

Challenges with Employment: Trajectories and Supportive Environments

This paper reviews papers from the Rural Families Speaks Project (Bauer, 2004) with a focus on the contribution to longitudinal employment trajectories of rural, low-income families. All of the papers make contributions to the existing literature by confirming already existing knowledge and also add new dimensions to the literature. The policy implications from the challenges are included in the Dolan paper from this special session.

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Irregular employment often affects individual and family functioning. Being without employment or changing employment often creates vulnerability for families. The stability of employment in rural areas is more than an issue for families; it is also a major issue for communities.

Three studies with longitudinal samples provide the basis for the challenges identified in this paper and development of policies and programs for the families and communities. For all of these studies, many of the mothers had service jobs that were labor intensive, with low wages and nonstandard work hours. The travails of accessing and maintaining employment was a major challenge for the mothers. The resources of childcare, transportation, physical and mental health services were vital for employment of these rural, low-income mothers.

The Rural Families Speak Project initially used the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), commonly known as Welfare Reform. The team was interested in the employment and employment stability for rural families. We immediately noted, in the responses from the women, that they were changing work often but were still employed, which created an in-and-out for them and their families as well as stability issue for employers.

A paper that we call the Job Volatility Study (Berry, Katras, Sano, Lee, & Bauer, 2008) used all the mothers in the Rural Families Project for all three waves of data collection. We conducted a mixed method, combining multinomial logistic regression and eliminative inductive qualitative analysis with 245 mothers. They were categorized into three groups: (a) stably employed (same job over time, $n = 40$, 16.3%), (b) unemployed (continuously over time, $n = 56$, 22.9%), and (c) intermittently employed (changed jobs or were in and out of the labor force with some unemployment at a point in time, $n = 149$, 60.8%). The largest group was the intermittent employment.

The stable employment group was characterized by flexibility at work, satisfaction with job that was more important than higher wages, and strong social support network of family, supervisors, or co-workers that helped at all times. The unemployed group was characterized by their choices to remain unemployed for their children. They also had younger children, did not have a car or transportation assistance, or experienced higher food insecurity or lower life satisfaction when compared to the stably employed. The intermittent group was characterized by lack of flexibility at work, difficult work and family responsibilities, short-term health issues for themselves or family members, and some minor disabilities that made continuous work difficult. This group also had younger children or was food insecure, but they received more transportation assistance than the stably employed.

A paper that we call the Intermittent Employment Study (Sano, Katras, Lee, Bauer, & Berry, in press) consisted of 113 mothers who were intermittently employed in the Job Volatility Study and could clearly be categorized. We had 57 (54.4%) with job change (stayed employed but changed jobs over the years), 35 (30.9%) with job loss (employed at the baseline but quit sometime in the study period), and 39 (35.5%) with job gain (unemployed at the baseline and became employed during the study period). Multinomial logistic regression was

combined with case studies to characterize the groups. Case studies for each of the group were presented to help draw attention to the complexity of the intermittent employment issues.

Interestingly, no statistical differences in the demographic characteristics of the mothers existed for those with job change, loss, or gain. The Job Volatility reviewers were certain that we had a very mixed population with the intermittent group and challenged the research team to be more specific. When compared to the job change group, the job loss group was identified by lower mother's education, more depressive symptoms, higher number of health problems, and younger age of youngest child. The only significant factor for the job gain group was receiving of TANF. This finding is being explored by other research teams and additional information was not included in this session.

A longitudinal qualitative study of 28 continuously employed single mothers (Son & Bauer, in press) concluded the presentation. Work-family conflict is a popular topic in the literature. Little work on longitudinal studies has been conducted. We know that work-family conflict is more detrimental to rural, low-income, single mothers than for middle-class or married mothers. Many mothers rely on informal support that is usually unstable or unavailable at the point of need. The inductive qualitative analysis revealed quotes to highlight four themes that emerged from the study and were included in presentation. The themes were demands from family and work, resources used by mothers to maintain their employment, work-family conflict, and how the mothers spoke about living with the realities of life. The sub-themes within the demands were for childcare, unexpected family issues, nonstandard work schedule, and job insecurity. The sub-themes within the resources were support from family, work, and the community. The one major finding is that all of the mothers who remained in the same job had strong family support over time. The sub-themes in work-family conflict were time constraints, tiredness, and stress. The living with realities of life sub-themes were missing or leaving work, reduction of work time, and keeping favorable jobs. It was important to recognize that important research concepts often came from qualitative studies that included items that could not be measured quantitatively.

Successful employment is related to working environments, availability of public assistance, and local job markets for rural, low-income mothers. The individual characteristics, family situations, and supportive communities influence the employment of rural, low-income women. The challenges and trajectories for all these studies can be summed up. The mothers with supportive employers were able to have more flexible working environments. Single mothers with family support were able to remