements could be the result of either negative or positive changes in a family's circumstance, such as no longer being able to afford a provider or relocating to a better neighbor-

hood, respectively. *Planned nature* refers to the extent to which parents anticipated and expected the change (that is, a sense of awareness or warning) and had time to prepare and plan for it. We relied on information about how much time the parent had to make new arrangements as well as their subjective experience of anticipating the change or having little warning and feeling rushed to find a new provider. We coded changes as *planned* when parents anticipated the change and had time to plan for new arrangements, at least one to two weeks (though usually longer), and we coded them as *unplanned* when parents described the change as unexpected and hurried.

Frequency of Changes

We identified 132 total childcare changes across eighty-five children and families in our study. We examined changes at the target child level, meaning that we focused on changes that the youngest child in the family experienced; families with multiple children may have made additional changes for older children in care. The vast majority of children experienced at least one childcare change (sixty-four of eighty-five children, or 75 percent), 28 percent experienced one, 27 percent experienced two, and 20 percent experienced three or more between the time they entered the subsidy program and the day of the interview, again twenty-two months on average.

Because we lacked information about the case, we were unable to classify fifteen of the childcare changes (11 percent) based on either desirability or planned nature. Cases that were unclear on the desirability dimension ($n = 6$) were typically those in which the child left an informal or family childcare (FCC) provider because of a job loss or school program ending and transitioned into parental care only, but we did not have information as to whether the parent wanted to continue with the arrangement. Five of these were planned and one unplanned. Cases that were unclear on the planned dimension ($n = 9$) were typically unanticipated changes, but we did not have information about how much notice the parent had or whether they felt rushed; two of these were desired and seven were undesired.

Childcare changes varied across the dimen-

sions of desirability and planned nature (see table 2). Desired changes were most often planned (94 percent, $n = 73$), with a few exceptions ($n = 5$). This is consistent with the expectation that parents need time to plan to make a change in arrangements they perceive as desirable. Undesired changes were more evenly divided between planned ($n = 22$) and unplanned ($n = 17$). This suggests that awareness and time to plan is important but insufficient for making a desired change in arrangements. Even parents who anticipated needing to make a change in arrangements sometimes left a childcare provider that they would have preferred to stay with. We describe each type of change in figure 1. We examined differences in parents' experiences of childcare changes by race and ethnicity and by geographic site by analyzing variation in the types of changes and reasons for changing care arrangements across groups.

Desired Changes

Most of the childcare changes that parents described were desired, meaning parents wanted to leave their current provider. These typically led to a provider perceived to be a better fit for the family and supportive of overall family well-being. These types of changes were driven by parents seeking a different type of care or higher-quality care, a problem with their current provider, or transitions in employment, school, or housing that opened up the possibility of changing arrangements.

Desired and Planned Changes

Desired childcare changes were coded as planned when parents anticipated the change

and had time to plan for new arrangements, usually at least a few weeks. Most represented moves into center-based care, which is consistent with parents needing time to search for and enroll in a center or even waiting for a spot to open. Fifty-five percent of all childcare changes were desired and planned; 60 percent of children experienced at least one such change.

Margarita, a Latina immigrant mother in Westchester County, used the subsidy program to pay a FCC provider to care for her three-year-old son. She soon became concerned about the quality of care, however: "I saw that she had lots of little kids, and he learned a little but not much. But he almost like didn't want to stay, didn't adapt. So he always stayed there crying. . . . A few times I found that it was very hot at the day care. They didn't have air conditioning, so like, I didn't like that very much. So, I said, 'I'm going to move him.'" In addition, the provider would call her at 4:30 p.m. to come pick up her son when she was supposed to be open until 5 p.m. Because of these problems, she sought out a new provider. She visited a childcare center in her neighborhood and reported that she liked it because it "had more space, more teachers," and was open until 6 p.m. She decided to move her son to the center, and when we spoke with her, she believed that her son was now thriving.

As Margarita's experience illustrates, many desired-planned changes were driven by parents seeking a new provider because of a problem with the current provider. These problems ranged from payment issues, unreliability of care, bad parent-provider relationships, logistical problems (such as commute time), and

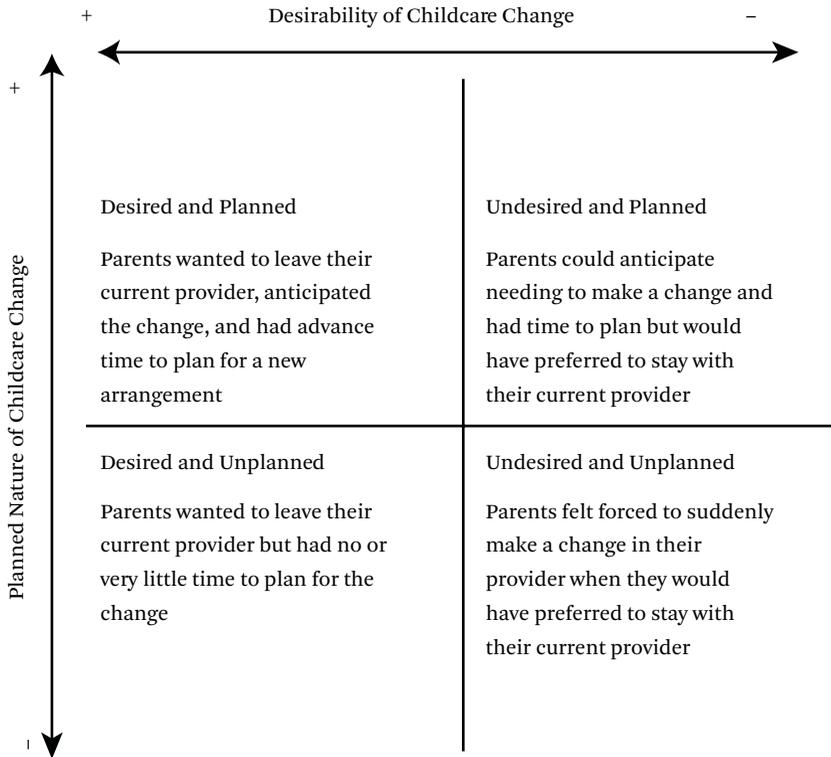
Table 2. Childcare Changes

	Planned	Unplanned	Unclear	Row Total
Desired	73	5	2	80
Undesired	22	17	7	46
Unclear	5	1	0	6
Column total	100	23	9	132

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Each cell represents the number of childcare changes coded on each dimension of desirability and planned nature of the change (for example, seventy-three childcare changes were coded as desired and planned).

Figure 1. Types of Childcare Changes



Source: Authors' compilation.

both minor and serious concerns about the quality of the care and their child's safety. Parents in all types of care—center-based, FCC, and informal—reported problems with their providers and sometimes moved to a different or similar type of care. When parents made desired-planned changes, they like Margarita were typically able to find a provider that better fit their needs.

For parents with few alternative childcare options, however, desired-planned changes did not always lead to a better family-provider fit even though they were leaving an arrangement that was not working. Gina, a White mother living in southwestern Illinois, was working part time and attending college. She used the subsidy to pay her friend to watch her infant son while she worked. Her friend had initially misunderstood the payment rates—thinking she would get \$7 per hour instead of \$7 per day for part-time care—and was displeased. According to Gina, the friend would make her feel guilty

about the low subsidy payment rates and then became unreliable, showing up late. Gina says, "I felt bad because she had misunderstood what she was getting paid. And she kind of held that over my head, where I couldn't afford to pay her out of my pocket." Gina ultimately quit her job and ended the arrangement because of her discomfort with the situation. Although she wanted to enroll her daughter in a childcare center, she was unable to find one that would take her daughter part time, yet the subsidy would not pay for full-time care. The only alternative she saw was to quit her job and go without regular care—with the help of her partner and occasionally her mother—while she completed her degree.

In some cases of desired-planned changes, parents were satisfied with their provider but wanted a different type of care or an otherwise more satisfactory arrangement. In these cases, parents sought higher-quality care or a provider that was a better fit with their child's or

their families' needs. Most of these changes were into a childcare center, often from no primary care provider, from relative care, or from one center to another. Parents often described wanting to move into a school setting as their child approached kindergarten. When asked why she moved her preschool-age son from informal care provided by her mother to a childcare center, Tyra, a Black mother in Cook County, says, "I didn't want him to be behind, and I needed him to have like social skills." In some of these cases, parents added part-time center-based care to an informal care arrangement, combining center and relative care to better meet their child's developmental needs while covering their work hours. Head Start and public pre-K programs, both of which are government funded but not by the childcare subsidy program, played a particularly important role for parents who were not working and thus no longer subsidy-eligible but wanted their child in a school-like environment they could afford.

Transitions in employment, school, or housing also sometimes led parents to make a desired-planned change when these transitions were themselves planned and when they opened up the possibility of a new childcare arrangement that was preferable to the parent (including, in some cases, keeping a child home with the parent). Transitions out of employment included parents who were laid off, quit their job (often due to job problems), or were temporarily not working during the summer and wanted to keep their child home with them. Parents who were transitioning back to work after a period of not working could make a desired-planned change back to nonparental care, often center-based or FCC. School transitions led to similar childcare changes when parents no longer needed care or started or resumed their education.

Finally, desired-planned changes were driven by the subsidy program when parents were able to reinstate their subsidy after a gap in subsidy receipt caused by unemployment or administrative problems. Because parents could often not afford to pay for childcare without the subsidy, they stopped using their provider—typically center or FCC—after exiting the subsidy program. The transition back to

work or school allowed them to reinstate their subsidy and access a preferred care arrangement.

In several cases, desired-planned changes were driven by parents who were leaving what they described as temporary care arrangements. The temporary arrangement was often secured in haste when leaving an earlier arrangement without sufficient time to plan for the next one. For example, Melissa, a Black mother living in Cook County, applied for the subsidy program when her partner and current childcare provider became abusive; she needed to quickly make new arrangements for her five children, ages two through eleven years (an *unplanned* change). She had a difficult time finding a provider who could care for all of her children (since during the summer her school-age children needed care) and who would begin to provide care while she awaited childcare subsidy approval, and viewed the FCC provider she secured as temporary. When she no longer needed care for her three oldest children at the beginning of the school year, she moved her two youngest into a childcare center that was both more convenient and, she felt, a better fit, having the racially diverse learning environment she wanted for her children as well as free transportation. When we spoke with her, she was still using and satisfied with the center.

Like Melissa, other parents who had limited time or options to find a provider during their childcare search chose temporary arrangements. Meanwhile, they continued searching for a provider who could better meet their needs. In some cases, they needed to wait for a change in jobs, subsidy status, or housing that would open up the opportunity. In describing her childcare search while first applying for the subsidy program in Cook County, Tamara, a Black mother, said, "I mean, it was getting down to the wire and I had to pick a baby—a daycare. And they were close to my house, so I just picked that one. And it was going to be a temporary thing, because I was planning on moving anyway." She later says that her son didn't like the center, which made her feel that it was not a "safe or stable environment for him," though it was "as good as it's going to get" until she was able to move to a new home near a center she had attended when she was a

child and that she “loved.” She was still using this center when we spoke with her, despite a temporary break due to a subsidy loss.

Desired and Unplanned Changes

The handful of desired-unplanned changes occurred when parents willingly left their provider but had no or very little time to plan for the change. Because current arrangements were problematic, parents felt the change was better for the family, especially when they were concerned about their child’s safety. Even so, the suddenness of the change could be destabilizing because it typically left families without any care. These types of changes were quite rare, only 4 percent fitting this pattern; 6 percent of children experienced a desired-unplanned change.

Desired-unplanned changes were driven by parents’ job loss, problems with the childcare provider or subsidy program, or a combination of these factors. Parents reported experiencing problems with their provider or having concerns about the care for some time prior to leaving, but the decision to leave was pursued with little to no planning. A White mother living in southwestern Illinois who was fired from her job called it a “blessing in disguise” because she had several concerns about the FCC provider she had been using for her two-year-old daughter, including that the provider would ask parents to misreport the hours of care they received to the subsidy program.

Mandy, a Black mother living in Nassau County, was using the subsidy program to pay for a FCC provider for her infant twins. She explained that when she was searching for care she had limited options and was in a hurry and chose that provider because it was a new provider close to her home and on the list of approved providers from the childcare resource and referral agency. However, she later became concerned about the quality of care and found out through the state childcare licensing website that the FCC provider had received multiple health and safety violations while her children were in her care, yet no one had informed her about it. She called her caseworker at the Department of Social Services (DSS) to complain and request a provider change, but soon after made a sudden decision to stop using the

FCC home after an argument with the provider about the provider’s not changing her son’s dirty diapers: “I called my worker that day, I said, ‘I will not be bringing the children back to her after today. Whatever you have to do, I refuse to bring my kids back to her.’ I called her, the [director of DSS], and I told the director. . . . ‘This is what this woman did. I’m not taking them back there. And don’t pay her after today.’”

Mandy did not experience a gap in providers because she “caused such a stink” with DSS that they helped her find a new one—another FCC home—and immediately processed the paperwork needed to make the change. Mandy was very satisfied with the new FCC home and continued with that arrangement until the provider closed its doors. In all other desired and unplanned changes, the parent stopped using nonparental care altogether for some time after leaving the provider.

Undesired Changes

Undesired childcare changes occurred when parents were happy with their current provider and did not want to leave. Often, a change in their circumstances—including job change or loss, subsidy loss, and residential moves—made their current provider untenable, and they felt forced to make a change. Undesired changes typically led to a provider that was a worse fit or at least not a better fit for the family. Because of this, some parents viewed their new arrangement as temporary and continued to search for childcare after an undesired change (leading to a subsequent planned, desired change); this was particularly true when parents did not initially have time to plan their childcare transition.

Undesired and Planned Changes

In undesired and planned changes, parents could anticipate needing to make a change in providers and had time to plan but would have preferred to stay with their current provider. These changes were typically out of center care into informal care or exclusively parental care. Undesired-planned changes made up 17 percent of childcare changes; 25 percent of children experienced this type of change.

Undesired and planned changes occurred

when parents had notice that their job or subsidy was ending and that they would not be able to afford to stay with their childcare provider. In some cases, after the parent left their job, they were able to continue using the subsidy until it was time to redetermine their eligibility or the provider was willing to provide care for a period of time after the subsidy ended, which allowed parents time to plan. Many of these changes were from center-based care into exclusive parental care when the parent would have preferred to keep their child in the center but was unable to afford it because of the subsidy loss. For example, in one case, Lorena, a Latina immigrant mother living in Cook County, had to redetermine her eligibility for the subsidy program while she was on maternity leave from her job. She knew she would lose the subsidy at redetermination because she did not have current paystubs to submit and continued to send her four-year-old son to the center until she received the letter from the subsidy program office that her benefits were canceled. When asked how the transition out of the center was for her family, she explained that it was difficult for her and her son: “For me, it was, I wasn’t very happy, you know, to have to take him out. He was used to the center, and he would ask me, ‘Mommy, when are you going to take me? I want to see my friends.’ So, it was a little bit frustrating, like how do I do this, you know what I mean?” When Lorena returned to work, she reenrolled her son in the same center, where he stayed until he started kindergarten and she no longer needed childcare.

In other cases, changes in families’ circumstances, including a residential move, a job change, or a work schedule change, made their current provider untenable, and the parent felt forced to leave their provider but had sufficient time to do so. Unlike those precipitated by a sudden job or subsidy loss, the parent was able to find another provider that was able to accommodate—to varying degrees—their current circumstances. When Stephanie, a Black mother living in southwestern Illinois, started using the subsidy program, she and her sister did an extensive search for childcare centers and found one near her work and her sister’s house that she liked. When Stephanie changed

jobs, however, the center was too far away. She explained, “And I hated that I had to switch, but it was just, I couldn’t afford gas-wise to go back and forth.” She found another center close to her home with which she was satisfied but continued to feel that “if I could go back, I would.”

Some parents who made an undesired-planned change described conflict between competing family needs that required them to leave a provider that was not working out. For example, Jessica, a White mother living in Cook County, started using the subsidy program to pay her aunt to care for her infant son because she did not want him in a center-based setting until he was older. However, after a few months, her aunt became unreliable, causing problems in Jessica’s job. Although Jessica preferred to have her son cared for by a trusted relative, she moved him to the same childcare center that her preschool-aged daughter was attending. The change caused her significant distress: “And then the daycare, I hated it, honestly, at first. Because they were good to him, it’s just, like, I would cry when I would drop him off. And [my daughter] was older, so it was okay. But I would just bawl my eyes out for like probably four months.” As her son grew older, Jessica became more and more comfortable with the center, and when we spoke with her, her son was still attending and she was very happy with the care.

Other parents reported preferring center-based arrangements for their children, either for practical reasons (such as proximity) or because they perceived that it would provide academic or social skills, but reluctantly stopped using a center because a child did not adapt well enough even though the parents were happy with the quality of the program. In all of these cases, parents had been using relative care and went back to that same arrangement. We refer to these as undesired-planned changes because the parent had time to make new arrangements but would have preferred a different outcome.

Undesired and Unplanned Changes

Undesired and unplanned changes occurred when parents felt forced to suddenly make a change in their provider. These are similar to undesired-planned changes because the parent

did not want to leave the provider, but more disruptive because the change was not anticipated. Thirteen percent of childcare changes were described as undesired and unplanned; 15 percent of children experienced this type of change.

Michael, a White father living in Cook County, had been using the subsidy program for his two-year-old daughter for about a year when his childcare center informed him that his benefits had been canceled. He later learned that he missed the eligibility redetermination period because he moved and did not receive the redetermination letter. It took him about two months to reinstate his benefits and return to the center. During this time, because he could not afford the \$83 per day that the center charged, he pieced together care from relatives and took time off work: “I’m using up my parents . . . Actually my mom, because my dad lives in [another state], but I was using her as much as I could. And then I counted on [my daughter’s] mom to show up and watch her for a couple days and that kind of fell through. So then I was calling into work, and then work was like, ‘Well, you know, you need to show up. You need to be here if you want to have a job.’”

As Michael’s example illustrates, undesired and unplanned changes were most often driven by an unexpected subsidy loss, subsidy application denial (child started attending provider before approval and subsidy was denied), or provider payment problems, leading parents to scramble to find childcare so they could keep their job or to quit their job. Like Michael, other parents also unexpectedly lost their subsidy because of a missed redetermination notice due to a residential move and others due to a small wage increase or moving in with their partner. Other parents reported that their provider was not getting paid for unknown reasons and either willingly or unwillingly left the provider out of concern that they would be unable to pay for the care. In these cases, parents were still working when they lost the subsidy but could not afford their current provider without it and therefore sometimes used temporary arrangements while working to reinstate the subsidy or continuing to look for other care. In a few cases, parents were able to bring children with them to work or quickly

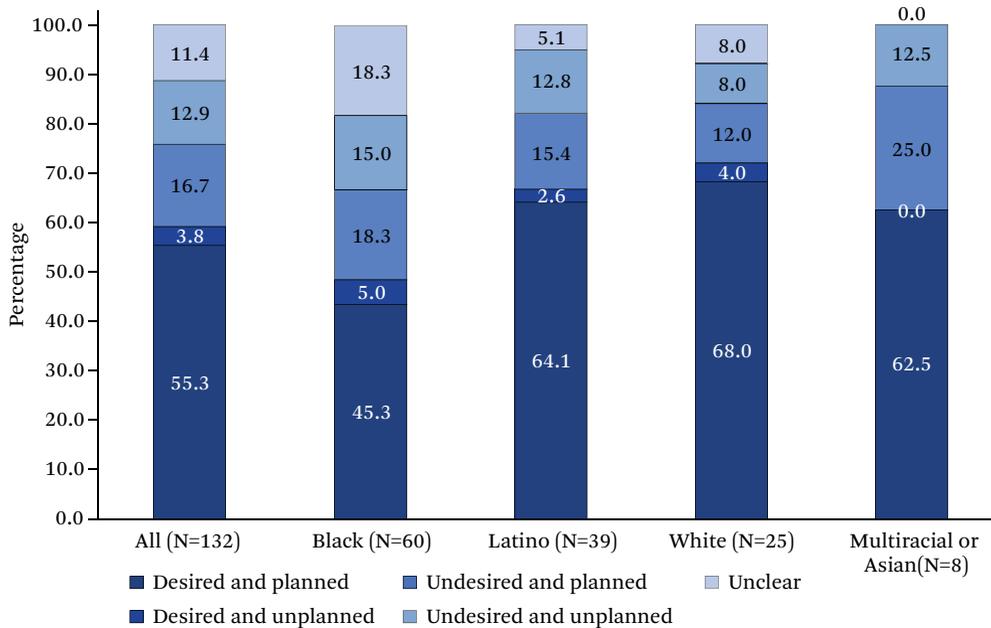
enroll in a childcare center that had openings. Most of the time, however, parents relied on relatives, friends, or took time off work. Thus the majority of these changes were from center care or FCC to informal care or exclusive parental care.

The subsidy program also contributed to undesired-unplanned changes in two cases when a parent’s childcare provider—a relative or friend—quit because payment rates were too low and gave the parent little notice. Sasha, a Black mother living in Westchester County, described why her cousin and childcare provider for her two-year-old son found another job: “And, she was like, ‘It’s not helping me pay my bills, and stuff like that. I don’t want to get put out my home, whatever. It’s not enough for me to be paying.’ They want her to pay more rent than what she get. You know? She could deal with it at first, but then it was just getting too hard.” After ending the arrangement with her cousin, Sasha’s sister began caring for her son, and Sasha and her sister submitted paperwork to the subsidy program office to transfer the subsidy payments. Despite calling the subsidy office repeatedly and submitting paperwork multiple times, after several months, Sasha’s sister was still not receiving payments. This led Sasha to quit her job as a home health aide rather than continue asking her sister to provide care without pay.

Undesired-unplanned changes not driven by the subsidy program were driven by children’s health problems, but were rare. For example, Crystal, a Black mother living in Cook County, had a son with a disability who had to be hospitalized for two months, leading him to lose his spot in the center he attended. Crystal’s mother helped with childcare after his release until he recovered and enrolled in a new center. We coded this and similar changes as undesired because the parents described that they would have preferred to stay with the provider and the change was disruptive to the family.

DIFFERENCES IN EXPERIENCES BY PARENTS’ RACE AND ETHNICITY

The types of changes that families experienced differed by parents’ race and ethnicity. As shown in figure 2, Black parents reported fewer desired-planned changes than Latino and

Figure 2. Types of Childcare Changes by Parents' Race and Ethnicity

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: N=132 childcare changes.

White families, and reported more undesired changes, both planned and unplanned. Latino parents also reported slightly more undesired (planned and unplanned) changes than White parents. These findings are similar if we consider the number of children with each type of change. We focus on differences between Black, Latino, and White parents because only three parents in our sample identified as a different race or ethnicity, two as multiracial and one as Asian.

These racial and ethnic differences are driven in part by differences in parents' reasons for changing childcare arrangements. Black parents were more likely to report changing arrangements because of a job or subsidy loss or problems with the subsidy program, which contributed to more undesired changes, both planned and unplanned. In particular, Black parents reported problems getting their subsidy approved for their job or school program or for their unlicensed relative or friend provider. In these cases, the parent began using the subsidized provider while awaiting subsidy approval and had to leave the arrangement when their application was denied. In a similar

situation, one Latina mother from Nassau County lost her FCC provider when the provider found out that the mother had switched jobs and started working as a housekeeper paid under the table. The provider worried the mother's job did not fulfill subsidy program requirements and the provider might not get paid.

Although Black, Latino, and White parents all reported that changes in their employment led to changes in care arrangements, the types of childcare changes differed by race and ethnicity. For White and Latino parents, changes in employment nearly always led to a desired-planned change. For Black parents, job changes most often led to an undesired-planned change because their new job was too far away or because their new work schedule no longer worked with their provider, which also contributed to Black parents reporting more undesired changes. Latino parents reported more provider problems that led to undesired changes; these were similar to those Black and White parents reported but more common among Latino parents. Moreover, provider problems, particularly concerns about the

quality of care (often FCC homes), were a more prevalent driver of desired-planned changes among Latino parents than among Black and White parents, who were more likely to report reasons like seeking a better provider fit or transitions in jobs, school, or housing.

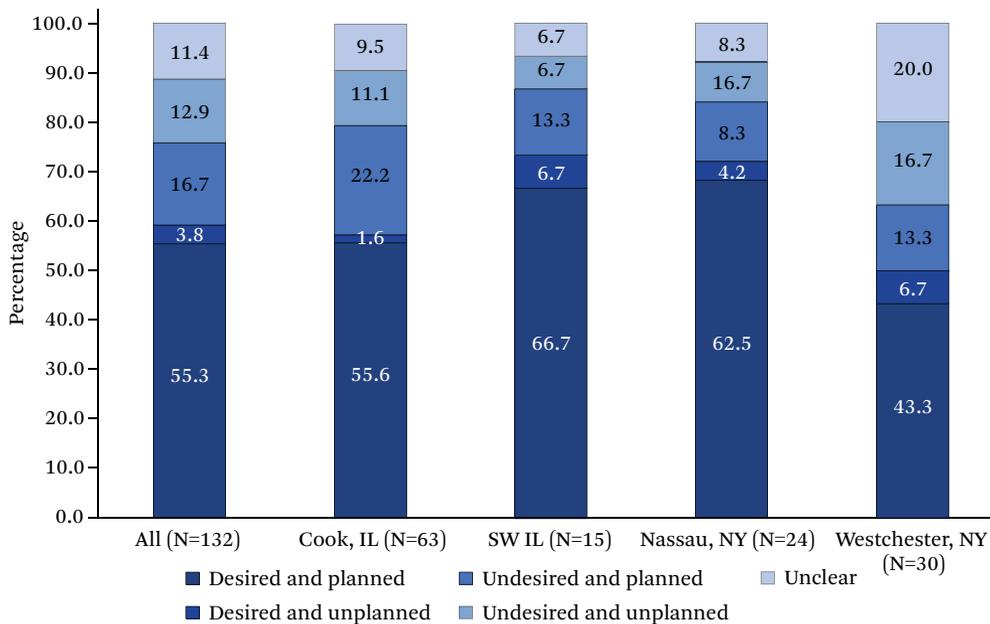
Parents rarely explicitly mentioned race or ethnicity when describing their reasons for changing childcare arrangements, but some Black and Latino parents said they sought out centers that were racially and ethnically diverse. Language was an important consideration for Latino immigrant parents. For example, one father in Cook County made a desired-planned change from one FCC to another that spoke Spanish and that he could better communicate with. Other Latino parents also reported that being able to communicate with a provider in Spanish was an important factor. Another Latina immigrant mother enrolled her daughter in a public pre-K program (a desired-planned change) so that her daughter would learn English before starting kindergarten because the family spoke Spanish at home and her daughter was being cared for by her Spanish-speaking grandmother.

Differences in Experiences by Geographic Site

Patterns in the types of childcare changes differed by geographic site. Families in southwestern Illinois and Nassau County experienced more desired-planned changes than their counterparts in Cook and Westchester Counties (see figure 3). Families in southwestern Illinois experienced fewer undesired changes (planned or unplanned) than those in the other sites, and families in both Illinois sites experienced fewer undesired-unplanned changes than their New York counterparts. These findings are similar if we consider types of changes at the child level, save that children in Cook County are as likely to experience at least one desired-planned change as those in southwestern Illinois and Nassau County.

What might account for these patterns? One explanation is that families in southwestern Illinois were less likely to report that subsidy problems contributed to a change. Moreover, although a substantial number of families in Cook County either lost their subsidy or encountered subsidy problems that led to an undesired change, they often had notice that the

Figure 3. Types of Childcare Changes by Geographic Site



Source: Authors' calculations.
 Note: N=132 childcare changes.

subsidy was ending, making them more likely to experience undesired and planned changes than their New York counterparts. Some parents in Cook County, for example, reported that they continued using the subsidy after a job exit until it was time to redetermine their eligibility or that their childcare center allowed them to continue using the center for a few months after the subsidy ended. Parents in Cook County also reported more undesired and planned changes driven by provider-related reasons, such as problems with provider reliability.

Families in Westchester County seem to have experienced fewer desired-planned changes because they were less likely to report childcare changes driven by seeking a better provider fit, higher-quality care, or a different type of care. Across sites, desired-planned changes driven by seeking a better provider fit were often into public pre-K or Head Start programs or from informal to more formal care (for example, relative care to FCC or FCC to center). Indeed, the one child who experienced this type of change in Westchester County transitioned into a public pre-K program from exclusive parental care. This geographic pattern could reflect differences in the supply of licensed childcare across sites. In Cook County, although some desired-planned changes related to seeking a better provider fit were into Head Start and public pre-K programs, many were into community-based centers (typically subsidized), suggesting that parents in Cook County may have more center-based care options. In addition, across all types of changes, those in Cook County were more likely to involve transitions into center-based care, whereas those in Westchester County were the least likely.

DISCUSSION

Many families with low incomes experience childcare instability that has negative implications for both parental employment and children's development. However, not all childcare changes involve harmful instability. In fact, many reflect parental efforts to move children into more beneficial settings. Understanding the conditions that bring unwanted instability and those that support child or family well-

being is imperative to identifying policy levers that can help parents prevent harmful changes and encourage more positive ones. This is especially important during an era of dynamic family trends and renewed initiatives to design policies that better meet the needs of working families. We argue that understanding the extent to which parents desire to leave their provider (desirability) and have time to plan for new arrangements (planned nature) can help distinguish between transitions that are problematic or beneficial. We apply this framework to data from qualitative interviews with a racially diverse sample of parents with low incomes.

Although nearly all desired childcare changes were planned, undesired changes were both planned and unplanned. When desired changes were planned—driven by parents' seeking a better provider fit or different type of care, problems with their current provider, or changes in employment, schooling, or housing—parents had time to search for a new provider. Most of these changes were into programs parents felt were an improvement in quality or fit, and thus were described as supportive of family well-being. In the few instances when desired changes were unplanned, they could be disruptive because they were so sudden and typically left parents without any childcare. Nevertheless, because these changes were driven at least in part by parents' concerns about their provider, parents also expressed relief at removing their child from an undesirable and sometimes unsafe care arrangement. Parents experienced undesired childcare changes when they felt forced to leave a provider with whom they were satisfied. Undesired and unplanned changes were the most disruptive and often led parents to scramble to find new care arrangements or quit their jobs. Undesired and planned changes were less disruptive but did not typically result in a better provider fit. A subsidy loss (sometimes in combination with a job loss) and problems with the subsidy program (including payment problems and low payment rates) often precipitated an undesired change, especially unplanned changes. When changes in families' circumstances, such as a residential move or job change, made a provider untenable, parents also felt forced to

make an undesired change but typically had time to plan.

Both desirability and the planned nature of changes are important dimensions for understanding parents' experiences with childcare changes. Desired-planned changes are similar to the "planned transitions" of Katherine Speirs, Colleen Vesely, and Kevin Roy (2015), which represent changes in care both wished for and planned. Similarly, undesired-unplanned changes are similar to their concept of "forced transitions," which occur when parents are satisfied with their care arrangement but need to leave without time to plan for or anticipate the change. However, planned changes are not always desirable or supportive of family well-being. When parents feel forced to leave a provider that is a good fit, they may still view the transition as undesirable, even with sufficient planning. Moreover, although most desired-planned changes did result in securing a more preferred care arrangement, many desired-planned changes were driven by problems with parents' current provider that could have been prevented if parents had more time and better information during their childcare search. The availability and quality of childcare options in parents' neighborhoods—and their knowledge of those options—mattered for their ability to find a provider that was a good fit. Finding affordable childcare with "reasonable effort" is a key dimension of access (Friese et al. 2017), and parents shared many stories of stressful and unsatisfactory searches that required more than reasonable effort. Like Moran (2021), we find that some changes are desired and unplanned when parents who were having provider problems decided to suddenly end the arrangement, for example, out of concern for their child's safety.

Not enough time to plan was particularly salient in parents' use of temporary arrangements. Those who did not have enough time in their childcare search frequently identified a temporary arrangement while continuing their search or waiting to reinstate subsidy eligibility or for a spot to open at another provider. Temporary arrangements was a strategy parents who wanted to conduct a higher-quality search used, but it contributed to children's experiencing a greater number of settings. Our findings

suggest that policy reforms should work to minimize parents' need for temporary arrangements. For example, subsidy rules could (and sometimes do) allow parents to begin using care while searching for a job and hold onto care when subsidy-related problems cause delays to eligibility redetermination.

Almost half the target children in our sample (all of whom were under six years old) experienced multiple childcare changes; indeed, one in five experienced three or more. Had we collected information on additional children in the household, the number of changes would likely have been even higher. Moreover, had we collected data from a wider swath of low- and moderate-income families who do not benefit from subsidized care but nevertheless report economic challenges finding and maintaining affordable care, we might have observed even more changes. Future research would benefit from examining the implications of changes for families at different levels of economic need.

Our findings suggest that future childcare instability research might benefit from taking into account the valence of childcare changes, and identify ways to model them both individually and over time to gain a better understanding of the positive and negative implications of complex childcare trajectories for children's and families' well-being. Survey researchers could develop items that tap into the reasons for changing providers (especially job loss or job changes, subsidy loss, provider problems, children's needs), whether the change was desired, and the extent of time that was available for planning. With such data, the patterns in this study could be linked to critical outcomes related to child development, parental employment, and family well-being.

Our small and nonrepresentative sample precludes drawing definitive conclusions about subpopulation differences. Nevertheless, it is concerning that, relative to White and Latino parents, the childcare changes Black parents describe appear to more frequently reflect negative instability rather than a positive change to a new setting. For example, the childcare changes of Black parents were more likely than those of White and Latino parents to be reported as undesired (Latino parents showing

more undesirable changes compared to White parents) in part because Black parents reported more job changes that necessitated leaving a preferred provider, subsidy loss, and complications getting a subsidy approved. The data also suggest that Latino parents may be having more difficulty than either their White or Black counterparts finding providers that meet their family's expectations regarding quality and linguistic inclusion. This finding underscores the importance of including linguistic and cultural competence in provider training efforts. Overall, these findings are consistent with research indicating that the subsidy approval and re-determination process can be especially challenging for families of color, who are more likely to have precarious employment circumstances and use license-exempt family, friend, and neighbor providers, triggering in some cases unexpected and undesired care exits (Henly, Sandstrom, and Pilarz 2017).

The local supply of formal childcare options may partially account for differences in the desirability and planned nature of changes that we observed across the geographic sites. Rural areas have few center-based care options (Anderson and Mikesell 2019), and families with low incomes in suburban areas may have particular challenges finding affordable care even with their subsidies. Supply differences in formal care may explain why it was more common for Cook County parents to seek a better fit from among a broad range of community-based formal programs, whereas in other communities, seeking a better fit was more narrowly in reference to Head Start and public pre-K. Relative to New York parents, Illinois parents experienced more planned changes (desired or not), perhaps because of more notice of or more flexibility from their providers after a subsidy loss. In Cook County, a greater opportunity to plan did not coincide with more desired moves because parents reported more changes precipitated by subsidy problems than those in southwestern Illinois did. This finding suggests that differences in local implementation of subsidy programs are more likely to explain this pattern than state-level policies, such as eligibility period lengths. Our data, however, do not allow us to pinpoint the underlying causes of these different patterns by geography.

We therefore interpret these findings with caution.

Our data were collected before the 2014 Reauthorization of the CCDBG, which made several changes to the childcare subsidy program to improve access for families with low incomes to high-quality care and continuity of care. Depending on the success of these goals, our 2013 data may overestimate the frequency of childcare changes today. Our findings suggest that the CCDBG policy reforms designed to increase continuity of subsidy receipt by lengthening eligibility periods to twelve months and mandating a ninety-day grace period after a job loss should help prevent undesired changes. Additionally, new federal regulations require states and territories to implement strategies to improve consumer education and childcare access in underserved communities. Improvements in consumer education strategies can help parents in their search and selection efforts so they can make informed choices and have an easier time finding high-quality care and good provider-family fit from the start. Further, increased requirements for monitoring childcare quality and safety in the CCDBG reauthorization may also minimize desired changes that are driven by provider problems, although these requirements may discourage some providers from participating in the subsidy program altogether (Henly and Adams 2018). Our findings also suggest that reforms resulting in higher payment rates to subsidized providers might reduce the frequency of childcare changes caused by providers who discontinue their involvement in the subsidy program because of the below-market rates the state pays.

Not all changes are disruptive to families and not all could be prevented by altering subsidy program rules. Given the centrality of parental employment for childcare stability, especially for Black families in our study, policies that increase earnings and improve stability in parents' work hours and schedules are also needed. As Elizabeth Ananat, Anna Gassman-Pines, and John Fitz-Henley (2022, this issue) demonstrate, fair scheduling laws have the potential to stabilize parents' work hours and schedules. More stable schedules facilitate parents' ability to find stable care and, in turn, more stable care can minimize childcare-

related work disruptions (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue).

Recent policy developments hold promise for addressing broader and long-standing issues in the U.S. childcare landscape—a shortage of supply to meet families’ needs and preferences, minimal levels of quality, and unaffordable out-of-pocket costs—that complicate finding and maintaining high-quality and stable care. For example, the American Rescue Plan Act passed in March 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier pandemic relief funds infused nearly \$50 billion into the childcare system aimed at stabilizing and strengthening childcare providers and supporting families with low incomes impacted by lost jobs and income. These funds have helped protect and boost the childcare market in the short term. The Biden administration’s Build Back Better Framework (White House 2021) would further alleviate childcare costs. The Build Back Better plan includes a proposal to extend the expanded Child Tax Credit in the American Rescue Plan, provide free, high-quality, and universal preschool for three- and four-year-olds, and expand the availability of subsidies to ensure that families earning up to 250 percent of state median income spend no more than 7 percent of their income on childcare. These investments could significantly improve low-income families’ access to high-quality and stable childcare by expanding program eligibility and reducing out-of-pocket costs while providing supplemental income via tax credits that could help families weather gaps in subsidy coverage or to afford fees not covered by a subsidy. A guarantee of two years of high-quality preschool education could also ease childcare search efforts—especially for parents working regular, daytime, and weekday hours when preschool programs are in session—thereby reducing the chance of undesired, unplanned changes because of a bad match. Our findings caution a naïve assessment of childcare changes as necessarily negative and suggest that the implementation of new policies should not encourage stability above all else. Instead, policies should support families’ efforts to seek new, higher-quality providers to address changing family contexts and children’s changing developmental needs while helping stabilize

high-quality arrangements that are a good fit for the family.

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The Earned Income Tax Credit, Family Complexity, and Children's Living Arrangements



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Demographic shifts over the last half-century have resulted in dramatic changes in family structure. These changes have implications for the social safety net because public assistance programs define families differently. This article focuses on a critical poverty-alleviation policy, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), to document family complexity in the United States. We find that more than 60 percent of children in lower-income families reside in households with ambiguity in tax filing and thus in claiming valuable credits. Tax filing ambiguity driven by family complexity is especially common among households with Black children, highlighting significant racial inequities in the tax treatment of complex families. We also consider two reforms to reflect the realities of families today: the childless EITC and a noncustodial parent EITC.

Keywords: EITC, family structure, family complexity

Demographic shifts over the last few decades have changed the nature of children's living arrangements, especially among those whose parents have low incomes (see, for example, Cherlin 2010). A large literature has documented the increasing diversity in children's living arrangements (Carlson and Meyer 2014), such as living with unmarried or cohabiting parents (Manning and Stykes 2015); step families, blended families, or social fathers (Furstenberg 2014); or complexity arising from multiple partner fertility (Monte 2019). Beyond

parents and their partners, children are also increasingly likely to live with other extended family members (Pilkauskas and Cross 2018). In 2018, more than 15 percent of children lived with adults who were not their parents or their parent's partners (Harvey, Dunifon, and Pilkauskas 2021). Complexity in children's living arrangements is also closely linked with socioeconomic status and race-ethnicity: children from low-income and non-White households experience greater complexity than their more affluent peers (Harvey, Dunifon, and Pilkauskas

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2021; Cross 2018). The recent COVID-19 pandemic may further increase the share of children in complex living arrangements driven by increased rates of parental death (Kidman et al. 2021) and economic instability.

These demographic shifts have occurred amid critical shifts in the U.S. social safety net and the nature of work. Welfare reform in the mid-1990s marked a shift away from unconditional cash benefits toward in-kind benefits such as Medicaid and food stamps and work-contingent programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). At the same time, polarization in the labor market has led to an increase in low-wage, unstable, and unpredictable work arrangements (see Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue) that may affect families' ability to qualify for these work-contingent tax credits, as well as childcare (Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henly 2022, this issue) and other needed assistance (Randles 2022, this issue). Declines in labor-market opportunities for those without a college degree have also likely contributed to increases in family complexity (see Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2018; Edin et al. 2019).

Family diversity can create complexity in claiming needed assistance as each social safety net program defines families differently. For instance, Food Stamp (or SNAP) benefits are determined based on everyone who lives in the same household and purchases or prepares meals together (spouses and children are automatically considered as one unit; claiming for other relatives is less clear). Medicaid eligibility, on the other hand, is determined by income at the nuclear family structure, which is based on the marital status of parents and children. For benefits provided through the tax code, eligibility is based on tax filing units, which is determined based on marital status as of December 31, who resided in the household for at least half of the year, and the ages of the family members. To further complicate matters, many tax credits and deductions within the tax code

have their own set of age, financial support, and residency requirements.

We focus on the interaction between the Earned Income Tax Credit and family complexity. The EITC is a critical U.S. antipoverty policy that lifts at least eight million individuals out of poverty each year. For families with children, it does more to reduce poverty than any other current social policy, perhaps excepting the 2021 Child Tax Credit (Fox 2020). Many studies have linked the EITC with increased labor-force participation among unmarried mothers (Meyer and Rosenbaum 2001; Hoynes and Patel 2018; Micheltore and Pilkauskas 2021). Thus, this work-contingent policy plays a central role in the lives of low-wage workers, serving as a wage subsidy for parents who may face unstable or precarious employment. Yet complexity in family structure and in tax rules may leave working parents without access to this important credit. Although tax rules delineate who is eligible to claim children for EITC purposes, the credit was established in 1975, when the average family looked very different from the average family today. Qualitative studies have documented incidents of confusion in determining tax filing units (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015) and the challenges arising from family complexity (Edin, Tach, and Halpern-Meekin 2014), but the extent to which EITC rules create complicated and confusing tax filing arrangements, or leave out certain family types, is not well understood at a national level.¹

Using the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS), we document the proportion of children residing in various complex living arrangements. We pay particular attention to the proportion in households where tax filing status might be especially complicated: children living with adult relatives in addition to their parents, and those with only one or no birth parent present.² EITC tax filing complexity arises in these households because multiple adults can potentially claim

1. A number of reports have noted the potential complications arising from family complexity and the tax system (Goldin and Kleiman 2021; Landers and Crandall-Hollick 2021; Maag, Peters, and Edelstein 2016).

2. The CPS contains information on parent type, distinguishing between biological, step, or adopted parents. Here, we use the term birth parent to refer to a biological or adopted parent, as compared to a step-parent or social parent.

the same child. Using information from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), we provide more detailed estimates of how many children spend part of their time residing with nonresident or noncustodial parents, and the financial support that they receive from nonresident parents. We then discuss the implications of these complex living arrangements for EITC claiming and potential reforms that could provide more support for complex families. The findings from this study have broader implications for the social safety net, and the 2021 expansion of the Child Tax Credit in particular,³ which requires assessing children's living arrangements on a monthly basis.

BACKGROUND

The Earned Income Tax Credit began in 1975 as a temporary credit, made permanent in 1978, for low-income parents, intended to offset payroll tax contributions.⁴ The credit is fully refundable, meaning that households with no tax liability can still receive the credit in the form of a tax refund. The benefit schedule is trapezoidal: benefits phase in up to a threshold, remain constant over some values of income (plateau), and then phase out for earnings beyond a second threshold. The EITC provides more generous benefits to households with multiple children, but no additional benefit for those with more than three. For households without qualifying children, the maximum benefit for childless filers in 2019 was only \$529 and those with earnings above \$15,570 (approximately the annual income of an individual working full time at the federal minimum wage) were not eligible.⁵ In contrast, households with three children and earnings below \$50,162 could claim benefits worth up to \$6,557. Families with children whose income is up to roughly 230 percent of the federal poverty threshold may be

eligible for the EITC, and benefits could be worth up to 45 percent of annual earnings.

Because taxes are levied at the family level, the tax code, and the EITC in particular, is not marriage neutral. Until 2002, married filers faced the same benefit schedule as unmarried filers, creating a substantial "marriage penalty" for EITC claimants. That is, many couples who would be eligible for the EITC if unmarried and filing as separate tax units, would be ineligible for the credit if they were to marry and file their taxes jointly, creating some concern that the EITC discourages marriage (see Dickert-Conlin and Houser 2002; Herbst 2011; Michelmore 2018). Over the last two decades, efforts have been made to reduce the marriage penalty by extending the plateau region of the benefit schedule for married filers. These changes allow married couples to have higher earnings than unmarried filers and still maintain their EITC benefits. In 2019, the threshold for married filers was extended \$5,800 beyond that of unmarried filers.

Qualifying Child Rules

Strict eligibility and low benefit levels for tax filers without qualifying children mean that families with children are the primary beneficiaries of the EITC. Who is considered a child in a household may seem straightforward, but complex relationship and residency tests create uncertainty for some families. Indeed, whether intentional or due to confusion, the vast majority of erroneous claiming of the EITC is due to misclaiming of dependent children (Liebman 2000).

An individual—or qualifying child—must meet three requirements: age, relationship, and residency. We describe the eligibility rules and then highlight areas where the rules are less clear.

The age requirement states that the qualifying child must be under the age of nineteen, or

3. American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Pub. L. No. 117-2, 135 Stat. 4 (March 11, 2021).

4. As of 2019, twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia also had state-level EITCs.

5. The EITC for households without qualifying children is typically referred to as the childless EITC. In fact, many of these filers do have children, but for tax-filing purposes they cannot claim them. In 2021, under the American Rescue Plan Act, the childless EITC was temporarily expanded, tripling the max credit (to approximately \$1,500) and extending the income eligibility to \$21,000.

twenty-four if a full-time student at the end of the tax year. The child must also be younger than the tax filer.⁶

To meet the relationship test, the child must be the biological, adopted, step, or foster child of the parent. A child may also be a descendent of the claimant, such as a grandchild, niece, or nephew. A child could also meet the relationship test if they are the brother or sister of the claimant, including full, half-, or step-sibling.

The child must also reside in the household with the tax filer for at least six months of the year, though exceptions are made if the child was born or died during the tax year.

Although the age requirement is relatively straightforward, both the relationship test and the residency test in complex families can be ambiguous. This can arise when more than one household or person in a household meets all three requirements, such as when a child's parents are divorced but share custody of the child, when two cohabiting birth parents of the child live together and could both potentially claim the child, or when parents live with other relatives who are also potentially eligible to claim the child.

When who can claim the child is ambiguous, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) provides a set of tiebreaker rules. These state that if more than one taxpayer can claim the child, the qualification goes first to the child's parent (in cases when a child lives with other relatives). If more than one parent is a taxpayer (parents who do not file taxes jointly or unmarried parents), the qualification will go to the parent with whom the child has lived the longest in the previous year. However, if a child spends an equal amount of time with both parents (such as in joint custody or cohabiting birth parents), then the qualification goes to the parent with the highest adjusted gross income (AGI). If no parent taxpayer is eligible to claim the child (such as when parents are un-

employed), then the taxpayer with the highest AGI who also lives with and is related to the child may claim the child. In practice, whichever parent or caregiver files their taxes first and claims the child as a qualifying child for the purposes of the EITC will receive the refund; it is up to the secondary parent or caregiver (or the IRS auditing process) to contest the claim.

In sum, despite rules to determine who can claim the child, in more complex family arrangements, particularly if the child does not reside in a household with two married, birth parents, the ambiguity in who can claim is significant. This ambiguity is especially important when it might be easy to make mistakes, both parents have significant financial hardships, and because the IRS is far more likely to audit low-income filers than higher-income filers (Kiel and Essinger 2018; Kiel and Fresques 2019; Tax Policy Center 2020).

DATA

Because no one data source provides a complete picture of family complexity in the early twenty-first century, we use four data sources in this analysis: the March 2019 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey, the 2019 American Community Survey, the 2017–2019 National Survey of Family Growth, and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.

The CPS ASEC and the ACS are two large, nationally representative data sources, and allow us to document the various living arrangements among children whose families might be eligible for the EITC. In the CPS ASEC and the ACS, we restrict our sample to those under the age of nineteen, given that qualifying children must be younger than nineteen at the end of the calendar year.⁷ We supplement these data with the NSFG and the FFCWS to ascertain more information about nonresident parents—

6. We use the term child throughout even though eighteen-year-olds are generally considered adults by law (they can vote and be drafted). The eligibility age for the EITC is slightly higher than for the Child Tax Credit; until 2020 the Child Tax Credit age was under seventeen, under the 2021 expansion the age was changed to under eighteen.

7. Although children under the age of twenty-four who are full-time students are also eligible, we do not include them in these analyses because of data constraints: we are unable to observe the tax filing units of individuals who do not live with their parents while they are enrolled in school.

how often children see their nonresident parents and whether they receive financial support from them and if so how much.

Current Population Survey

The CPS is a nationally representative annual survey of approximately sixty thousand households. The CPS ASEC contains detailed information on household composition, labor-market status, and annual income from a variety of sources, and is administered in March of each year. Annual income information is based on the 2018 tax year, so we calculate EITC eligibility based on the tax filing rules in 2018. After restricting the sample to those under the age of nineteen, we have a sample size of 49,864 children.

American Community Survey

The ACS is a nationally representative survey of the U.S. population that samples approximately three million households annually and is collected by the Census Bureau. The ACS data for this study were drawn from extracts made by the Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample, or IPUMS USA (Ruggles et al. 2021). Unlike the CPS, the ACS is conducted on a rolling basis throughout the year, thus income information refers to the prior year rather than the prior tax year. We use tax filing rules for 2018 for the 2019 ACS. We exclude children who live in group quarters because it is not possible to determine their family or household relationships or income and to make more comparable with the CPS. The sample includes 667,326 children.⁸

National Survey of Family Growth

The NSFG collects information from a nationally representative sample of men and women of childbearing age, between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine. We use the 2017–2019 survey to obtain estimates about time and financial sup-

port provided by nonresident fathers. Men provide information about children who do not reside in their household, including how often their nonresident children sleep over and whether and how much financial support they provide them.⁹ Of the 2,029 men reporting at least one child, 784 reported having at least one nonresident child.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

To obtain additional information about nonresident parents, we supplement our analyses with data from the FFCWS, an urban longitudinal birth cohort study of approximately five thousand births, followed at regular intervals between 1999 and 2016.¹⁰ Study participants are relatively economically disadvantaged and thus likely eligible for the EITC. Primary caregivers (such as grandparents or other relatives) and both parents were interviewed when the children were nine years old, providing insight into differences in perceptions across caregivers and on nonparental guardianship in general. We draw on data from all survey waves for some questions and focus on the year nine data for comparing across caregiver types.

MEASURES

The ACS and CPS collect information on all individuals residing in the household and their relationship to the household respondent. We use this information, variables that link children to parents, relationship status, and age to construct the variables for our analyses.

Household Structure

The ACS and CPS include information on the marital status of every member of the household, as well as the presence of cohabiting partners, which we use to determine whether children reside with married parents, cohabiting

8. Certain differences between the ACS and CPS sampling might lead to slightly different estimates. First, the CPS only includes people who “usually” live in the household, whereas the ACS considers individuals to be part of the household if, at the time of the survey, they have been in the house, or will be in the house for more than two months and do not have a “usual residence elsewhere.” Second, the ACS is mandatory and the CPS is a voluntary survey.

9. Although women are asked whether any of their children do not reside with them, women are not asked questions about time spent with nonresident children or about financial support provided to them.

10. For more information, see the study website at Princeton University (<https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>).

parents, or an unmarried, unpartnered parent.¹¹ Using “parent pointers,” or variables that identify coresident parents, we determine whether children have parents in the household. We consider children without parent pointers (or pointers that indicate no parent present) to be residing in households with no parent present.¹² Using data on the relationship to the household head and the age of the individuals, we can identify the relationship of other nonparent or nonpartner-of-parent adults in the household.¹³ We then identify whether other relatives or nonrelatives over the age of eighteen live in the household, distinguishing grandparents from other relatives for sub-analyses.¹⁴

Using this information, we categorize children into five living-arrangement groups: married, cohabiting, or single parents with no other adults in the household; no parents but other adult relatives such as a grandparent or uncle in the household; and no related adults in the household. We then create subcategories for each of the parent groups to distinguish living arrangements in which the child lives with only parents from those that include both parents and related adults, and those that include

parents and unrelated adults.¹⁵ In the CPS, we further distinguish children living with cohabiting parents into those who are living with two birth parents and those who are not as this distinction is important for tax filing purposes.¹⁶

Income and EITC Eligibility

In some analyses, to illustrate the scope of family complexity among this policy-relevant population, we focus on households where some or all of the individuals are likely to qualify for the EITC. To estimate eligibility, we use information on the number of children in the household based on parent reports, marital status of the parents, and parental earnings. We calculate eligibility based on whether parental earnings were below the maximum income threshold in the 2018 tax year given the number of children residing in the household (including those with zero earnings). For married-couple households, we combine both parents’ earnings, because EITC eligibility is based on the earnings of both parents if their filing status is married filing jointly.¹⁷ For cohabiting-couple households, we calculate EITC eligibility based on the earnings of the birth parent if only one birth parent is in the household, and based on

11. In the CPS, information on the presence of cohabiting partners is available for all household members. The ACS has this information only for the respondent.

12. In the ACS, the parent pointer identifies any coresidential romantic partner as the child’s parent. Thus, social parents (unmarried or married step-parents or cohabiting partners) will be identified as the child’s parent in some cases. This may mean that some partners who do not consider themselves a parent figure of the child will be erroneously considered a parent. It is not possible to distinguish biological parents in the ACS.

13. If the parent (or grandparent) is the reference person we can identify the relationship to all other household members with great accuracy. However, if a nonrelative is the reference person, the child and all their relatives are likely categorized as nonrelatives and thus the specific relationships cannot be identified, though we can still link children to their parents via the parent pointers. In a supplemental analysis in the ACS, we used the parent pointers to identify the child’s grandparents; in only a handful of cases did children reside with both a parent and grandparent but neither parental figure was the household respondent, suggesting this is unlikely to introduce many errors in identifying children’s relatives.

14. Following prior work, we do not consider siblings of the child of any age to be “additional adults” (see Pilkauskas, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 2014).

15. When the household includes both additional related adults and unrelated adults, children are categorized as living with related adults because these related adults could potentially claim children for the purposes of the EITC but unrelated adults could not.

16. We do not do the same in the ACS because the information is not collected.

17. Married couples who file as married filing separately cannot claim the EITC, so we assume that all married couples file jointly.

the earnings of the higher-earning partner if both parents are birth parents, which is consistent with the tiebreaker rules in the EITC.¹⁸ We calculate eligibility separately rather than using the CPS imputed variable (which uses NBER's TAXSIM) because the assumptions made for complicated households (such as cohabiting birth parents) are not clear and because non-parental caregivers (such as a grandparent caregiver) are not considered eligible.¹⁹

Because calculating EITC eligibility as described requires many assumptions about the tax filing unit, we also present findings characterizing children by whether their total family income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Per census family definitions, all income of individuals residing in the household related by blood or marriage are considered in this calculation.

Children's Household Living Arrangements

Nearly forty-nine million, or a majority of children in our sample, live in married-parent households (see table 1): about 65 percent of children in both samples and the vast majority of children in married households do not live with any other adults beyond the nuclear family (about 90 percent, or 58 percent of all children). Children living with a single parent are the second-largest category—approximately 24 percent (18.3 million) of children, of which two-thirds live with just one parent and no other adults (16 percent of all children). About 7 percent of children (5.6 million) live with cohabiting adults, and according to the CPS, about 40 percent of those children live with both birth parents and 60 percent with one birth parent and one social parent. Very few children in cohabiting households live with other adults (relatives or nonrelatives, less than 1 percent).

Regardless of the marital status of the parents, about 12 to 13 percent of children live in a household with at least one parent and at least one related adult over the age of eighteen (ten million children). A smaller proportion (1 to 2 percent, or about 1.7 million), live in a household with at least one parent and one unrelated adult over the age of eighteen. Last, 4.5 percent of children under the age of nineteen live in a household without a parent: the majority of those children live with another related adult over the age of 18 (over 3 percent), such as a grandparent (approximately 2 percent). About 1 percent of children live with other adult relatives, such as an aunt or uncle, and the remaining 1 percent live with adult nonrelatives (such as foster care).

When we restrict our sample to children living in poor and near-poor households, we find stark differences in living arrangements relative to the population overall. About 37 percent of children in lower-income households live in a married, two-parent household with no other relatives; they are also nearly twice as likely to reside with cohabiting parents as the full sample of children (12 to 13 percent versus 7 percent among all children). Children in lower-income households are also much more likely to live with a single parent (38 percent versus 24 percent overall) or without any parent than the full population of children (8 percent versus 4.5 percent overall). Interestingly, the share of children living with their parent (or parents) and other relatives or other nonrelatives is similar across the full population and lower-income populations (12 to 14 percent with relatives and 2 to 3 percent with nonrelatives). Results are very similar when we examine households with income below the EITC-eligibility threshold rather than 200 percent of poverty. Because the

18. In the ACS, we use measures of family income minus public assistance income. This is the measure used by the Census Bureau for estimating income-to-needs in the ACS. We do this because this variable seems to produce more consistent estimates than the sum of the parent's earnings variables for households with more than one coresident parent. It is not clear why this is the case; however, for households with other relatives (that would be included in the poverty threshold) we just use the earnings of the parents. This approach leads to very similar estimates of eligibility between the ACS and CPS despite different look-back periods for income.

19. For example, the CPS imputation does not assign children to grandparents as they are not the child's "parents," despite the fact that grandparents can technically claim these children as their primary caregiver. Despite these limitations an analysis using the CPS imputed variable shows similar estimates to those produced using our approach for households where parents are present.

Table 1. Children's Living Arrangements

	Percentage of Children					
	ACS			CPS ASEC		
	Number of U.S. Children Under 19	All	<200 Percent of Poverty	EITC-Eligible	All	<200 Percent of Poverty
Married						
No others	48,872,124	63.96	41.70	39.01	65.32	42.75
Plus other relatives	43,753,634	57.26	36.65	35.41	59.54	37.73
Plus other non-relatives	4,501,902	5.89	4.18	2.69	5.32	4.66
	616,588	0.81	0.87	0.91	0.46	0.36
Single	18,338,636	23.99	37.30	40.37	23.50	38.14
No others	12,198,908	15.96	27.40	31.70	16.62	28.36
Plus other relatives	5,188,782	6.79	7.66	6.06	6.31	8.77
Plus other nonrelatives	950,946	1.24	2.24	2.61	0.57	1.01
Cohabiting	5,671,657	7.42	13.12	14.67	6.76	11.74
No others	5,098,980	6.67	11.92	13.13	6.16	10.78
Both birth parents					2.71	5.28
Birth parent + one nonbio					3.45	5.50
Plus other relatives	405,361	0.53	0.78	1.12	0.37	0.56
Plus other nonrelatives	167,316	0.22	0.42	0.42	0.23	0.40
Parents + adult relatives	10,096,045	13.21	12.62	9.87	12.00	13.98
Parents + adult nonrelatives	1,734,850	2.27	3.53	3.94	1.26	1.77
No parent present	3,531,430	4.62	7.87	5.95	4.43	7.38
Grandparent headed	1,680,500	2.20	3.20	3.15	2.17	3.08
Other relative headed (not grandparent)	722,066	0.94	1.25	1.01	1.08	1.38
Other head	1,128,864	1.48	3.42	1.79	1.18	2.92
Number of observations	76,413,847	667,326	230,371	202,499	49,864	18,305
						19,788

Source: Authors' calculations from the American Community Survey (ACS IPUMS; Ruggles et al. 2021) and the Current Population Survey (CPS ASEC; U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

Note: All children under the age of nineteen not residing in group quarters. Children matched to parents using parent pointers. Children living with both adult relatives and nonrelatives counted in the adult relatives category. Children who are unrelated to the household head are considered in the no parent present–other head category. Birth parents do not include adoptive parents. All numbers weighted using survey weights.

EITC-eligibility calculation requires several assumptions about tax filing units, and because the findings are quite similar, we rely on the 200 percent of poverty threshold to characterize low-income households for the remaining analyses.

Family Complexity by Race-Ethnicity

Table 2 presents the prevalence of each household living arrangement discussed in table 1, by child's race-ethnicity. For simplicity, we present results using only the CPS data. Results reveal stark differences in the living arrangements of children by race and ethnicity. Whereas almost 84 percent of Asian children and three-quarters of White children reside in married-parent households, only 61 percent of Hispanic children and 37 percent of Black children do. Nearly half of Black children reside in a single-parent household, relative to 26 percent of Hispanic, 16 percent of White, and just 11 percent of Asian children. Cohabitation rates are similar across racial-ethnic groups (6 to 9 percent), with the exception of Asian children, who are substantially less likely to have cohabiting parents (2 percent). Coresidence with other adult relatives is common among all racial-ethnic groups (15 to 18 percent) except among White households (7 percent). Black children are also substantially more likely to live without any parent in the household (7.5 percent) than all others (3 to 4 percent). Much of this is explained by the prevalence of grandparent-headed households among Black children (5 percent).

Racial differences remain when restricting the sample to all children residing in lower-income households. Children of all race-ethnicities in lower-income households are less likely to live with married parents: 68 percent of Asian, about half of low-income White and Hispanic, and 20 percent of Black children. White children in low-income households are far less likely to live with a parent in addition to other relatives (10 percent) than their Black, Hispanic, and Asian counterparts (14 to 23 percent).

These differences in family complexity by

race and ethnicity have potentially large consequences for EITC claiming. Relative to White children, Black, Hispanic, and especially Asian children are much more likely to have another relative residing in the household who could potentially claim them as a qualifying child. For Black children in low-income households in particular, family complexity due to nonresident parents and living with relatives means that more than 80 percent of such children potentially face complexity in EITC claiming due to a nonresident parent or living with multiple relatives.

Tax Filing Complexity: Household Types

Nonresident parents, the presence of a relative (with or without a parent present), and living with two, cohabiting birth parents can lead to tax filing complexity. In the next section we consider each household type in turn.

Nonresident Parents

The most common intersection between family and tax complexity arises when children have at least one nonresident parent. The complexity stems from the fact that a nonresident parent can potentially claim the child for the EITC if the child spends at least half the year living with that parent. This might arise from a variety of scenarios: joint or shared-custody agreements (postdivorce or when child support orders are set up), midyear moves, or even informal shared-custody agreements. Table 3 presents the proportion of children who have at least one nonresident parent and the common living arrangements among this population. We illustrate this pattern among all children, as well as children from low-income households—overall and by race-ethnicity.²⁰

Among all children under the age of nineteen, approximately 40 percent have at least one nonresident parent. Living without at least one birth parent is even more common, 58 percent, when we limit the sample to children in households with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Differences by race are also significant: nearly 80 percent of Black children in lower-income households have one

20. In table A.1, we show these figures for all children by race-ethnicity.

Table 2. Percentage of Children in Each Living Arrangement by Race and Ethnicity

	All Income Ranges				<200 Percent of Poverty			
	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian
Married								
No others	37.01	74.47	60.63	83.80	20.40	47.68	49.53	68.10
Plus other relatives	33.34	70.70	51.39	70.43	18.08	44.94	42.00	52.60
Plus other non-relatives	3.65	3.30	8.57	13.12	2.30	2.54	6.84	14.95
	0.02	0.47	0.67	0.25	0.02	0.20	0.69	0.55
Single	48.29	16.22	26.27	11.33	62.95	30.98	32.52	22.10
No others	36.88	11.96	16.57	7.66	51.06	23.35	21.93	13.91
Plus other relatives	10.71	3.83	8.84	3.47	11.03	6.57	9.48	7.58
Plus other nonrelatives	0.70	0.43	0.86	0.20	0.86	1.06	1.11	0.61
	7.11	5.63	9.19	1.69	8.28	12.70	12.79	1.86
Cohabiting								
No others	6.84	5.17	8.11	1.47	8.16	11.59	11.56	1.35
Both birth parents	3.18	1.82	4.38	0.40	4.41	4.63	6.41	0.88
Birth parent + one nonbio parent	3.66	3.35	3.73	1.07	3.75	6.96	5.15	0.47
Plus other relatives	0.21	0.20	0.82	0.22	0.12	0.44	0.93	0.51
Plus other nonrelatives	0.06	0.26	0.26	0.00	0.00	0.67	0.30	0.00
Parents plus adult relatives	14.57	7.33	18.24	16.81	13.45	9.55	17.25	23.03
Parents plus adult nonrelatives	0.79	1.15	1.79	0.50	0.98	1.92	2.10	1.16
No parent present								
Grandparent headed	7.60	3.68	3.90	3.15	8.26	8.67	5.16	7.96
Other relative headed	4.52	1.92	1.39	0.28	4.54	3.59	1.71	0.70
Other head	2.04	0.66	1.32	0.89	1.96	0.94	1.41	0.86
	1.04	1.10	1.19	1.98	1.76	4.14	2.04	6.40
Number of observations	5,030	27,775	11,843	2,463	2,902	7,187	6,495	621

Source: Authors' calculations from the Current Population Survey (CPS ASEC; U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

Note: All children under age nineteen not residing in group quarters. Children matched to parents using parent pointers. Children living with both adult relatives and nonrelatives counted in the "adult relatives" category. Children who are unrelated to the household head are considered in the "no parent present–other head" category. Birth parents do not include adoptive parents. Weighted using survey weights.

Table 3. Percentage of Children with at Least One Nonresident Parent

	All Children	<200 percent of poverty				
		All	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian
At least one nonresident parent	41.11	57.81	79.39	54.97	49.56	37.75
Married with step-parent	9.83	6.77	4.4	7.95	7.02	7.26
Cohabiting one-biological parent	3.78	6.05	3.85	7.72	5.75	0.76
Single parent	23.50	38.42	62.95	30.98	32.52	22.10
Grandparent-headed (no parent)	2.17	3.08	4.54	3.59	1.71	0.70
Other relative-headed (no parent)	1.08	1.38	1.96	0.94	1.41	0.86
Nonrelative-headed (no parent)	1.18	2.92	1.76	4.14	2.04	6.40
Number of Observations	49,864	18,305	2,902	7,187	6,495	621

Source: Authors' calculations from the Current Population Survey (CPS ASEC; U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

Note: All children under the age of nineteen not residing in group quarters. All percentages weighted using survey weights.

nonresident parent versus 55 percent of White, 50 percent of Hispanic, and 38 percent of Asian children. Although most children who have at least one nonresident parent live in single-parent-headed households with no others—24 percent of all children and 38 percent of children in low-income households—levels vary dramatically by race-ethnicity. Sixty-five percent of Black children live with a single parent, versus only 22 percent of Asian children.

Among children in lower-income households, 7 percent live with one birth parent and one step-parent and 6 percent live with one birth parent and one “social parent” (the cohabiting nonbirth partner of the parent). Roughly 4 percent of low-income children live with a relative (3 percent with a grandparent and 1 percent with other relatives) with no parent present, but rates for Black children are higher (5 percent grandparent and 2 percent other relatives) than for White (4 percent grandparent, 1 percent other relative), Hispanic (2 percent grandparent, 1 percent other relative), and Asian children (1 percent grandparent, 1 percent other relative) in lower-income households.

Among lower-income households, then, approximately 60 percent of children do not live

with two, married, birth parents, creating some ambiguity in tax filing. However, we might overestimate the number of children facing tax filing complexity because of this form of family complexity for several reasons. First, a child may have a deceased parent. According to estimates from the Social Security Administration, approximately 1.6 percent of children receive benefits because of the death of a working parent (Tamborini, Cupito, and Shoffner 2011).²¹ Second, a child may be born to a parent who used a sperm or egg donor. Estimates of the proportion of children born from donor parents vary wildly, larger estimates showing about 0.5 percent of children in the United States are conceived via sperm donation (Arocho, Lozano, and Halpern 2019), many of whom, about 60 percent (Hertz, Nelson, and Kramer 2013) live in two-parent families, both same and different sex couples. Parents self-report whether they are the biological parent of the child; thus, it is unclear in the survey whether married parents who are not genetically related to the child consider themselves biological parents. Nonetheless, parental death and donor parents may lead us to overestimate the proportion of children with nonresident parents by about 2 percentage points. Third, we

21. About 1 percent of children in the CPS sample reside with a widowed parent, though this is likely an underestimate of the percent of children with a deceased parent, as parents who remarried or were never married would not be considered widows.

assume that nonresident parents even know about their child; however, the extent to which this affects our estimates is unclear.

To be claimed for the EITC, a child must also live with the nonresident parent at least half of the year and that parent must have a relatively low income. To better understand the EITC eligibility of nonresident parents, and thus the number of potentially ambiguous scenarios, we use data from the NSFG on nonresident fathers.²² Fewer than half of nonresident fathers report annual earnings below \$40,000 per year, the upper income threshold for EITC eligibility for a single parent with one qualifying child in 2018 (see table 4). Only 26 percent of nonresident fathers report that their child spent any nights with them in the previous four weeks; 10 percent report that the child stayed several times a week or more—an indicator that the child lives with them half-time or more, and thus might be eligible to claim the EITC. Put-

ting these two criteria together, just 5 percent of nonresident fathers in the NSFG meet both the income and residency requirements to claim the child for the EITC.

In table 5, using data from the FFCWS, we further consider ambiguity in EITC eligibility that could arise when children live in more than one household. Among this lower-income sample, 68 percent of nonresident fathers report that the child lives with them at least some of the time; 36 percent report half of the time or more. These estimates are much higher than those reported by nonresident fathers in the NSFG. However, when we turn to mother's reports on how much of the time the child lives with her, we see large discrepancies between mother's and father's perceptions. Ninety-four percent of mothers who do not live with the child's father report that the child always lives with her; 21 percent of fathers report that the child always lives with him.²³ Although we have

Table 4. Overnight Time with Nonresident Fathers

	Percent
How often did the child spend the night (in last four weeks)?	
Not at all or not ascertained ^a	74
Less than once a week	7
About once a week	9
Several times a week	9
Every day	1
Meets income requirement (less than \$40,000 per year)	44
Meets the time requirement (child lives with parent at least half the time)	10
Meets income and time requirement	5
Number of fathers age fifteen through forty-five with nonresident children	784

Source: Authors' calculations based on National Survey of Family Growth, 2017–2019 (CDC 2022).

Note: Men age fifteen to forty-nine reporting fathering at least one child with whom they do not live.

^aFathers who report not visiting or seeing their nonresident child in the last four weeks are not asked this question.

22. Although both men and women were asked about whether each of their children resides in the home in the NSFG, men were asked more extensively about their support for nonresidential children than women. Among women who had at least one live birth, approximately 5 percent report that at least one of their children lives with their birth father or other relatives. Thus we focus on nonresident fathers.

23. Response rates from fathers are much lower than those from mothers. This table only examines data when both parents were interviewed—but it is a somewhat select group as these may be more involved fathers than the general population. However, in supplemental analyses that did not limit to those where both mothers and fathers responded the distribution of time spent was similar.

no way of assessing which report is more accurate, this finding raises questions about the extent to which nonresident parents may feel entitled to claim the EITC on behalf of their child.

We see a similar discrepancy when we examine reports of nonresident parents when the child lives with a relative rather than the other parent. The bottom panel of table 5 presents the relative caregivers' reports of mothers and fathers time spent with the child as well as mothers' and fathers' self-reports.²⁴ As was true of nonresident fathers, nonresident mothers and fathers self-report far higher levels of contact with their child than the relative caregiver's accounts. These discrepancies could lead parents and relative caregivers to both attempt to claim the child for the EITC. Studies also suggest that challenges around claiming the child

for public assistance frequently arise between grandparent caregivers and nonresident parents, given that both may need the financial assistance (Pittman 2015, 2019). The child's custodial arrangement may not make clear who has the right to claim the child.

In sum, the data from the NSFG suggest that just 5 percent of nonresident fathers meet both the income and residency requirement to claim the child. However, the analyses in the FFCWS demonstrate the complexity of determining how much time children spend with their nonresident parents, given how dramatically opinions differ between parents and between parents and relative caregivers. This high level of disagreement suggests a possibly widespread issue, one that might have real implications for tax filing.

Table 5. Time Living with Nonresident Parents, Discrepancies in Reported Time

How much of the time does the child live with you?^a	Always	Half	Some	Never
Father's reports of time with father	21	15	32	32
Mother's reports of time with mother	94	2	2	1
<i>N</i>	4,594			

How often did parent see child in the last month?^b	Every Day	Half or More	Less than Half	Never
Report of mother				
Relative report	9	8	38	45
Mother report	17	19	41	23
<i>N</i>	66			
Report of father				
Relative report	3	3	45	48
Father report	9	22	53	16
<i>N</i>	33			

Source: Authors' calculations based on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, 1999–2017 (CRCW and CPRC 2022).

^aPooled sample waves 1–5. Sample is restricted to children who have a non-resident parent, whose parents are both living, not in jail and known (i.e., if father is unknown the child is not included). The sample excludes children living with grandparents, foster parents, or other relatives. Because the father survey is much smaller than the mother survey, responses are limited to those cases where the mother and the father both responded. However, analyses that allow all maternal or paternal cases (regardless of the availability of the other parent's data) were very similar.

^bYear 9 (2007–2010). Sample is limited to children who live with a relative (no parent present in the household).

24. These analyses are on very small samples and thus are only suggestive. We restrict the sample to those for which the mother, father, and nonparental caregiver responded. In analyses for which we retained the full sample of nonparental caregivers, the results were similar.

Other Relatives in the Household

The second most common living arrangement for children in which some ambiguity in tax filing arises is when children live with other relatives and their parents (13 percent of children). In other words, multiple adults might be eligible to claim the child for the EITC. According to IRS tiebreaker rules, the parent always has priority; but if a relative, such as a grandparent, is also in the household and has a higher AGI, the grandparent may claim the child instead.²⁵ In households where the child's parents are married and they live with additional relatives, it seems less likely that the relative would claim the child (about 6 percent of children). This situation may be more common, however, among single-parent households who live with other relatives (7 percent of children). The situation is further complicated by the fact that many of these children also have nonresident parents; thus families must negotiate within and across households to ensure that only one individual claims the child. In the rare case that both the parent and the child are under the age of nineteen (less than 1 percent in the CPS sample), the grandparent (or other relative) may claim both the parent and the child for the EITC.

Two-Parent Cohabiting Households

Another source of complexity arises for children in cohabiting households with both birth parents (about 2.5 percent of children, and 5 percent of children in lower-income households). In these cases, both parents are eligible to claim the children for the EITC. According to EITC tiebreaker rules, the parent with the highest AGI should claim the child. Yet in households with multiple children (75 percent of all households headed by cohabiting parents), parents are each free to claim some children in the household (as long as they meet income requirements) to minimize tax liability; research suggests that families do so (Halpern-Meeke et al. 2015; Jones and O'Hara 2016). For example, a household with four qualifying children and two income-eligible parents would

likely minimize household tax liability if each parent separately claimed two children. That is, families can be strategic in their tax filing to maximize benefits. At the same time, doing so requires a fair amount of tax knowledge. We know little about the extent to which families understand these complexities. Access to tax preparers might increase this likelihood, and 96 percent of taxpayers use software such as Turbo Tax (40 percent) or expert preparers (56 percent) to file their taxes (Goldin 2018). Further complications arise if cohabiting partners have some shared, biological children as well as children from prior relationships.

Implications of Tax Filing Complexity

Our analysis suggests two main forms of ambiguity in EITC claiming due to family complexity: when a child does not live with two married birth parents, and when multiple related unmarried adults live with the child. Although many children live in households that could potentially raise such ambiguities, our data cannot estimate how many actually do. Recent data from tax audits provide some context. The Internal Revenue Service estimates that between 22 and 26 percent of tax returns that claim the EITC have errors (Greenstein, Wanchek, and Marr 2019). Most of these errors, however, are unintentional. About 70 percent are due to residency and relationship requirements (U.S. Treasury 2014). Thus the interplay between family complexity and the tax system affects many low-income families. That it does is especially important given that the IRS is five times as likely to audit households who receive the EITC than those who do not (TRAC IRS 2022). Families are far less likely to claim the EITC after an audit, and may be less likely to be employed after an audit, especially families with young children (Guyton et al. 2018). Thus these audits and errors can be consequential. That family complexity is especially common among Black families suggests that it may also contribute to racial inequality in income and wealth.

25. As is the case with divorced parents who share custody, whichever tax filer claims the child first will receive the EITC benefit; the IRS does not allow multiple filers to claim the same child (as verified by their Social Security Number). However, if multiple filers attempt to claim the same child, this may trigger an investigation by the IRS, and would require filers to substantiate their claims with additional documentation.

HOW CAN THE TAX CODE ACCOMMODATE MORE COMPLEX FAMILY STRUCTURES?

The majority of children in lower-income households experience some type of family complexity, posing challenges to determining eligibility for the EITC. Both the Bush and Obama administrations proposed rules to simplify the EITC, and the Treasury Department has also proposed error-reduction policies that have been put forth in various House and Senate bills (Greenstein, Wanchuck, and Marr 2019). We focus our discussion on two policy proposals to better accommodate complex family structures: a federal noncustodial parent EITC and a permanent expansion to the childless EITC.

Noncustodial Parent EITC

Given that the majority of children in low-income households have at least one nonresident parent, our first proposal is to introduce a federal noncustodial parent (NCP) EITC. Proponents of an NCP EITC argue that many noncustodial parents cannot claim their child for the EITC despite providing them financial support.

A noncustodial parent EITC could simultaneously provide tax relief for parents providing financial support for nonresident children and reduce child poverty by encouraging noncustodial parents to further financially support their children. Evidence from New York State, which has its own NCP EITC, suggests that in the first few years after the credit was established, noncustodial fathers were about 1.6 percentage points more likely to be employed and 1 to 2 percentage points more likely to pay their child support in full (Nichols, Sorensen, and Lippold 2012). Providing noncustodial parents their own EITC could also reduce tension and confusion over which parent should claim the EITC

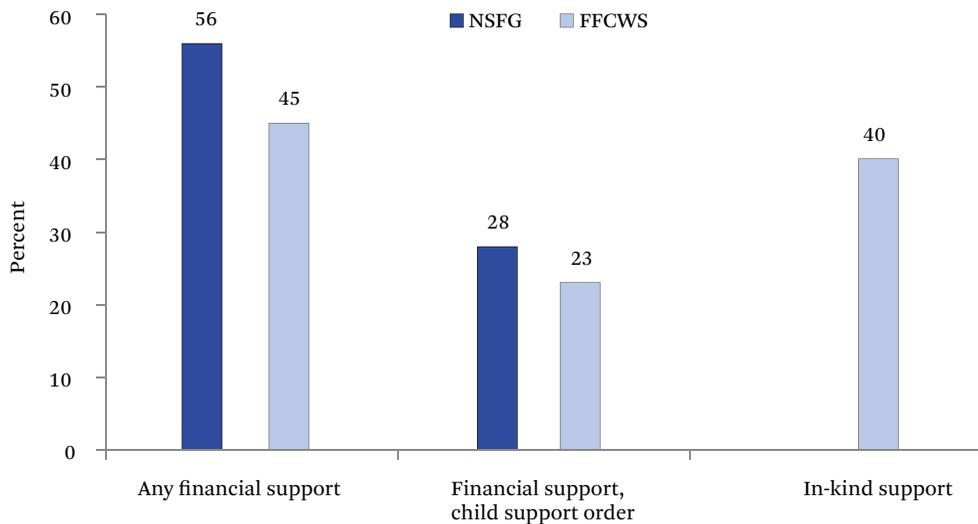
when the child spends a portion of the year with each parent, or when children primarily reside with a nonparental relative. Research shows that many low-income, noncustodial parents are taxed into poverty through the tax code (Marr and Huang 2020). An NCP EITC might lift more noncustodial or nonresident parents out of poverty, which should also benefit children.

New York and Washington, D.C., both have noncustodial parent EITCs that could serve as models for a federal NCP EITC. In New York, the maximum NCP EITC available in 2019 was \$1,323. A full-time, year-round worker earning the minimum wage in New York at that time would have an annual income of about \$23,000 and be eligible for an NCP EITC of about \$575, approximately 3 percent of their pretax annual income.²⁶ In both, the NCP EITC is linked with the child support system: to claim the credit, noncustodial parents must have a formal child support order and have paid all of their child support from the previous calendar year.²⁷

Linking the noncustodial parent EITC to the child support system provides a third-party verification system and ensures that only parents who financially support their nonresident children receive the credit. The obvious downside to this structure is that noncustodial parents without formal child support orders are not eligible, and child support orders are less common among low-income parents in particular (Nelson 2004). For example, figure 1 shows that though more than half of nonresident fathers in the NSFG provide financial support to their children, only 28 percent do so through a formal child support order. In the FFCWS, a lower-income sample of fathers, only 23 percent of nonresident fathers provide formal support, but 40 percent provide in-kind support such as toys and clothing. Another study estimated that only about one-third of fathers with incomes

26. The New York State NCP EITC is calculated as either 20 percent of the federal EITC if the tax filer had one child in the household, or 2.5 times the federal EITC calculated with no qualifying children. In the District of Columbia, noncustodial parents between the ages of eighteen and thirty who paid their child support order in full from the previous year can claim a DC EITC worth 40 percent of the federal credit they would have qualified for under the federal tax rules.

27. Noncustodial parents may have child support arrears from previous years, but must have paid child support for the most recent year. A federal NCP EITC would need to consider whether refunds would be intercepted to pay for child support arrears.

Figure 1. Financial Support from Nonresident Parents

Source: Authors' calculations from National Survey of Family Growth, 2017–2019 (CDC 2022); Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, 1999–2017 (CRCW and CPRC 2022).

Note: Men age fifteen through forty-nine reporting fathering at least one child in the NSFG. In the FFCWS, the sample is restricted to maternal reports of nonresident fathers and sample waves 1–6 are pooled.

under \$40,000 had a formal child support order and only one-third of those were fully compliant with the order (Wheaton and Sorensen 2010).

A further complication in designing a federal noncustodial credit is that many noncustodial parents reside with some of their biological children. These parents would then potentially be eligible to claim more than one type of EITC. In the NSFG, 35 percent of fathers with nonresident children resided with some of their biological children; the vast majority (85 percent) also provided financial support to their nonresident children.²⁸ Allowing tax filers to simultaneously claim an NCP EITC and the EITC for those with qualifying children would acknowledge the financial support that many fathers provide to both their resident and nonresident children and would likely help reduce the number of children and parents living in poverty.

How much would a federal NCP EITC cost? Estimates vary depending on whether the fed-

eral credit would be linked with the child support system. Laura Wheaton and Elaine Sorensen (2010) estimate that a federal NCP EITC that required fathers to be fully compliant with child support orders would cost about \$1.1 billion, but only about 11 percent of the noncustodial fathers with income below \$40,000 would be eligible. Removing the child support requirement, therefore, would potentially scale up the costs by an order of magnitude and imply a federal cost of about \$11 billion.

In sum, although the current NCP EITC policies are closely tied to the child support system, and good reasons support noncustodial parents' providing financially for their children, a policy not coupled with child support would likely provide greater benefit to children and parents. Although policy approaches that both encourage child support and financial support more generally (say through a bigger credit for those who are also up to date on child support orders) are possible, they would incur additional administrative burdens and costs.

28. Approximately 30 percent of low-income noncustodial fathers lived with some of their children (Nichols, Sorensen, and Lippold 2012).

Future research and proposals are needed to outline a federal NCP EITC—those that do and do not link it with child support systems.

Expand the Childless EITC

Rather than create a separate EITC for noncustodial parents, another way to provide benefits to nonresident parents is through an expansion of the EITC for all workers without qualifying dependents, often referred to as the childless EITC.²⁹ Support for expanding the childless EITC has been growing (see, for example, Maag, Werner, and Wheaton 2019; Williams 2019).³⁰ Also, in 2021, the Biden American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) incorporated a temporary expansion to the credit for the 2021 tax year. The expansion nearly tripled the maximum benefit from the previous year, from \$538 in 2020 to \$1,502 in 2021. The expansion also reduced the minimum age required to claim from twenty-five to nineteen, and increased the maximum earnings threshold from \$15,000 to \$21,000. This expansion of the income threshold means that a childless filer working full time, year round at the federal minimum wage would now be eligible for a credit worth about \$800; under the previous law they would have been ineligible. For a federal minimum wage earner, the expansion of the childless EITC is more generous than the NCP EITC in New York, for instance, but full-time, year-round workers in states with higher minimum wages (say \$12 per hour) would still be ineligible for the childless EITC, even under the ARPA expansion. Although it is too soon to evaluate the full effects of the expansion of the childless EITC, estimates suggest that the 2021 ARPA expansion will increase the costs of the credit from \$2 billion in 2018 to \$11.9 billion in 2021 (Crandall-Hollick 2021).

29. Because noncustodial parents typically cannot claim their nonresident children on their tax returns, the IRS categorizes them as childless filers.

30. A few states have also expanded childless EITC benefits by reducing the minimum age required to claim, and increasing the size of the credit; for example, Minnesota doubled the size of the EITC available to childless workers in recent years. California, Maine, Maryland, and Minnesota have all either reduced the age threshold required to claim the childless EITC (twenty-one in Minnesota, eighteen in California and Maine), or eliminated it altogether (Maryland). Washington, D.C., Maine, Minnesota, and California have also increased the maximum benefit available for childless workers. D.C. matches the federal EITC for childless workers dollar for dollar, and increased the income threshold for claiming from roughly \$15,000 to \$25,477 in 2019. Minnesota also recently doubled the size of the EITC available for childless workers who earn less than \$15,570, and Maine increased the match rate for childless workers from 12 to 25 percent of the federal credit.

Making the ARPA extension permanent for all workers without dependent children has the advantage of simplicity and reduced administrative costs because it avoids the need for a verification system, either child social security numbers or child support payments if formal child support is required. This approach would provide support to a wider range of individuals: nonresident parents with and without formal child support orders, those without children (but who may one day be parents), nonrelative caregivers, and unmarried, cohabiting couples. Despite its name, an expansion to the childless EITC would likely affect many parents who do not live with any of their biological children, but who provide financial support to their children. According to the NSFG, 65 percent of men with nonresident children do not live with any of their children, making these men appear childless, even though they have children. Greater economic stability among this population would also have the potential for spillovers (such as increased education, relationship stability) that may affect children in the future.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on data from four large-scale U.S. surveys, we consider how different aspects of family complexity might affect EITC claiming among families with children. We focused on three key forms of complexity: nonresident parents, when one or both parents are nonresident; the presence of other relatives in the household; and two unmarried, birth parents. We found that a large share of children experience at least one of these complexities at a given time, variation by household income and race and ethnicity being substantial.

Our first key finding relates to the very high rates of nonresident parents that might complicate EITC claiming. Approximately 40 percent of all children and 60 percent of children in lower-income households have at least one nonresident parent. Although living with a single parent is the most common living arrangement when a child has a nonresident parent (24 percent of all children, 38 percent of low-income children), a nontrivial share of children live with a step- or social parent (14 percent of all children, 13 percent of children in lower-income households), or no parents (4 percent of all children, 7 percent of low-income).

Another key finding relates to the stark differences in rates of nonresident parents by race and ethnicity. As documented in numerous studies (for example, Cross 2018), Black children are far less likely to reside with two, married, birth parents than their White, Hispanic, and Asian counterparts. Among lower-income households in particular, approximately 80 percent of Black children had one nonresident parent, compared to approximately 50 percent of White and Hispanic children, and 25 percent of Asian children.

The existence of a nonresident parent alone does not introduce tax filing ambiguity—the nonresident parent must qualify for the EITC based on income and residency. From the NSFG, we find that only 5 percent of nonresident fathers would meet both the income and residency requirement, suggesting that perhaps only a small share of nonresident parents are truly eligible to claim the credit. Nonetheless, we do not know how many nonresident parents feel entitled to claim it, and our analyses in the FFCWS suggest that mother's and father's perceptions can differ substantially. We also find differences in perceptions between nonparental caregivers and nonresident parents, suggesting that these discrepancies might be relatively widespread. Thus, although it is not clear what share of households truly face confusion in which relative is eligible to claim the child for the EITC, it is likely to affect a nontrivial share of children living in lower-income households, particularly Black children.

Consistent with prior studies (see, for exam-

ple, Harvey, Dunifon, and Pilkauskas 2021), we find that about 15 percent of children live in a shared household (with an additional relative or nonrelative). Although rates of household sharing among children living with married and single parents are similar, ambiguity in tax claiming is likely to be more of a consideration in single-parent households, as the majority of children residing with married parents are likely claimed by their parents. Rates of coresidence with parents and other adult relatives in lower-income households varied by race and ethnicity: 10 percent of White, 13 percent of Black, 17 percent of Hispanic, and 23 percent of Asian children lived with their parents and a relative. Thus, although nonresident parents were uncommon among Asian children relative to other groups, these children are far more likely to coreside with other relatives (usually grandparents).

Last, we estimate that about 5 percent of children in low-income households live with two cohabiting birth parents. Complexity arises in this situation because taxes are levied at the family level, so each parent would file a separate return, creating ambiguity about which parent should claim the child. Differences in cohabitation rates by race and ethnicity are small, Hispanic children being somewhat more likely and Asian children somewhat less likely to live in such households.

How can we reform the EITC to better address the needs of complex families? Our analysis focused on two reforms in particular: establishment of a federal noncustodial parent EITC and expansion to the existing childless EITC (or making the ARPA expansion permanent). Both expansions to the EITC, whether for childless adults or a form of a noncustodial credit, would likely increase employment (Nichols, Sorensen, and Lippold 2012; Miller et al. 2018).³¹ Offering more generous support to nonresident parents could also reduce conflict and confusion between resident caregivers and nonresident parents, who may feel entitled to claim their children for the EITC even if they fail to meet residency requirements. The appropriate course of action depends on the overall goals—to focus on the economic well-being

31. This might also help nonresident parents provide financial support to children being raised by relatives.

of children and their parents, or low-income households more broadly. Expansions to either the childless EITC or the NCP EITC could help many children by improving the economic well-being of their parents and caregivers. However, more research on both policies is needed. Research on the spillover benefits of a childless tax credit to children (both born and yet to be born) would be especially useful.

Although we focus on two proposed EITC policy changes, other reforms would help extend the reach of the EITC and lift more children out of poverty. One might allow both co-resident unmarried birth parents and other co-resident relatives (such as co-resident grandparents) to claim an EITC (or a smaller EITC). Others might completely separate child-related tax credits from work-related tax credits in the tax code, effectively eliminating child qualifications from the EITC and providing instead more generous child credits through a child allowance (Burman 2020). Another distinct but related issue is the marriage penalty. When two unmarried partners have earnings in the EITC-eligibility range, it may be advantageous for them to remain unmarried for the EITC. Despite a number of adjustments to reduce the marriage penalty in recent years, the EITC still creates a marriage disincentive, though evidence suggests that the effects on marriage are relatively small (Dickert-Conlin and Houser 2002; Herbst 2011; Michelmore 2018).

Because of data limitations, our analysis focuses on family complexity at a particular time; the share of families affected by ambiguity in tax filing is likely to affect a much larger share of families if we were to follow families over time, as children may be claimed in different tax filing units over the course of childhood (Tong 2014; Splinter, Larrimore, and Mortenson 2017). As noted earlier, we may overestimate the number of children with nonresident parents

because of parental death or assisted reproduction. Finally, the data used in this study predate the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effects of the pandemic on employment, and in particular mother's employment (who are most likely to claim the EITC), are not yet clear. Nor do we know what the effects of the pandemic will be on children's living arrangements; however, it is likely that complexity, and need, will have both increased.

Our study has implications for the recent expansions to the Child Tax Credit (CTC) as part of the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act. The expansion of the CTC essentially created a child allowance in the United States, providing monthly cash benefits between \$250 and \$300 per month, per child, depending on the age of the child. Estimates suggest that nearly 90 percent of children under the age of eighteen were eligible for the benefits. Our analysis suggests that many children do not reside with both birth parents, which has implications for determining eligibility not only for the EITC, but for the 2021 CTC as well. Because the CTC was distributed monthly, it likely created additional challenges in determining children's living arrangements.

The EITC lifts many families out of poverty (Fox 2020) but can be complicated to navigate, especially when families and living arrangements are complex. Reducing the complexity of the EITC would help families understand and better follow the rules. Expanding the reach of the EITC would allow more parents to tap into the resources that might improve their economic stability and the well-being of their children. Given the many studies that show that income improves children's life trajectories (see, for example, Duncan, Magnuson, and Votruba-Drzal 2017), policies that extend the EITC—acknowledging the complexity of families—are likely to pay off in the long term.

Table A.1. Percentage of Children with at Least One Nonresident Parent by Race/Ethnicity

	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian
At least one nonresident parent	67.77	34.18	42.38	24.68
Married with step-parent	8.28	10.86	8.87	9.27
Cohabiting one-biological parent	3.83	3.65	4.25	1.19
Single parent	48.29	16.22	26.27	11.33
Grandparent headed (no parent)	4.52	1.92	1.39	0.28
Other relative headed (no parent)	2.04	0.66	1.32	0.89
Nonrelative headed (no parent)	1.04	1.10	1.19	1.98
Observations	5,030	27,775	11,843	2,463

Source: Authors' calculations from the Current Population Survey (CPS ASEC; U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

Note: All children under the age of nineteen not residing in group quarters. All percentages weighted using survey weights.

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Fixing a Leaky U.S. Social Safety Net: Diapers, Policy, and Low-Income Families



JENNIFER RANGLES 

Changing work, family, and policy trends converged to increase diaper need in recent decades. Safety net programs do not cover diapers, and diaper policy proposals have met limited success. Based on interviews with seventy mothers who experienced diaper need, this article examines how diapers shape low-income parents' caregiving and why income and public aid are not always enough to cover diapers. Mothers described stigma associated with lacking diapers and mixed experiences seeking diaper support. These experiences suggest effective policy responses, including diaper vouchers and extending changes to tax credit policies.

Keywords: children, diapers, family, policy, poverty

Diapers may seem like just another consumer good, one provided by means-tested public assistance programs when parents cannot afford them. In fact, they are of special practical concern and symbolic importance for early childcare, parental self-efficacy, and family well-being. Diapers are an expensive, crucial need during the first years of a child's life, but they are not covered by existing aid programs, including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Parents can use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or cash aid to pur-

chase diapers, but the buying power of benefits and the proportion of families in poverty that receives TANF have decreased significantly in recent decades (Azevedo-McCaffrey and Safawi 2022). The \$75 average monthly diaper bill for one infant would alone account for 8 to 40 percent of the average state TANF benefit (Safawi and Reyes 2021).

Welfare policy changes have intersected with changing labor market, family-formation, and other policy and economic trends to create a hole around diapers in the U.S. social safety net. Women's labor-force participation rates

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have increased during the past five decades, most significantly for mothers with children of diapering age. From 1975 to 2019, the employment rates of mothers with children age zero to three years almost doubled from 34.3 to 63.8 percent (U.S. Department of Labor 2021); meanwhile, disposable diapers became nearly universal as more parents relied on childcare facilities. During this time, the portion of single-parent households, which are headed primarily by women and more likely to be poor, increased fourfold (Livingston 2018). Single mothers are less likely than married mothers to work full time (U.S. Department of Labor 2021) and more likely to experience work-life conflict associated with job schedule instability (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue). In the wake of COVID-19, unpartnered mothers with children younger than five years experienced the sharpest decrease in employment rates, job loss being more common among Black and Latina mothers (Barroso and Kochhar 2020). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, disposable diaper costs have increased 10 percent due to higher demand and input material costs, supply-chain disruptions, and shipping cost surges.

Working-age, low-income parents struggle to cover mounting diaper costs in the context of poor job quality and a fraying social safety net. Only a third of low-income families earn wages sufficient to cover a basic family budget (Joshi et al. 2022, this issue), and basic needs like diapers that were previously accessed via more generous cash aid are now more likely to be provided as in-kind assistance by community-based organizations (Allard 2009). TANF's time limits, work-related eligibility requirements, and greater state discretion over spending limited direct cash assistance, especially in states with higher proportions of Black and Latinx children (Meyer and Floyd 2020). This transition to a work-based safety net decreased the economic well-being of families headed by poor, single mothers, many of whom became disconnected from both welfare and work during the postreform period (Danziger et al. 2016; Tach and Edin 2017).

Antipoverty policies do not account for necessities like diapers. The Supplemental Nutri-

tion Assistance Program (SNAP), the only government program that provides near-universal basic assistance for families with children, does not allow purchasing of nonfood hygiene items, including soap, menstrual supplies, and diapers (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2021). Although the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC) boost family discretionary income, not all can work or find work that qualifies them for credits usually paid as income tax refunds. Most low-income children live in complex family households with ambiguous tax filing situations that complicate claiming full tax credits (Michelmore and Pilkauskas 2022, this issue). Contributing to cumulative disadvantage, those who receive aid through work-based safety net policies typically also have cash income from work, whereas those who struggle to find and maintain employment accrue fewer tax credits.

Dwindling cash aid and lack of well-paid jobs with predictable hours that accommodate childcare compel many low-income mothers to rely on social networks and resource-stretching strategies beyond welfare and employment (Seefeldt and Sandstrom 2015). As recent decades have seen a move away from cash aid to in-kind assistance and work-dependent tax credits, hygiene items such as diapers have become politically invisible, which has significant social, economic, and health implications for families. Rather than just another consumer good, diapers are an important lens through which to understand how the incomplete transition to a work-based safety net in an era of welfare curtailment and growing family instability shapes experiences of poverty, early childcare, and economically vulnerable parents' adaptive post-welfare survival strategies.

BACKGROUND: THE INEQUALITIES AND POLITICS OF DIAPERING

Diaper need—lacking enough diapers to keep an infant dry, comfortable, and healthy—affects one in three mothers in the United States (Smith et al. 2013), where almost half of infants and toddlers live in low-income families (Koball and Jiang 2018). Diaper need disproportionately affects families of color and parents who are not employed or have little education (Raver et al. 2010). It exacerbates food insecu-

rity, can cause parents to miss work or school, and is predictive of maternal depression and anxiety (Massengale, Erausquin, and Old 2017; Smith et al. 2013). When associated with infrequent diaper changes, it can lead to diaper dermatitis (rash) and urinary tract and skin infections (Adalat, Wall, and Goodyear 2007; Sugimura et al. 2009).

Infants in the United States will typically use more than six thousand diapers, costing at least \$1,500, before they are toilet trained (Thaman and Eichenfield 2014). Cloth diapers are not a viable alternative for most low-income parents given high start-up and cleaning costs and childcare requirements for disposables. Many low-income parents must therefore devise coping strategies, such as asking family or friends for diapers or diaper money; leaving children in used diapers for longer; and diapering children in clothes and towels (Massengale et al. 2017).

Low-income parents also turn to diaper banks, which collect donations and purchase bulk inventory for distribution to those in need and usually provide a supplemental supply of twenty to fifty diapers per child per month. In 2016, the nation's more than three hundred diaper banks distributed fifty-two million diapers to more than 277,000 children, meeting only 4 percent of the estimated need (Massengale et al. 2019). Many of those who seek diaper assistance live in households with employed adults who have missed work because of diaper need (Carstensen and Gunther 2018).

Diaper need is also an issue of racial inequality, co-parenting dynamics, and welfare stigma. Those who struggle with diaper need and use diaper banks are most likely to be Black and Latina unmarried mothers who receive means-tested aid, and many are from households with an employed adult (Massengale et al. 2017). Although single motherhood is predictive of diaper need, two-parent families, public aid, and employment do not necessarily prevent it. As a highly visible and costly item that must be procured frequently according to norms of proper parenting, diapers are part of negotiations about paternal responsibility and access to children. Unemployed non-residential fathers give more in-kind support, such as diapers, than formal child support; the

provision of diapers can be a form of or precursor to greater father involvement (Kane, Nelson, and Edin 2015), especially among fathers who are disconnected from the labor market and adopt nonfinancial ideas of provisioning (Halpern-Meehin and Talkington 2022, this issue). Welfare reform was motivated in part by presumptions that cash aid replaced fathers as financial providers and that poor mothers willingly depend on entitlement programs that disincentivize marriage and work (Hays 2003). These presumptions may contribute to the policy inertia surrounding diapers.

Dilemmas of Including Diapers in the Work-Based Safety Net

Since the 1990s, safety net policies have expanded services for working poor families while rescinding support for those in poverty who are not employed (Tach and Edin 2017). Political framings of diaper need reflect this trend. Federal lawmakers introduced the Hygiene Assistance for Families of Infants and Toddlers Act in 2015, 2016, and 2017, which all noted parents' need for diapers to comply with employment requirements of means-tested programs, especially TANF. In 2019, federal legislators proposed the Lee-DeLauro End Diaper Need Act, which appropriated \$100 million a year for state pilot diaper programs. The 2019 bill noted adverse health effects and limited childcare options for those without diapers. All federal bills have proposed designating diapers as "medically necessary" and essential for children's access to childcare and parents' abilities to work and fully care for their children. None made it past initial referrals to congressional committees. COVID-19 spurred two federal bills, the End Diaper Need Act of 2021, which proposed funding and tax exemptions for diapers, and the COVID-19 Diaper Assistance Act earmarking \$200 million in federal diaper assistance. Supporters emphasized parenting expenses, diaper need as a public health crisis, and increased pandemic demand on diaper banks due to illness and financial stress.

Forty states have introduced diaper bills, including proposals for sales tax exemptions, diaper vouchers, and public assistance for diaper banks (National Diaper Bank Network 2021; Wallace, Weir, and Smith 2017). As of 2022,

thirty-five states tax diapers as a discretionary expense at 2.5 to 7 percent, which does not include applicable county and city taxes. In locales with high combined state and local sales taxes, the tax alone can equate to buying an extra month's worth of diapers each year. State diaper policies have been most successful in California, which in 2018 designated \$10 million for diaper distribution via food banks. California also passed A.B. 480: Diaper Assistance for CalWORKS Families, which provides \$30 monthly diaper vouchers for parents enrolled in the Cal-Learn and CalWORKS (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) programs. Unlike WIC or food stamps, which can be used only for specific items, the California diaper voucher is an unrestricted cash transfer added to monthly TANF benefits. Parents need not provide receipts or proof of diaper need, but only TANF recipients with children younger than three and qualified work, school, or volunteer plans are eligible. Justifications for increasing diapers' availability and accessibility have focused on reducing public welfare and health-care costs associated with diaper need and investing in welfare-to-work programs and parental self-sufficiency. This accords with larger trends whereby policies perceived to support the working poor are more successful in the current legislative environment (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015).

Diapers will continue to play a central role in many low-income parents' care and economic survival strategies that require informal work, forgoing other basic needs, and seeking help from relatives, charities, and social service organizations such as diaper banks (Seefeldt and Sandstrom 2015). Diaper policy inertia reveals the difficulty of expanding political notions of need when the safety net promotes work over care and does not recognize hygiene items, especially those purchased and used primarily by women and associated with childbearing, as necessities. As with diapers, menstrual products are still taxed in most states, and the inability to afford them (known as period poverty) linked to poorer mental health outcomes (Cardoso et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2013). Moralistic views of items associated with urine, feces, and menstrual blood as unspeakable bodily products seem to trump a prag-

matic public health perspective that certain items are medically necessary to manage basic biological processes in clean, healthy, and dignified ways. Akin to controversies over birth control as a preventative reproductive health measure (Gordon 2002), beliefs that providing diapers equates to subsidizing irresponsible sexual and childbearing choices may temper support for public diaper assistance.

The case of diapers draws necessary attention to how the social safety net can better support low-income families given work, family-formation, and policy trends. Strategies and stigma related to diaper need have not been studied as part of low-income parenting in the wake of welfare reform. This research fills that gap using data from interviews with seventy mothers who experienced diaper need to answer four questions about emerging diaper policies: What role do diapers and diaper need play in low-income parents' caregiving experiences? How do existing need-based aid programs help or hinder parents' strategies to prevent and manage diaper need? What are parents' experiences accessing private, community-based, and public diaper assistance? What do these suggest about effective policy responses to diaper need?

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

I draw on data collected via in-depth qualitative telephone interviews conducted from August 2017 through September 2018 with seventy parents who experienced diaper need. I recruited interviewees by distributing fliers to family and health-care service providers, including WIC offices, hospitals, and postnatal support programs, and in social media groups for low-income parents. Anyone with primary responsibilities for a child in diapers qualified for the study. Despite gender-neutral language and images on recruitment materials, only two men responded. Subsequent targeted recruitment efforts for men participants through father programs, diaper banks, and social service organizations yielded only one other father respondent, suggesting that diaper need is experienced disproportionately by low-income mothers. Consequently, I limited the analysis to those who identified as women and I refer to respondents as mothers.

Interviews focused on familial and financial situations, diapering practices, and strategies for accessing diapers. Respondents each received \$25 cash compensation to recognize the value of their time and to offset any costs associated with participation. Most respondents identified as women of color (see table 1). All lived in-state: fifty-nine in Central California, eight in Southern California, and three in Northern California. Most (N = 68) lived in urban or suburban areas, suggesting limited rural access to diaper support services. Overall, respondents were more disadvantaged than other families in the state living in poverty with children up to five years old. They were less likely to have an employed adult in the household, had lower annual income, and were less likely to be recipients of state food and cash aid programs; they were more likely, however, to have a high school diploma and be married or living in a two-parent household (Danielson and Bohn 2017; U.S. Census Bureau 2018).

Six respondents (9 percent) had received the CalWORKS \$30 monthly diaper voucher, and forty (57 percent) had received diapers from a diaper bank, church, or agency at least once. The average monthly diaper bill for the thirty-seven respondents who disclosed a specific amount was \$66 (ranging from \$22 to \$175), some 8 percent of the mean household income. In 2018, a household of two people, the smallest in the sample, qualified as poor according to federal poverty guidelines with an annual income of \$16,460 or less (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2018); the sample's average annual income of \$9,564 meant that most respondents and their children lived below the poverty line.

Telephone interviews lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. With respondents' permission, all interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. I followed a semi-structured interview guide and used an abductive analytical approach that relied on

Table 1. Participant Demographics, N = 70

	N	Percent		N	Percent
Race			Relationship status		
Latina/Hispanic	31	44	Single	26	37
African American/Black	17	24	Dating or cohabiting	20	29
Mixed race/Multiracial	9	13	Married	24	34
White	9	13	Number of children		
Asian/Asian Indian	4	6	1	14	20
Education			2	16	23
Less than high school	12	17	3	18	26
High school diploma	21	30	4+	22	31
Some college or vocational	30	43	Pregnant	8	11
College degree	6	9	Number of children in diapers		
Graduate degree	1	1	1	51	73
Employment			2	17	24
Not employed	46	66	3	2	3
Part-time employed	17	24	Mean monthly income or aid	\$797	
Full-time employed	7	10	Mean age	29 years	
Other sources of income or aid					
WIC	49	70			
Food stamps	47	67			
TANF	37	53			
Spouse or partner income	21	30			
Housing assistance	19	27			

Source: Author's calculations.

knowledge of previous literature to deductively shape the research and interview questions yet remained open to inductive findings and explanations emerging from the data (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I coded notes and transcripts using a flexible coding process (Deterding and Waters 2018). I first coded for broad topics by applying index codes and a priori attributes to the data, which allowed me to generate cross-case memos and a set of analytic codes, including those related to reasons parents struggled with diaper need, how existing programs addressed diaper need, and recommendations for diaper policies. I applied these analytic codes and generated new attributes specifically related to how mothers' experiences of diaper need aligned with potential policy solutions.

Findings: Policy Discontents of Diaper Need

I describe mothers' experiences of diaper need, why aid and income were not enough to prevent it, and mothers' efforts to access diaper support. Mothers drew on these experiences to make a case for expanded safety net conceptions of need that include diapers and diaper aid.

What Diapers Mean to Low-Income Mothers

Diapers were the first item many mothers bought after receiving aid or income, and most knew exactly how many days and hours their diaper supplies would last. Almost all mothers (93 percent) had completely run out of disposable diapers at least once. Forty-eight (69 percent) had borrowed diapers or diaper money from others, and fifty-five (79 percent) reported forgoing other basic necessities, including food, hygiene items, and medicine, to buy diapers. Mothers described cloth diapers as both cost and labor prohibitive and therefore not a feasible solution to their diaper need. The sixteen mothers (23 percent) who tried cloth diapering noted expensive start-up costs, lack of in-home washers and dryers, high per-load laundromat fees, and stigma associated with what others might not perceive as a "normal" diaper. Most who used cloth diapers reported that cloth was ultimately more expensive than disposables. They therefore devised diaper-stretching strategies, including using other household items such as paper towels and t-shirts to construct makeshift diapers, leaving

used diapers on longer, and letting children go diaperless when not in public. A third of mothers described experiencing anxiety or depression related to diaper need, many emphasizing the stress of "living diaper to diaper."

Half reported that diapers were the household expense they worried about most, even more than food or housing. Food shortages were less common due to mothers' receipt of WIC and SNAP, access to food banks, and strategies for stretching limited food supplies. WIC and SNAP did not always cover all their families' nutritional needs, and many mothers reported spending money out-of-pocket on food, especially infant formula. Compensatory tactics for managing diaper need, however, were limited relative to those devised for coping with food insecurity. Mothers justified going without food themselves or eating limited diets of low-cost foods such as tortillas and rice. Yet they could not rationalize depriving their young children of something necessary to perform a basic bodily function in a dignified and clean way. As Melissa, a thirty-two-year-old Asian mother of three, explained, "As long as you portion sizes and know how much your children eat, you know how much food you're buying. But diapers, it's uncontrollable because you don't know how many times they're going to pee or poop a day. If they're sick and have diarrhea, they're going to go through way more. I don't worry as much about food because I can manage it with food stamps. I worry more about diapers because there's no support, and they go like no tomorrow." Mothers could also rely on more people in their social networks for food. As a fieldworker, Melissa could access fresh produce from work and knew family with fruit trees and gardens that produced excess. Respondents had fewer sources of in-kind diaper support and felt guilty asking for diaper money from friends and family experiencing similar financial constraints.

Family instability compounded the economic difficulties of diaper need. Single mothers were less likely to have an employed adult in the household and especially struggled to access diapers. Married and cohabiting mothers reported that they generally had more financial resources and could rely on another adult if diaper supplies ran low. Almost half

($N = 21$) of married and cohabiting respondents had an employed partner who contributed income to the household, which accords with research that many families experiencing diaper need include at least one working adult (Mas-sengale et al. 2017). The time and money an additional live-in parent offered allowed partnered mothers to access diaper giveaways and be full-time caregivers at home where they could let children go without diapers. Although having a co-parent could mitigate diaper need, some mothers reported that husbands' and boyfriends' questioning about money spent on diapers exacerbated their diaper stress. Partnered mothers tended to purchase and change more diapers than fathers, some of whom, according to mothers, were unaware of diaper expenses, how many diapers children used, and the labor of managing limited diapers supplies.

Parental relationship dissolution also contributed to some mothers' diaper need. Sonia, a thirty-three-year-old Latina mother of two, said, "I had never been without income. Her father and I separating dampened our situation. When he was around, he was helpful with her and diapers, but when we didn't have [diapers] that was another detriment added to our fighting. We were breaking up, and I was worrying about the diapers." Mothers noted that fathers struggled to provide diapers or diaper money due to unemployment, low wages, lost contact, incarceration, or death. Tracy, a twenty-five-year-old multiracial mother of three, explained, "I never thought I'd be a single mother needing help for diapers, but my son's father was killed before [my son] was born. I just need more help. It's hard to do the diapers and other stuff on your own."

Paternal diaper provision made some mothers more inclined to let fathers spend time with children, and fathers' inability to provide diapers signaled lacking or waning commitments. Trinity, a forty-two-year-old Black mother of three, noted that "Even if you're working, diapers are expensive. Her father helps, but not really. He's not really around. I've been with him on and off for a long time. By the time we had the baby, I assumed from our conversations, and we had two miscarriages, that he wanted the baby. But once she came, he was just out, no diapers, no nothing." Diaper trans-

actions could be a barometer of co-parenting relationship quality, and diapers a currency used to negotiate fathers' involvement. Marissa, a forty-year-old Latina mother of seven, explained how she and her youngest child's father came to an agreement. "I get the milk, the formula, and he gets the diapers and the wipes. We both budget. Money for this stuff gets put aside first, and it means a lot that he always takes care of this one thing." Although they had broken up shortly after their daughter's birth, Marissa worked hard to maintain an amicable co-parenting relationship with the baby's father, whom she believed proved his paternal commitments by ensuring adequate diapers.

When mothers could not rely on paternal diaper support, they were reluctant to ask others because they feared judgment about their childbearing choices and parenting abilities. Audra, thirty-two, white, and a mother of five, admitted feeling embarrassed. "It's sad to need diapers. You don't want to feel like you're failing as a parent. I hate it when people say, 'You knew what you were getting into having kids.' People get food, but they judge you more when you struggle with diapers." Likewise, Toni, a twenty-nine-year-old Latina mother of four, confided, "I will never ask my mom for diaper money again because she doesn't get it. Neither does my sister. They look down on me about it. You feel so alone. It gets thrown in my face. I can't live it down that I asked them for diapers." Mothers speculated this was why no government program covered diapers. Ashley, a seventeen-year-old Latina mother of one, said, "I guess policy people think diapers are the main thing that's a parent's responsibility. If you ask for help because you can't afford diapers, they think we're not taking care of our kids, that we're too lazy to get them."

Natalie, twenty-nine, mixed race, and a mother of three, speculated that policymakers think, "They had a choice to have that child. There are all these other programs out there. They should be able to provide at least this one thing if they choose to have the baby. Nutrition, we're not going to take that away. That's definitely a necessity. People need housing, so we'll help with that. But diapers, that parent can figure that out on their own." Maria, thirty, Latina, and a mother of four, similarly surmised that

policymakers wanted to discourage childbearing among poor families. “They likely think, ‘We’re not going to give you everything on a silver platter when you should be working and supporting these babies you’re making.’ We didn’t plan for another baby. Our daughter was already potty training. I was going back to school. My husband was working. I was on birth control. It failed us.” Assumptions that parents should live with the consequences of their choices, Maria elaborated, ignored the realities of low-income families’ constraints. Maria’s husband, a fieldworker, lost work hours due to extreme heat and wildfire smoke that ravaged Central California during the summer of 2018. Maria quit school because they could not afford childcare, and she lamented the struggles of trying to live responsibly on low wages and limited government aid that did not account for diapers.

Mothers’ stories pointed to the practical and symbolic significance of public support for diapers. Practically, WIC, SNAP, and housing assistance programs provide need-based aid to cover some, if not all, of families’ food and shelter requirements. Symbolically, they codify that food and housing are basic human needs to which all should have access regardless of ability to pay. The absence of any similar systematic policy for diapers combined with mothers’ struggles to provide them meant that diaper need was experienced as an acute parenting failure. Diapers are taken for granted as parents’ responsibility, but politically deemed a discretionary expense. This is misaligned with how mothers understood their infants’ specific basic needs, which for most came down to milk and diapers. Food stamps and WIC offered support for one. No comparable acknowledgment or assistance for the other meant that mothers struggled even more to access a necessity policy did not officially recognize their children have. Mothers astutely suspected that their diaper struggles were shaped by a work-based safety net that scrutinized work behaviors and stigmatized additional childbearing among poor families.

When Welfare and Work Are Not Enough

Most mothers received government aid, including WIC, food stamps, housing assistance, and

TANF. Of these, only TANF could be used to purchase diapers. All forms of assistance could potentially offset household expenses, but combined benefits were not enough to cover diapers. Solange, a twenty-four-year-old Black mother of five, described how difficult it was to qualify for cash aid, how little it covered, and how rarely case managers asked about diapers. “I still have to get everything these children need, and being low income, it isn’t the easiest to survive. There’s this very old saying, ‘If you have clothes on your back, food in your mouth, and the lights on, you’re okay.’ But nobody cares about the other stuff, like does your baby have diapers? People think that people like me are ungrateful because we need more resources. . . . They’re like, ‘You get WIC? You get this service? You should be able to afford everything.’ But no one cares about diapers.”

Some mothers’ requests to welfare case managers for diapers were met with condescension. One told Aisha, a twenty-year-old Black mother of one, “You have cash aid. Why is it so hard for you to get diapers?” Aisha responded, “You have to pay rent, and food stamps don’t cover everything. You have to figure it out on your own. People act like we don’t want to get her diapers, or we just like spending money. But it just doesn’t always work in our favor.” Others echoed concerns that cash aid was not enough for diapers along with other household basics.

Respondents specifically challenged stereotypical assumptions that poor mothers do not effectively budget public aid. Brenda, twenty-five, Asian, and a mother of three, said, “If you get any government assistance and you need more because it’s not enough, people wonder where are you putting your money? They just think, ‘You’re buying other things, you’re not buying for your kid.’ I do whatever needs to be done for my kid, and my kids come first. But cash aid, it’s never enough for the gas, the bills, keeping the lights on. They think it’s not enough for the diapers because we screw it up. But it’s not enough because it’s not enough.”

Mothers explained how benefit levels did not account fully for basic living expenses and that the problem was not mismanagement of lavish government handouts. Indeed, in all fifty states, TANF benefits are not enough to pay

utilities and rent for a modest two-bedroom apartment, and no state benefit is above 60 percent of the poverty line (Safawi and Reyes 2021).

The falling value of TANF combined with purchasing restrictions on other forms of aid forced mothers into a perpetual bind when it came to work, welfare, and diapers. Many mothers could not afford to work due to prohibitively high childcare costs, and employment did not always pay enough to cover diapers. Although working mothers generally had higher combined monthly income and aid, many of the twenty-four employed mothers described how work reduced the time children's diapering could be managed privately at home, thereby increasing the need for disposable diapers. Although family diaper costs varied depending on how many children wore diapers and diaper brand and size, employed mothers were more likely than stay-at-home mothers to report monthly diaper costs higher than the sample mean of \$66 per month.

Employed mothers relied on center-, family-, or nonfamilial home-based childcare to work. Childcare facilities require that infants' disposable diapers be changed for each urination or defecation or at least every two hours otherwise; cloth diapers are not accepted by many care providers due to hygiene guidelines for preventing fecal contamination. Centers that receive Child Care Development Block Grants are not required to provide diapers, and many funds do not fully cover salaries, facilities, and program mandates. Therefore, most parents, even those who receive childcare grants, must provide diapers. Mothers reported that a full day of center-based care could require six to eight diapers, sometimes twice the number they would have used at home. Thus a full-time employed mother could expect her diaper costs to double, and five mothers had missed work at least once because they had had too few disposables required for daycare.

Employed respondents who used family or home-based childcare described tacit agreements that providing disposable diapers was a condition of leaving their children in the care of others not able or willing to manage cloth diapers or leave children diaperless. Employed mothers were also more likely to describe time pressures associated with work, commuting,

and readying children for school and childcare, which further increased their need for disposables. Natalie, a twenty-nine-year-old multiracial mother of three, noted, "I'm always in a rush on the way to work, a tight schedule, getting the kids and baby ready, making sure I have enough clean diapers." The demands and costs of employment could ultimately contribute to mothers' diaper challenges and restrict their diaper need coping strategies. Even low-wage work could earn just enough to cut the value of mothers' cash aid or cause them to lose eligibility entirely. In California in 2019, a family of four could earn monthly gross income up to \$3,970 before losing WIC benefits. Yet a similarly sized family could earn only \$1,724 before losing a portion of TANF, the only form of public assistance that can buy diapers.

Mothers in households with an employed adult also underscored the stresses of working poverty. Patricia, a twenty-nine-year-old Latina mother of three, described how her husband's low-wage job was not enough for diapers, yet made it harder to ask for diaper support:

I'm embarrassed to ask people for help because they'll say, "Your husband works so you should be able to afford diapers." But no, there's more I have to pay for. I think it's even more of a problem because a lot of the working class, we don't get a lot of extras. I barely get WIC, barely any financial support. It took my husband getting deducted in hours for us to get food stamps back. It's harder because everything has to come out of his paycheck, and we literally have to pinch and dime every single thing for the diapers.

Employed mothers emphasized the strains of living paycheck to paycheck and questioned how even working two-parent families could not afford essentials. Yazmin, twenty-eight, Latina, and a mother of three, described how working mothers' diaper need seemed invisible and unjustified. "My husband and I have full-time jobs, but we're in debt, don't qualify for anything, and rely just on our income. I'm working. He's working. There should be no reason why she shouldn't have diapers." That married, full-time employed parents struggled to get diapers challenged assumptions that "do-

ing everything right,” in Yazmin’s words, prevented diaper need.

Other employed and married mothers asked how they could play by the rules of a welfare system that promotes work and responsibility yet still not afford diapers given the high cost of living and raising children. Alexis, a twenty-three-year-old Asian mother of two, earned \$1,000 a month at Wal-Mart; her husband earned slightly more doing seasonal farm work. “They used to say it takes a village to raise a child. Now that means it takes a village to fund a child, like paying for diapers. I work, go to school. He works. If you do get a job, you get cut off from everything. I could never be a stay-at-home mom because now it takes two working. Even when parents have jobs, on minimum wage, you work hard, and with taxes you still you don’t make enough for diapers.” Employed mothers like Yazmin and Alexis faced stigma when asking for diaper assistance because people assumed that a dual-earner household should make enough to cover all bills. Yet, much like welfare, low-wage work was rarely enough to meet families’ diaper needs.

Mothers receiving welfare found that benefit levels were too low to pay for diapers not covered by other safety net programs, and employed mothers’ low wages, inconsistent work hours, and added childcare costs meant that income did not necessarily prevent diaper need. The third group—the ten mothers who neither were employed nor received TANF—were particularly hard-pressed to afford or access diapers given their disconnection from both the labor market and the cash aid safety net. Like those in the Kristin Seefeldt and Heather Sandstrom (2015) study, disconnected mothers in this study relied on a patchwork set of coping strategies to get diapers, including informal side jobs like housekeeping, living with family or friends, and asking for diapers or diaper money from others. The shared difficulties of managing diaper need among mothers who were welfare recipients, employed mothers, and disconnected mothers point to fundamental problems of the incomplete transition to a work-based safety net (Danziger et al. 2016). Without a guarantee of living-wage employment or sufficient cash aid benefits, basic needs not covered by in-kind aid

programs will often go unmet. Almost all of the more than three hundred diaper banks in the United States have been founded since 1990s welfare reform; they have become an increasingly important part of the community-based safety net of organizations that provide in-kind goods to help families meet needs unmet by government policies and programs (Allard 2009). With mixed success, mothers turned to diaper distribution services to fill diaper gaps.

Setbacks and Successes of Seeking Diaper Support

Mothers sought various sources of diaper support, including family service agencies, churches, and diaper pantries. Two in three mothers had accessed or tried to use diaper assistance services at least once, and half of these reported negative experiences. The half who had positive experiences spoke specifically about respectful, accommodating, and empathic staff. Alas, numerous challenges prevented respondents from utilizing in-kind diaper aid.

Mothers spent significant time and energy tracking when diaper distributions were scheduled, arranging for how to get there, and ensuring they had the proper documentation or proof of need, which often included the physical presence of children. Gina, a sixteen-year-old Latina mother of one, could not receive diapers from a church pantry without an adult guardian and government-issued form of identification. Because her mother’s work hours conflicted with diaper distribution times, Gina rarely received diapers. Other mothers worried about pantries running out of their children’s sizes before they could get there. Jackie, a thirty-five-year-old multiracial mother of three, was nearing the end of her diaper supply because the organization from which she received diapers ran out of the larger sizes her son wore. As many mothers reported, smaller diaper sizes (newborn, 1, and 2) were in greater supply, but demand for 3s, 4s, and 5s was higher. Jackie said, “Many places have smaller sizes because they’re more supportive toward the newer babies versus the older ones.” The standard weight range for size 2 diapers is twelve to eighteen pounds, the typical infant growing out of size 2 at six months. Mothers struggled to get

the right diaper sizes given that seventy-six of the ninety-one diapered children of mothers in the sample were six months or older. The average age of children who wore diapers was 16.2 months (median = twelve months), though only two mothers ever received disposable training pants for toddlers. Some mothers described not receiving diaper assistance because their children had been deemed too old and ready for toilet training. Yet only ten diapered children were thirty-six months or older, the average age at which children in the United States finalize toilet training (Thaman and Eichenfield 2014). No child needing diapers was older than four years, and one of the only two diapered four-year-olds had been diagnosed as medically incontinent due to health issues.

The number of diapers mothers received varied widely. Some received as few as five, whereas others received full bulk-sized boxes with 120 to 150 diapers that would last a month. Most reported receiving in the range of thirty-five to fifty per month, which aligns with recommendations for what families typically need. Most pantries allocated diapers per child, but some distributed by household. This was a problem for Christine, a fifty-three-year-old Black grandmother of three children in diapers. Three toddlers needed triple the diapers, and Christine was forced to choose the one size that would best fit all of them, ages one, two, and three.

Mothers who did not live near organizations that distributed diapers had difficulty with transportation, especially when diapers were available only during narrow time windows on specific days. One of the two mothers living in rural areas reported that traveling to the closest diaper distribution would require three bus changes and several hours of transit time just to receive thirty diapers. Many mothers shared stories of traveling across town via circuitous bus routes with numerous young children in tow, only to arrive at diaper pantries that had already run out. Although Aisha was aware of a family resource center that gave out diapers, she noted,

You have to buy a bus pass, make it all the way downtown, and they usually want you to bring the baby to verify you have a kid. They ask for

a lot just to get what you need. I don't blame them. A lot of people scam the system, but most people need help. After all that, you only get fifteen, twenty diapers. That would be gone in less than a week. It's pretty embarrassing to ask for diapers for your own kid because it comes with questions like, "You're not taking care of your kid?" And the last thing we want in our life is [Child Protective Services] when a lot of us have been in the foster care system before.

Like Aisha, many mothers of color feared that asking for diaper support would trigger accusations of negligent parenting that could lead to involvement with the child welfare system. Several had experiences with child removal based on citations of unfit living conditions, including lack of diapers. Mothers often did not know whom to trust and questioned whether agency staff or case workers would see their efforts to get more diapers as good mothering or as evidence of potential neglect. They feared that requests for diapers would cause child welfare agencies to conflate the conditions of poverty with parental unfitness.

The sixty-one respondents (87 percent) who identified as mothers of color were more likely to report racialized stress, stigma, surveillance, and social exclusion associated with diaper need and seeking diaper assistance. Overall, White mothers in the sample were somewhat less economically disadvantaged; all but one had at least a high school diploma, and they had higher combined household income and aid (\$1,093 monthly). Likely in an effort to deflect racialized welfare queen stereotypes of having additional children to collect more public aid, mothers of color were more likely to emphasize that they used aid frugally and were responsible parents. Mothers of color, especially Black mothers, described being attuned to public perceptions of their children's diapers and fears of involvement with the child welfare system on the basis of inappropriate or too few diapers. Mothers of color were also more likely to report avoiding public spaces, including diaper distributions. Undocumented immigrants or those with undocumented family members were also reluctant to seek diaper support from agencies they feared might disclose their status

and risk their deportation. Several expressed concern that diaper pantries might be immigration enforcement checkpoints. Although no such cases were known, immigrant mothers' fears kept some from seeking diaper aid.

Another obstacle was that many organizations distributed diapers only as an incentive for watching or attending parenting classes. Through a family support agency, Ramona, twenty-one, Latina, and a mother of one, earned "mommy money" she could spend on diapers. Staff treated her respectfully, she said, and "didn't make you feel absolute crazy because you don't have enough diapers for your kids." Yet once she started picking up more work hours as a restaurant server, she found it harder to travel when the required classes on managing money and parenting were available. Mary, a twenty-eight-year-old Latina mother of three, was especially irritated that a church from which she received diapers made single mothers watch and discuss a half-hour video about the importance of fathers' involvement. Jessica, thirty-seven, White, and a mother of five, was able to get diapers every three months if she watched a twenty-minute video about how to prevent choking hazards and safely secure car seats. The diaper supplies they provided were generous, enough for two weeks, but the church would not provide diapers to children older than two years, the age at which staff believed children should be toilet trained.

Shame also prevented mothers from seeking diaper assistance. Jamie, a thirty-eight-year-old White mother of one, said about using a pantry, "You have to provide a lot of information about why you need the diapers that people wouldn't share if you weren't in that situation. It's humiliating and humbling. Some of them are understanding. Some are just judgmental. If you stutter, they think you're on drugs, and they look at you, like, 'What's wrong with you?' Like you can't provide, or that my baby's dad can't provide." Mothers emphasized that some were quick to pass judgment when they sought diapers, but less willing to seek understanding of why they needed them. Faith, forty-three and multiracial, was the guardian of four young children of her best friend who had died of cancer, including three-month-old twins. Recently diagnosed with lung and cervi-

cal cancer and undergoing radiation and chemotherapy treatments, Faith once tried to get diapers from a national charity. The woman she spoke to asked Faith whether she had a car, implying that if Faith had any asset of value, she should sell it before seeking free diapers. "I took off my wig, 'I'm going through chemotherapy. . . . I don't have time [to sell my car] when I have to raise these four babies.' I shouldn't have to explain why they should help me. It's humiliating because I'm used to doing things on my own. It's hard to explain why you need diapers to a stranger. They're just looking at you like, 'Why don't you get a job?' I'm not asking you to give me money. I just need some diapers." Faith later got diapers from a compassionate church group that knew her situation and offered a big box of diapers monthly until the twins were toilet trained.

Half of the mothers who had received diaper aid reported positive experiences like Faith's with the church group. Sonia, a thirty-three-year-old Latina mother of two, described it as "one thing in my life I knew I could count on, which gave me a sense of peace. If I run out or have a problem, I can go over there and ask and probably get another set of diapers." Mothers stressed the value of developing relationships with staff who knew and treated them with knowing respect, not anonymous indifference. These relationships were helpful when the staff's knowledge of a family's situation resulted in more diapers beyond the allotted amount in emergencies. Trinity, forty-two, Black, and a mother of three, was grateful for the six packs of diapers she received each month through a municipal diaper bank that served all TANF recipients in her city.

You can only get diapers as long as you qualify, so that's the stipulation. If something ever happens where I'm not able to get aid, cash aid for her, because I don't get it for me, just for her, then I'm not going to be able to get them. It's easy. I just show up with my government-issued EBT [electronic benefit transfer] card and say, "I'm here for diapers." They just give them to you. At first I was embarrassed to go get them, but I had to work through that, and I put in my share of time. I've worked and paid taxes my whole life. I'm

just in a unique situation right now. I don't know what I would do without this program.

Trinity felt more justified in accessing diapers as a tax-supported service because she saw it as a benefit earned through work rather than a stigmatizing charitable handout.

The six mothers who received CalWORKS (TANF) diaper vouchers had mostly positive experiences. Although the voucher's \$30 value did not cover all diaper costs, it filled many of the gaps. Unfortunately, three of the six mothers lost eligibility within three months. Molly, a thirty-one-year-old Black mother of two, received the voucher for two months before her household income barely surpassed the \$2,100 eligibility limit for a family of four. Before that, she strategically shopped at a supermarket that offered a \$20 gift card if a customer spent \$100. Molly converted \$70 cash into \$50 worth of diapers and spent the rest on groceries and other household items, including tampons and toilet paper. Receiving the diaper voucher as a cashable check gave her a sense of agency to spend the extra benefit based on her family's needs. Aurelia, twenty-five, Latina, and a mother of three, received the voucher for two months before sustaining life-threatening injuries in a car accident. After she could no longer fulfill the requirements of her work plan, she became ineligible for the voucher. During the two prior months, the \$30 voucher was enough to stretch diaper supplies until she received her next aid check. Offering cash aid for diapers as a work support reduced the stigma and shame of receiving it but also meant that mothers who desperately needed it did not qualify.

CONCLUSION: DESIGNING POLICIES TO FILL THE DIAPER GAP

Changes in diapering norms and practices have converged with changing work, family formation, and policy trends in recent decades to create a specific basic need that goes unmet for a large portion of low-income families in the United States. Disposable diapering has become universal since the 1960s, when the majority of mothers with children of diapering age entered the paid labor force in record numbers. Family trends associated with higher poverty rates for mothers and young children, espe-

cially single parenthood, have increased, and low-income children in the United States are now more likely to have nonresidential parents and experience periods of parental incarceration (Carlson, Wimer, and Haskins 2022, this issue). Growing family instability accompanied greater job insecurity, lower wages, and unpredictable work schedules with irregular and reduced hours, especially among those without a college education. Employment and earned income requirements of cash aid and tax credit policies do not account for unstable earnings and household living arrangements, informal jobs, and barriers to work common among low-income families. Meeting children's basic needs for goods such as diapers has become especially difficult for those disconnected from both work and welfare.

Mothers' experiences of work, welfare receipt, and seeking diaper support point to how policies can better address diaper need in the context of these changes. Mothers emphasized the importance of diaper support that was equitable, easily accessible, and did not leave parents feeling stigmatized or shamed. Some mothers recommended changing SNAP and WIC to allow for the purchase of diapers. However, given that many already struggled to stretch the value of their SNAP and WIC allowances to cover food, many mothers advocated for increasing food or cash aid benefit levels to cover diapers. Even increasing cash aid by half of the average monthly diaper bill, \$35 to \$40, would go a long way in helping families fill their diaper gaps.

Mothers also recommended more public support for diaper banks. Many families that do not qualify for need-based programs struggle with diaper need. Those who run diaper banks work tirelessly to serve families and yet, with existing infrastructure and reliance on private in-kind and monetary donations, they are able to meet only a small fraction of the need. Interviews described here suggest that the existence of diaper banks destigmatizes need by normalizing diaper aid and recognizing diapers as a childcare necessity for which low-income parents deserve support. As true of food banks, accessing diaper banks has costs, some obvious (for example, transportation) and others hidden, such as fears of being labeled a failed

provider and reported to the child welfare system. Yet accessing diaper banks can also reduce feelings of isolation by connecting parents in need to supportive staff and others who struggle with similar needs (Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016). Mothers' different experiences accessing diaper aid reveal the importance of well-designed diaper distribution programs that, in addition to providing diapers, reduce the stigma, shame, and invisibility surrounding the need.

Public funding for diaper banks would likely increase the dignity of parents who must use them. Research on the EITC reveals that parents see it as an earned reward for work (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015); public diaper banks could similarly enhance feelings of social inclusion and public responsibility. As Trinity justified accessing the country's only publicly funded diaper bank because she "worked and paid taxes [her] whole life," more parents would likely feel valorized, rather than stigmatized, for getting diapers that their labor and taxes helped fund. Policies that recognize diaper need as a *need* provide a basic item required for children's health. They also generate social trust about the deservingness of low-income families.

Diaper vouchers that directly increase the value of families' cash aid have other advantages. Vouchers allow parents to access diapers as part of their normal shopping trips when they can choose the size, brand, and type of diapers best suited for their children. The \$30 cash value of the California diaper voucher will usually buy double or triple the number of diapers parents were able to get at diaper giveaways. When combined with coupons, store sales, and other promotions that mothers became especially adept at coordinating, that amount could meet much of a child's diapering needs for a month. Cash diaper support also affords parents more agency and dignity than accessing diapers through gatekeepers that may implicitly or explicitly question mothers' honesty, financial need, and fitness as parents. Cash for diapers circumvents many problems parents experience when they do not have the documents, geographic access, and ability to travel to specific locations at designated times. Vouchers may be particularly helpful for moth-

ers living in rural areas with less public transportation and fewer diaper distributions.

Diaper voucher policies have their own drawbacks and are unlikely to be enacted in many states. Only two states, California and Washington, offer diaper vouchers, and those efforts took many years and much concerted advocacy. Other states may follow, but if they use the California model that offers vouchers only as a supportive work service, most families in need will not benefit. To be eligible, parents must receive TANF, have a qualified work, school, or volunteer plan, and not earn income over a low threshold. Requiring another administrative process involving eligibility verification, tying public diaper support directly to work reinforces many negative stereotypes of low-income parents. Welfare programs should support parents' efforts to work and earn enough to care for their children; mothers I interviewed shared these priorities. In a system where full-time, low-wage work rarely earns enough to provide fully for a family, however, justifying diaper aid only as a work support does not account for deeply entrenched class, race, and gender inequalities that create need for welfare in the first place, especially among mothers of color raising children in deep poverty. It also sends the message that children deserve help with diapers only if their parents engage in activities the government defines as *work*.

Other promising policy proposals are more tenable in the current political environment. A federal law that officially designates diapers as medically necessary would have two primary benefits. First, it would lay the policy foundation for classifying diapers as a qualified medical expense for public programs like Medicaid in all states. The End Diaper Need Act of 2021 proposed permitting states to use Medicaid funds for medically necessary diapers for children age three and older officially diagnosed as bladder or bowel incontinent. It also proposed allowing the use of funds from health savings accounts for diapers as a health-care expense. Although some states already cover medically necessary diapers through their Medicaid programs and low-income families are unlikely to have jobs or the means to invest in tax-advantaged accounts, such a policy

would likely help more families access diapers. It could also be a precursor to political recognition of diapers as a health-care expense for all individuals who need them, regardless of age or official medical diagnosis. Second, given that many states exempt some or all medically necessary items from sales tax, this could encourage states to revisit the question of whether diapers should be taxed at all.

As important, designating diapers as medically necessary could ultimately align political stances on diapers with parents' lived experiences of diapers as an essential need of early childhood, not a discretionary expense that families can do without. Classifying diapers as discretionary has fiscal repercussions that increase the economic costs of diapers; it also takes an emotional toll by invalidating parents' struggles and sacrifices to provide them. Existing public programs for food and housing do not meet all eligible families' needs, but they politically and socially acknowledge these needs exist. Diaper need reveals consequences of our work-based safety net's failure to recognize hygiene items as essential in the context of dwindling cash aid and changing family and employment trends that harm low-income families, especially those headed by poor, single mothers of color.

It is for these same reasons that diaper support policies will likely continue to face opposition and barriers to implementation. No federal bill focused specifically on increasing diaper access and affordability has progressed far enough in the legislative process to prompt serious deliberation, much less a congressional vote. This is partially due to widespread mistaken assumptions that alternative diapering methods, namely cloth, can address diaper need. Diapers are not unique among hygiene items that have no place in the national social safety net. However, they are distinct in that they meet a basic need of young children, a particularly sympathetic demographic, but one with high poverty rates and no political power. In a charged political environment where reproductive rights and needs have taken center stage, we might not expect fiscal support for an item associated with additional childbearing and waste.

That I restricted the sample to California

and recruited through family service programs has several implications that likely limit the applicability of these findings to families struggling with diaper need in other states. California has relatively generous TANF benefits and public support for diapers through diaper banks and the CalWORKS diaper voucher program (Azevedo-McCaffrey and Safawi 2022), and more than half the sample (57 percent) had received in-kind diaper support. This suggests that diaper need due to insufficient public aid and limited access to diaper distributions is even more pronounced among families living elsewhere.

I conducted interviews before COVID-19 and diaper need has since increased because of pandemic-related financial stress. Many diaper banks received triple or more the requests for diapers from families struggling with job loss, reduced work hours, and limited diaper supplies in stores. Many sources of diaper support, including family agencies, health-care providers, and food and diaper banks significantly reduced in-person services, further reducing access to diaper aid. Shelter-in-place orders meant that parents had less contact with those in their social networks they previously relied on for diapers or diaper money.

COVID-19 relief bills and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 provided some hope. The Heroes Act passed in 2020 by the House of Representatives would have allowed programs funded by the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program to provide emergency supplies, including diapers, to families in need. Although the American Rescue Plan did not include a diaper provision, it did include a \$3,600 fully refundable Child Tax Credit for each child under age six, one that millions of families received as monthly payments through December 2021. The Rescue Plan also temporarily eliminated the requirement that families must have at least \$2,500 in taxable earnings to qualify for the CTC. Almost all parents who received the credit spent the money on essentials, including diapers (Zippel 2021). If families had more adequate income, diaper need would be reduced but likely not eliminated without major shifts in income distribution. The need for direct diaper provision will thus be ongoing in addition to efforts to

increase income sufficiency and unrestricted transfers, such as through living wages and universal basic income. Increasing housing assistance, SNAP, the EITC, and the CTC offset costs of families' other needs, allowing more resources for diapers and reducing childhood poverty (Parolin et al. 2021). These temporary provisions may pave the way for public diaper aid and chip away at work-based requirements that have effectively withheld cash from low-income families in recent decades. In the context of changing family and work trends that show no signs of abating, these provisions provide hope for fixing a leak around diapers in the U.S. social safety net.

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A Qualitative Examination of Work, Families, and Schools in Low-Income Latinx Communities During Strict Immigration Enforcement



DAVID E. RANGEL  AND ELIZABETH PECK

Education policy and the role of schools are a neglected part of the welfare state. Yet schools may be important sites for understanding how policy, work, and families intersect in immigrant households. Drawing on thirty interviews from seventeen households, this article highlights the experiences of families with young children during a time of increased national hostility toward immigrants. Given that immigrant families are often excluded from more traditional forms of social insurance, findings reveal the central role of fathers both inside and outside the home. Parental involvement, defined as parents' interactions with their children's education both inside and outside the home, was structured by English-dominant schooling environments. In Phoenix, parental involvement was uniquely shaped by a punitive immigration context at father's work and in children's schools. We discuss the implications of our findings on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and advance policy recommendations to support foreign- and U.S.-born children's educational success.

Keywords: Latinx experience, Mexican immigrant fathers, parental involvement, home-school relations, immigration enforcement

Mexican immigrant parents traverse the Mexico-U.S. border in search of a better future for themselves and their families. The lives they envision become imperiled if they encounter a hostile context that jeopardizes their children's futures. Although immigration policy has historically focused on keeping undocumented immigrants from entering the country, in re-

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cent years, the focus has shifted to making life more difficult for those who have stayed. In Mexican immigrant communities, immigration policy and its changing enforcement can destabilize communities and disrupt children's education. This article examines families in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona, when national deportations were at an all-time high in 2011 and 2012. In Phoenix, federal, state, and local immigration partnerships distinctly shaped family's experiences at work, home, and school.

Recent estimates suggest that a quarter of children in the U.S. have an immigrant parent, and the majority are U.S. citizens (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2019). However, many legal immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children are not eligible to receive public assistance (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021). Although low-income and foreign-born Latinx men have high labor-force participation rates (Joshi et al. 2022, this issue), during the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty rates increased most sharply for Latinx children in immigrant families: from 36 percent to 43 percent (Gelatt, Capps, and Fix 2021). Yet education policy and the role of schools are a neglected tools in the fight against childhood poverty (Garfinkel, Rainwater, and Smeeding 2010). Given the role of schools to support children's futures, examining factors that impinge on immigrant families' relationships with their children's schools takes on greater significance.

Although the central role of Mexican immigrant mothers in their children's education has been researched, the role of fathers is less understood (Rivera and Lavan 2012; Durand 2011). This selective focus neglects how parents might work together to support their children's development.

Drawing on thirty in-depth interviews with parents from seventeen Mexican immigrant households in low-income communities in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona, we examine parents' experiences with work and family at a time of strict immigration enforcement. Findings suggest that fathers' work inside and outside the home created both stability and instability for the family. However, Phoenix was a more hostile policy context for Mexican immigrants than San Antonio. At the same

time, parents in both cities described English-dominant schooling contexts that shaped household dynamics and family relations.

BACKGROUND

Social systems intersect and structure children's educational achievement. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is premised on the idea that both distal and proximate factors influence children's development (1994). This framework emphasizes the interrelationships between individuals at the micro level and their environments at the macro level (Bronfenbrenner 1994). The model sheds light on factors that influence educational risk (Johnson 1994), the experiences of immigrant families (Paat 2013), and family well-being in the COVID era (Prime, Wade, and Brown 2020). Bronfenbrenner's model calls attention to the idea that family members' lives and destinies are linked.

Immigration Policy

Federal, state, and local policies have increasingly targeted Mexican immigrants, the largest foreign-born group in the county, affecting their ability to live and work in the United States (Budiman 2020). For example, immigrant families and their U.S.-born children are excluded from important social safety supports that buffer the effects of poverty (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021). At the same time, Section 287(g) of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act promotes partnerships between Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement officials that request them. Once 287(g) partnerships are established, ICE can formally train and supervise local immigration enforcement activities (Wong 2012). Since its inception, the 287(g) Program has experienced varying levels of partnership interest. Counties with 287(g) partnerships are found to have higher levels of community instability and household mobility (Dee and Murphy 2020).

The Great Recession and its associated economic downturn ushered in a wave of state-level immigration policies (Ybarra, Sanchez, and Sanchez 2016). Data collection for this study was contextualized by ICE arrests reaching a high of 232,796 in 2009 (Kandel 2016) and

federal funding for 287(g) peaking at \$68 million in fiscal years 2010 through 2013 (American Immigration Council 2021). Despite the U.S. Supreme Court case *Trump v. State of Hawaii et al.* that ended President Donald Trump's "zero tolerance" and family separation policies, ICE's deputy director recently wrote that "ICE continues to use 287(g) partnerships to assist state and local agencies in ensuring the safety of their communities while working to expand the program consistent with EO 13768, Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States" (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2019).¹

Former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's change from "tough on drugs sheriff" to "ruthless immigration enforcer" was brought about by powers granted through the 287(g) program (Sterling and Joffe-Block 2021, 90). In 2007, ICE trained more than 150 Maricopa County sheriff officers. Sheriff Arpaio relentlessly pursued immigrants until abuse, racial profiling, and civil rights lawsuits ended the partnership between ICE and the Maricopa County's Sheriff's Office in December 2011. This termination did not halt Arpaio's efforts, however (Sterling and Joffe-Block 2021). In 2010, the year before this study began, Arizona enacted Senate Bill 1070 (SB 1070), the first law in the country that made it a state crime to be an undocumented immigrant (Campbell 2011; Santos, Menjívar, and Godfrey 2013).

Built on the enforcement mechanism authorized through the 287(g) program, SB 1070 deputized sheriffs to enforce federal immigration laws. SB 1070 had four key provisions. First, police could demand and investigate an individual's documentation status, referred to as the "show your papers" provision. Second, police could arrest individuals without a warrant on the presumption of their being undocumented. Third, not carrying federal registration papers indicating one's authorization status in the United States became a crime. Fourth, it also became a state crime for an unauthorized immigrant to seek or accept work in Arizona (Campbell 2011). In June 2012, coinciding with

the end of data collection for this study, the Supreme Court struck down all provisions of SB 1070 except for the first "show your papers" provision.

Although Phoenix was a hot spot for immigrant deportation during this study, immigration policy partnerships were not uniform across geographical contexts. Data from San Antonio's ICE field office suggest a less punitive approach to immigration enforcement: of the sixty-eight thousand immigrants who were deported from Texas in 2012, almost 70 percent were convicted criminals or repeat immigration violators; the remaining 30 percent were recent border entrants (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2012). In this study, we examine a national policy context hostile toward immigrants. Using a socioecological framework, we examine how variations in state and local immigration policies structured parents' broader set of social relations and environmental influences; we focus on implications for children's development.

Work and Home

Immigration policies and their strict enforcement have changed the nature and experience of work for Mexican immigrant households: first, by restricting employment and criminalizing those without valid documents; second, by using workplace raids to deport workers. Work restrictions constrain immigrants' access to employment by making it a crime to work without proper documents and imposing fines on companies that hire unauthorized workers (Mayorkas 2021). The end of legal employment for undocumented workers, however, enables employers to more easily exploit their labor. For example, Elizabeth Fussell (2011) finds that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when demand for low-skill construction workers to clean and rebuild the damaged city was high, Latinx day laborers were subjected to wage theft by unscrupulous employers who knew they would not report the theft to authorities. Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz (2012) similarly describes em-

1. *Donald J. Trump, President of the United States, et al., Petitioners v. Hawaii, et al.* 585 U.S. ___; 138 S. Ct. 2392; 201 L. Ed. 2d 775 (2018).

employers who prefer undocumented workers because of their exploitability. She cites one employer who stated, “if the immigrant employees had papers, they might not be such hard workers” (347). She also explains how after worksite raids, employers struggled to replace undocumented laborers with those willing to endure the same working conditions. For example, when a poultry-processing plant in Georgia lost two-thirds of its workforce in an immigration raid, local African American workers expressed concerns about dangerous work conditions and questionable labor practices, leading the plant to fill the positions with prison workers, Hmong refugees, and the homeless. The result of criminalizing immigrant labor has resulted in a downward trend in wages and higher unemployment rates for undocumented and documented Mexican immigrants (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016; Joyner 2018).

The second way punitive immigration policies intersect with work and family life is through family separation. Between 2010 and 2013, Jodi Berger Cardoso and colleagues (2018, 301) estimated that “300,000 parents of U.S. citizen children were deported.” As Jennifer Green (2019) points out in her study of mixed-status families in an era of mass deportation, mundane routines such as driving to the grocery store or going to work could result in deportation and fathers being separated from their families. Fathers are more likely to work outside the home in dual-headed Mexican immigrant households, putting them at greater risk of deportation (Dreby 2015; Gallo 2017). As the primary wage earners, fathers’ loss of employment may also shape various aspects of family life for their families. For example, uneven ICE enforcement in some communities may force fathers to seek other employment opportunities, causing families to leave together or remain separated (Ayón and Becerra 2013). For Mexican immigrant fathers, workplace restrictions not only threaten forced return to their country of origin, but also separation of the family unit (Cardoso et al. 2018).

Although the role of Mexican immigrant fathers within the home is less understood than that of mothers, fathers’ experiences with work

outside the home may manifestly shape aspects of life inside it. Thus a contribution of the current study is understanding how strict immigration enforcement shapes parenting roles and practices in underresourced, structurally disadvantaged communities.

Home and Schools

As families buffer the distal effects of immigration policy on their communities, schools play a critical role in providing social support services, regardless of a family’s documentation status. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act stimulus payments were not available to undocumented immigrants, lawful permanent residents, and U.S. citizens in immigrant families (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021). In response to the growing numbers of food-insecure families when schools closed due to the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that it would make meals freely available to all students for the 2021–2022 academic year through the National Food Lunch Program (2021). Schools also address the health and well-being of their students in other ways. For example, school-based health centers, funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provide a range of health-care services to families, including primary medical care, dental and oral care, and health education. To increase vaccination rates for COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) provided guidance to district administrators for hosting vaccination clinics to tackle disparities in vaccination rates.

As schools increasingly provide critical supports for low-income and immigrant families, strong family-school relations are central to maximizing students’ potential. Parents’ involvement in their children’s education inside and outside the home is associated with positive learning behaviors, higher test scores, and improved literacy skills (Durand 2011; Machen, Wilson, and Notar 2005). At the same time, building and maintaining strong family-school relations may be especially challenging in low-income, Mexican immigrant families because of language barriers and parents’ worries about their immigration status. Although for many

Mexican immigrant families, schools embody the hopes and aspirations for their children's futures (Green 2019), parents' involvement may reflect the broader constraints of their environment.

Because research on parenting practices and children's educational success focuses on mothers, fathers' role remains underexamined. The current literature suggests that Mexican immigrant fathers' involvement may be unique because of their multiple jobs, fear of deportation, greater English-language skills, and gender stereotypes about their role inside and outside the home (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001; Chrispeels and González 2004; Feliciano 2008). Drawing on a nationally representative sample of Latinx parents, Veronica Terriquez (2013) finds that Latinx fathers' participation in school-based events varies as a function of their immigration status and English-language proficiency: Spanish-dominant fathers and more recent immigrants were less likely to be involved in school-based activities. Additionally, Robert Moreno and Susan Chuang (2012) report that although Latinx fathers hold strong beliefs regarding their children's school participation, these beliefs are not reflected in their level of involvement at school. However, qualitative studies have pushed back on the narrative that fathers are uninvolved in their children's education; rather, teachers overlook or misinterpret fathers' participation and provide few avenues for deepening their engagement (Quiñones and Kiyama 2014; Gallo 2017).

Building and maintaining strong family-school relations is especially important in low-income, immigrant communities. However, research suggests that linguistically diverse parents are often excluded from their children's education (Carreón, Drake, and Barton 2005; Peña 2000; Ramirez 2003). Although state education agencies and school districts are mandated to support English-language learners and their parents, the U.S. Department of Justice reports numerous compliance issues (Lhamon and Gupta 2015, 39). Thus, the role of language on the formation of home-school relations among Mexican immigrant households warrants further study. Here we examine how

immigration policy structures family life inside and outside the home.

METHODS

This article emerged from an examination of how parents' relationships formed and developed at home, in schools, and within their communities (see Rangel, Shoji, and Gamoran 2020). Parents were selected for interviews from a broader pool of more than three thousand first-grade families and fifty-two Title I schools participating in a cluster-randomized controlled trial that examined the effects of parents' school-based relationships on children's early educational outcomes in low-income, predominantly Latinx schools. Overall results from the randomized controlled trial yielded null effects (Gamoran et al. 2021).

To recruit families, we made cold calls from lists of parents at eight study schools who consented to participate in the randomized control trial. We aimed to interview four families in each school. Families in one school in Phoenix were oversampled because of unique circumstances that warranted further exploration. Thus, our final interview sample consisted of fifty-seven parents from thirty-four families. We restrict our sample for this article to thirty parents from seventeen families in which at least one parent was born in Mexico.

Procedures

The article draws on interview data and field notes collected by the first author and another researcher from March 2011 to May 2012. With rare exceptions, all interviews occurred at the family's residence on a weekday evening. Before every interview, the researchers purchased food at a local restaurant and shared the meal with the entire family. The interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, according to parent preference, and lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. Total time spent in each household was between two and four hours. The interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, and translated when necessary.

Across the seventeen immigrant households, thirteen couples (five in San Antonio and eight in Phoenix) were interviewed. Four interviews were with mothers only, one of whom was

divorced. When two parents were present, interviews with mothers and fathers were conducted separately and simultaneously to capture parents' individual accounts of their experiences with their children's schooling. Interviews were conducted jointly when only one parent was present.

Analytic Approach

The analysis of the interview data proceeded in multiple stages. First, the second author and a research assistant open-coded all thirty interviews and wrote summaries outlining maternal and paternal involvement. During this process, the first and second authors met weekly to discuss thematic findings within the context of families' broader policy environment. Second, the interviews were indexed based on levels of parental involvement. Third, the second author and a research assistant coded the indexed data using NVivo 11 qualitative software. Analytic codes identified emerging factors that structured parental involvement. For example, after we created an index of parents who described intervening in a school-based issue, themes of distrust and fears of deportation emerged as salient. Last, parents' experiences with various domains of work, family, and community were contextualized based on the differing political environments in Phoenix and San Antonio (see table 1).

FINDINGS

In ecological systems theory, the mesosystem is where multiple microsystems intersect (Bronfenbrenner 1994). In Phoenix, strict immigration enforcement throughout the community intersected with parents' ability to find work and participate in their children's schooling. In contrast to San Antonio, where strict immigration enforcement was largely absent, the effects of these policies reached into the home as parents adapted to the climate of fear and instability that pervaded their community. Despite differing levels of immigration enforcement in San Antonio and Phoenix, inadequate language supports structured Spanish-dominant parental school involvement in both cities.

In Phoenix, families' experiences with hos-

tile immigration policy in their community provided a backdrop for schools' academic performance. In the best performing school in the sample, 26 percent of third-grade students were proficient in math and 32 percent were proficient in reading. In the lowest-performing school, 15 percent of third-grade students were proficient in both math and reading. In San Antonio, performance was marginally better: 56 and 39 percent of third-grade students were proficient in math and reading, respectively; in the lowest-performing school, 24 percent were proficient in math and 22 percent in reading.

Drawing on survey data collected from families and schools in the randomized control trial ($N = 573$), average parental involvement scale was compiled across ten items. Parents were asked to rate their level of involvement from 1 to 5, where 1 is "Never" and 5 is "11 or more times." Surveys included items such as "I helped my child with homework," "I went to a school program," "I asked my child to tell me about school," and so on. Across the eight schools, average parent involvement was 3.6, suggesting that involvement was neither high nor low. Among Mexican immigrant households in the interview sample, the average was higher (3.75). Some families reported scores of 5 across all items; the lowest average was 2.10. Principals were also surveyed and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement "Parents are actively involved in the school's programs," 1 being "strongly disagree" and 4 being "strongly agree." The average across the eight schools was 2.875, suggesting that they mostly agreed that parents were involved at the school. Schools' academic performance and the parental involvement scale provide context for parents' descriptions of how immigration policy served as *de facto* family, labor, and education policy.

Immigration Policy as *de Facto* Family Policy

Bronfenbrenner (1994) suggests that the macrosystem represents the cultural context in which families are embedded and serves as a blueprint within a given society. For this study, we consider federal and state-level immigration policy as the blueprint for the way immigrant

Table 1. Interview Participant Characteristics

Interview Participants, Father ^a	Children ^b	City	Employment Status
Devorah Baron, Ruben Baron	Alfredo (target child), Isaac (younger son), Jonathan (older son), Lizabeth (older sister)	Phoenix	Both parents worked outside the home
Martha Berber-Gomez, Diego Berber	Brian (target child), Marvin (age 4), Jose (Age 3)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Juanita Chavez, father not available	Miriam (target child), Chayo (1st grade)	Phoenix	Both parents worked outside the home
Vanessa Contreras, Jorge Contreras	Giselle (target child)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Glena Gomez, Armando Gomez	Brenda (target child), Jatzia (age 7), Deysi (age 11), Jose (age 16), Gloisa (Cousin-Age 8)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Mama Logro, father not available	Chiquillo (target child), MiEnano (1st grade), MiCuestro (older cousin)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Alma Lopez, Pancho Lopez	Noemi (target child), Enrique (son), Lilia (daughter)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Andrea Prieto, Jesus Prieto	Fernando (target child), Lalo (kindergarten), Nancy (age 2), Arthur (age >1)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Mayte Sandoval, Rudy Sandoval	Ramon (target child), Joel (age 7), Javier (8th grade), Blanca (11th grade)	Phoenix	Both parents worked outside the home
Olivia Uroza, Leo Uroza	Margarita (target child), Poncho (4th grade), Eduardo (age 15), Rosario (age 16)	Phoenix	Both parents worked outside the home
Miriam Villegeas	Leonardo (target child, Gabriela (age 10, Martina age 12)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Maria Vinas, father not available	Maria (target child), Adriana (Age 3)	Phoenix	Mom worked outside the home
Clarisa Fernández, Vicente Fernández	Mary (target child), Rosie (2nd grade), Emmy (Age 15), Eliza (Age 15)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home
Pilar García, Roberto García	Esmeralda (target child), Rosa (Age 9), Jose Garcia (Age 3)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home
Katie Gonglez, Rene Gonglez	Linda (target child), Cindy (Age 4)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home
Kanna De León, Fred De León	Barney (target child), Pancho (Age 12)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home
Sonia Molina, Marcos Molina	Marcos (target child)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home

Source: Authors' tabulation.

^aAll names are parent-selected pseudonyms.

^bChildren living in the home at the time of interview and relative to focal child (second or third grader).

families experience life within their communities. At the time of data collection (2011–2012), national deportations were at an all-time high (Suro, Suárez-Orozco, and Canizales 2015).

San Antonio and Phoenix are separated by 982 miles, and the political environment in each city made it feel even farther. In San Antonio, state-level policies did not single out immigrant households and none of the parents expressed fears of deportation. However, in Phoenix, billboards and radio announcements promoting Arpaio's "illegal alien hotline" asked community members to call and report the location of suspected undocumented immigrants. Arizona's attitude toward immigrants was clear: almost every parent we interviewed described a personal experience with deportation, whether family members, friends, or neighbors.

SB 1070 was part of Arizona's broader policy effort targeting Mexican immigrants. Local law enforcement frequently conducted status checks without cause. One consequence of the measure was that parents were constantly afraid of deportation because failure to carry proof of residency was cause for arrest. As an undocumented mother in Phoenix said, "Since the law was established, in almost every community, everybody is afraid of it. Many people were deported" (translated). Another father explained how even social relationships with undocumented immigrants could result in arrest: "Let's say you want to get water, you go to the store, and the police stop you, and you tell him, 'Here is my license' You show your I.D., and they say, 'Arizona I.D.' If you do not have it, who has the problem? I do, because if I have a person in my car who does not have an I.D., that is breaking the law here, and you could go to jail" (translated). In Phoenix, parents frequently discussed how SB 1070 created a climate of fear within their communities.

At the time of the study, the policy context in Phoenix was distinct from that in San Antonio. Unlike Sheriff Joe Arpaio's Maricopa County, Bexar County did not have a 287(g) partnership (Sterling and Joffe-Block 2021). One father from Phoenix who had recently traveled through San Antonio described the differences between the cities: "A year ago, I passed by San

Antonio. You don't see immigration [ICE officials] everywhere. In Arizona, you drive a little bit, and wow. Here you drive, and before you hit the road, immigration stops you, 'Let me see your I.D.' There you drive, and they are nowhere to be found. They used to say that the law was much stricter in Texas. To tell you the truth, the law is stricter here [in Phoenix]" (translated). To better understand this contrast, we asked parents in San Antonio about the news of mass deportations in Phoenix. One immigrant father responded, "Texans are calmer and more tranquil. I know people who have been expelled, but not because they are Mexican, because of drugs or something like that. I have not been to Phoenix, but it seems more difficult. Here in San Antonio, it's good, you can go wherever you want at any time, and it is okay" (translated). Relative to their counterparts in Maricopa County, immigrant families in Bexar County mentioned fewer interactions with law enforcement. Follow-up survey data from the randomized control trial revealed that four of the twelve Phoenix families had moved and dropped out of the study relative to one of five families from San Antonio. In Phoenix and San Antonio, immigration policy functioned as de facto family policy by structuring families' experiences in their communities. Fears of deportation, social distrust, and worries of family separation restructured the lives of many families who had called Phoenix home.

Immigration Policy as de Facto Labor Policy

In ecological systems theory, the mesosystem is where multiple microsystems intersect (Bronfenbrenner 1994). Strict immigration enforcement in Phoenix targeted immigrant families by restricting fathers' access to work. Unlike in San Antonio, immigration policy punished employers and employees alike. As the economy faltered, families left the state in search of income for their family.

In Arizona, SB 1070 made it illegal to work without proper documentation and penalized businesses that knowingly hired unauthorized workers by suspending or revoking their business license. Parents suggested that SB 1070 caused many workers to lose their jobs. Workplace raids were a defining feature of Sheriff

Arpaio's regime. As one immigrant father explained, "He [Arpaio] does his raids, he goes to big businesses where many people are working. They just arrive without letting anybody know. They arrive and take people out, people who have worked there for many years but do not have documents. They are working like many people who come from Mexico" (translated).

Employers were also required to use E-Verify, a federal website from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration that would make it more difficult for workers to submit fake social security numbers. By comparing workers' employment authorization forms with federal databases, the system can verify employees' identification photos by matching the one in the system (Orrenius and Zavodny 2015, 5). These work restrictions were consequential for undocumented immigrant parents. One father explained:

There are jobs, but you can't apply without a social security number. I have a cousin who does not work and lives in Mexico, so I told him, 'Let me borrow your social security number. I will work, and you do the taxes.' Before, you were able to do it, but now you can't. The thing is that they have E-Verify or something like that. So, when they started all of that [enforcement], we [those without valid work permits] could not do anything about it. Many people lost their jobs for the same reason, they did not have work permits. (translated)

Another father described how E-Verify not only affected workers but also their employers: "Before, a business could get a job and finish it in a few months. Why? Because there were people to work. Now, they have to hire documented workers, but where are they? They are not around anymore. There are still some without papers, but if the sheriff shows up [at the work-site], he fines the company and takes all the Mexicans that do not have papers. Legal papers do not make a worker. Papers do not do jobs. Jobs are done by people who want to work" (translated).

As a result, employers continued to hire undocumented workers despite the potential consequences. We asked one immigrant mother,

who worked at a recycling plant, whether her employer was aware of her status. She responded, "The boss knows everything. He knows we have someone else's papers, and he said that he would pay the fine for all of us. He is making a lot of money; why not?" (translated). As parents experienced limited work opportunities and the increased policing of job sites, Arpaio's workplace raids became synonymous with immigration policy.

Fear of deportation at work was a consistent theme in the data and restructured the lives of many families who had called Phoenix home for more than a decade. Community instability ensued as families left the state to look for work. One mother explained: "You had to be legal, or you would not survive in this place. The problem was work. So, the laws affected the employers because they were afraid of hiring people without papers. People say, 'You can live here,' but if you do not have a job, you cannot pay for anything. The first thing you lose when you do not work is the ability to pay rent and utilities, so you have to move" (translated). The decision to leave Phoenix, however, was not an easy one. An undocumented immigrant mother explained the dilemma: "Many people moved away when they lost their jobs. My husband didn't lose his job, but we would not be here if he had lost it. But for many people, their children were born here and have lived here for more than 16 years; they had to go back [to Mexico] because they lost their home" (translated). Although families had raised their children and bought homes in the community, as families decided to leave the state searching for work opportunities, long-standing community relationships fractured.

Decisions to leave Arizona were incredibly complicated in mixed-status homes where one household member was undocumented. Parents discussed contingency plans with friends and family if they were picked up in a raid. One documented father explained: "Many families have made me in charge of their children. If, one day, something happens—if they get deported—someone will bring their children to me. Otherwise, the government takes them and gives them up for adoption. Can you imagine how sad it would be that another family adopted your children because you did not have

papers and were deported to Mexico?" (translated).

In contrast with San Antonio, where strict immigration enforcement was largely absent, 287(g) partnerships and Senate Bill 1070 led to fears of deportation, social distrust, and worries of family separation. Labor shortages caused by employees moving or being deported presented employers a choice: either follow the law and their businesses might suffer or break the law and pay a fine. For fathers able to maintain a source of income, families adapted to the uncertainty of deportation as punitive immigration policies reverberated through Mexican immigrant communities, regardless of documentation status.

Immigration Policy as de Facto Education Policy

Bronfenbrenner describes the critical role of microsystems like the household in affecting children's development. In the context of Mexican immigrant households, we considered how macro- and meso-level factors influence mothers' and fathers' role within the home. In Phoenix, strict enforcement at parents' workplaces affected key domains of their children's lives, suggesting that immigration policy serves as de facto education policy.

Parents' fears of deportation and family separation were central in their children's lives. As one father described it, children were "worried they would not see their fathers again" (translated). As parents left the community to protect their children from the broader hostile context in which families lived, instability in schools directly ensued. Parents reported that school enrollment dropped dramatically. One mother explained: "[The school] sent me an application asking if I planned to return the following school year. I said no but because I was moving [to a new school], but many wrote no because they were returning to Mexico. In the last month of school, many students left. We were getting papers from the school telling us how we needed to talk to our children so the change would not be so hard" (translated). When we asked her about the impact of SB 1070 on home-school relations, she replied, "[SB 1070] affects the family's mood and relationship with the school because children saw that their par-

ents were worried. Parents were worried because they did not have jobs; spouses were fighting. At the same time, the children were afraid because of what they heard on TV. They were going to school crying, and they were fearful of going to school. That affected our children." Although many children of immigrant parents are U.S. citizens, parents reported that the emotional toll of deportation was often felt in schools.

Parents who remained in Arizona were distrustful of their children's schools and worried that schools might report their documentation status to law enforcement. One mother described this distrust: "Right now, we heard that parents with kids starting school this year would need to present legal documents. So, there will be another exodus of people leaving the state. I remember that at the beginning [when SB 1070 passed], I did not want to go to school. My children were born here, but the school never told us, 'Calm down, nothing is going to happen to you.' Now, the excuse they are saying [when registering children for school] is that they want to verify the address, but they are saying we need legal documentation" (translated). Due to the hostile policy environment in the community, the task of registering children for school, a standard process to ensure that children live within the catchment zone, caused this mother to believe her children's school had ulterior motives. She suggests that schools, rather than addressing her concerns about documentation status, did little to support immigrant families.

In addition, Proposition 203, a ballot initiative passed in the early 2000s, mandated English-only instruction (Wright 2005). One mother described the impact of this law on students: "Both of my children were in the Head Start program. At that time, it was a bilingual program, but in Arizona, they approved a law where they only teach English in schools. Before, it was not like that. I think it is bad for the children who are just arriving from Mexico or any other country because they start school not understanding anything. It is also bad because they do not speak to [the students] in Spanish, but [the students] do not understand English" (translated). Despite recent efforts to overturn the law in response to declining educational

outcomes for English-language learners, Arizona remains the only state in the country with educational language mandates (Wright 2005).

To better understand the context of parents' experiences, the first author visited an ELL classroom in Phoenix to observe parent-teacher conferences. In this district, parent-teacher conferences occurred in groups rather than one-on-one meetings. The author met the school interpreter informally before the conference and discovered that she was from the Midwest and neither a native-Spanish speaker nor a trained interpreter. Once the conference began, the teacher presented the students' academic progress to parents on a graph. She explained that although the grade standard was ninety to one hundred words a minute by the end of the year, some students were reading only six to eight words a minute. The teacher spoke for several minutes before looking to the interpreter to highlight the main points in a few seconds. At the end of the presentation, the teacher asked whether there were any questions. Through the interpreter, one parent asked whether the teacher could send reading homework in Spanish so that she could help her child at home. Exasperated by the question, the teacher exclaimed, "No, that would be way too much work!" The interpreter translated these remarks back to parents: "No, that is not possible."

Observations of parent-teacher relations and interviews with parents in this Phoenix classroom suggest that parental involvement was structured by language barriers as well as the teacher's prejudice against Spanish-dominant parents. One bilingual mother described how this teacher had reprimanded her son for being late because of a doctor's appointment. When the child knew he would be late the following day because they needed to pick up his prescription, he told his mother he was afraid his teacher would yell at him again. The mother assured her son that she would talk to the teacher. She recounted her exchange: "I went, and I told her, if you have questions or if you want to know exactly what is going on, you have my number, or you can have the office call me. Her response was, 'well, now, it's nice to know that you speak English and that I can communicate with you.'" When we followed up

by asking how she felt about the teacher's comments, she explained that the interaction made her feel "horrible" because "I have an advantage that most parents do not have just because I know the language."

SB 1070 and Proposition 203 structured home-school relations in Phoenix, but parents in both cities reported that language barriers shaped their involvement in their children's educations. Guidance from the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education on the provision of translators and interpreters requires that "SEAs [state educational agencies] and school districts must provide language assistance to LEP [limited English proficiency] parents" and that "school districts should ensure that interpreters and translators are trained on the role of an interpreter and translator" (Lhamon and Gupta 2015, 38–39). However, parents viewed interpreters at the school as ineffective and unreliable. One mother shared her concerns: "when you are speaking through an interpreter, they do not tell the teachers the same things we say, they [the interpreters] fix it up a little bit" (translated). Underscoring this observation, one father noted that school translators would "only repeat what you say like a machine" (translated). Although the extent to which greater parental involvement in their children's education would have improved students' educational performance is unclear, immigrant parents' autonomy to decide their level of involvement was removed when schools did not provide adequate language support.

In our discussions with parents about how relationships formed and developed in their communities, mothers frequently discussed how language barriers structured home-school relations. Through our interviews, we learned that fathers' English-language skills, often learned from work outside the home, were leveraged by mothers to help with educational responsibilities. Primarily, mothers reported that fathers' language abilities facilitated home-school relations. For example, one mother explained how she had grown accustomed to not communicating with her son's teachers: "every year when my son begins school, I ask him, 'does your teacher speak Spanish?' 'No, she does not speak Spanish?' It is better if I stay quiet and tell my husband that he has to go and

get involved” (translated). Similarly, another mother reported that she had strong relationships with a translator at school, which lessened the need for her husband’s English-language skills.

Exacerbating issues with translators, parents also reported concerns about the effectiveness of their children’s teachers and the inadequacy of their children’s schools. When his child was at risk of being held back a grade, one father explained that his wife “did not want to deal with the teacher” and asked that he intervene on her behalf. Fathers also intervened in school matters of their own accord. One father described his dismay when he reviewed his son’s workbook and found several incomplete pages. After consulting with relatives who had children in the same school, the father confronted the teacher about the unfinished work and ultimately decided to enroll his son in a charter school.

Fathers also helped when homework was sent home in English. One mother explained how her husband was always helping their daughter: “Mario speaks English, so if it is not something that I have to read, I can help her, but if she has to read, and it requires too much English, I tell [my husband], ‘Mario, she needs your help.’ He is always helping her. That is why I don’t have a problem. If he did not speak English, then that would be a problem” (translated). Similarly, after coming across a problem that he thought was too difficult for his seven-year-old son, another father described marking “a large circle around it, so the teacher would see it,” noting, “if [a parent] doesn’t speak English, they won’t notice [the difficulty of the assignment]” (translated). As parents viewed interpreters at the school as ineffective and unreliable, fathers were a vital family resource given the schools’ inability to support Spanish-dominant parents’ linguistic needs.

For families in Phoenix and San Antonio, mothers and fathers worked together to ensure their children’s basic educational needs were met. Fathers’ language skills facilitated home-school relations and were a key resource for their wives and children given schools’ failure to support Spanish-dominant parents and their children. Fathers intervened when educational issues arose, sent correspondences to

teachers, and helped with homework. In Phoenix, strict immigration enforcement intersected with children’s home environment. Excluding Spanish-speaking parents from full participation in their children’s schooling limited parents’ abilities to support their children as they struggled emotionally and academically. Other than sending notes home asking parents to discuss the impacts of immigration on their children, the ambiguity around deportation risks structured home-school relations: parents distrusted teachers and feared that schools would expose their undocumented status. As families withdrew their children en masse, schools were unaware of the dangers families faced in their daily lives. Schools represent essential sites of social mobility and social resources for low-income adolescents and their families. However, immigration policy can become de facto education policy for children attending schools that fail to buffer the effects of the punitive immigration environment and language barriers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we examine how strict immigration enforcement policies shaped work and family life inside and outside the home in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix. Drawing on interview data, we highlight how punitive federal and state immigration policies structure community relations through work and school and how these broader influences reach into the home. This analysis provides insights into the intersections between work and school in an age of increased political hostility toward immigrant families. Mexican immigrant fathers’ role in family life has been overlooked, and these findings shed light on the unique ways in which father’s work contributed to children’s development both inside and outside the home.

Our findings point to several broad conclusions. First, coordination among federal, state, and local law enforcement officials suggests that immigration policy serves as de facto family policy, structuring families’ experiences in their communities. Although immigration enforcement has long been under the federal government’s purview, 287(g) program partnerships have caused state-level immigration

enforcement to change dramatically under different presidential administrations. During the Barack Obama administration, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's name became synonymous with worksite immigration raids and deportations for families in Phoenix. The vestiges of anti-immigrant rhetoric and punitive policies in Phoenix during our study can be seen in other state-level policies, such as Alabama's HB 56 (Mohl 2016).

Although families reported vastly different immigration contexts in San Antonio than in Phoenix, Texas has adopted a similarly punitive approach in more recent years. After Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2016, Texas enacted Senate Bill 4, making it a crime for local officials or public colleges and universities to serve as "sanctuary cities" or refuse to work with ICE (Salas-Chacon 2017; Lasch et al. 2018). During the Joe Biden administration, Texas has also fought against executive action to end workplace immigration raids and deportation of undocumented immigrants by suing the federal government for not enforcing federal immigration law.²

Second, our work shows how immigration policy functioned as labor policy in Arizona. Immigration policy limited work opportunities, fomented social distrust, and exacerbated deportation fears. Work authorization documents were more stringently checked, and worksite immigration raids were a key enforcement mechanism. Experiences with deportation threats and limited work opportunities were largely experienced through fathers. As fathers sought other work opportunities and feared deportation, communities fractured. For those who stayed in Phoenix, commonplace activities like registering for school heightened families' deportation fears.

Third, our data show how immigration also functioned as de facto education policy. Although immigration policies did not explicitly target children, children were not spared from its effects. In Phoenix, parents described vanishing classmates and children crying in school because they feared losing their fathers. In both cities, parents' efforts to ensure their children's basic educational needs were met were

constrained by inadequate language supports. Parallel to Sarah Halpern-Meekin and Adam Talkington's findings (2022, this issue), our results show that families responded to these constraints by relying on fathers to play prominent roles at home and in schools.

Although advancing federal immigration reform should be a priority, educational policies need to focus on improving trust and communication between parents and schools rather than punishing children for their parents' immigration status (Bryk and Schneider 2002, 130). Results also suggest school districts must enforce adherence to mandated language access policies. To hold schools accountable, districts should provide parents with information to contact the Office of Civil Rights at the Department of Education to report violations. Districts would, of course, need to clarify that reporting violations would have no impact on parents, whether documented or undocumented.

That forces beyond their desired level of involvement shaped immigrant parents' participation in schools have implications beyond their children's education. Although the active enforcement of strict immigration policies has subsided under the Biden administration, their effects are likely to persist for generations. Scholars have recently called for expanding the adverse childhood experiences framework, which considers how childhood trauma shapes later life outcomes, to include the threat of deportation and deprivation resulting from strict immigration enforcement (Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2021). Although moving to another state may have offered temporary protection from deportation threats, as the editors note in their introduction to this issue, low-income workers are suffering on a national scale: job opportunities for low-skilled workers have diminished, labor-force participation has declined for those with low educational attainment, and wages have stagnated (see Carlson, Wimer, and Haskins 2022, this issue).

Finally, our study is not without limitations. Although our data succinctly capture the experiences of Mexican immigrant households from mothers' and fathers' perspectives, we

2. *State of Texas v. USA*, 515 F.Supp.3d 327 (2021).

cannot generalize to other populations or other communities. Policies identified in the study are not exhaustive, and factors not mentioned by parents may also have shaped their involvement. In addition, most of the families we interviewed were dual-headed, a typical household structure among working-class and poor Mexican immigrant families, but atypical for most low-income families, which tend to be single-headed households. Thus future research should consider the experiences of single-headed Mexican immigrant households.

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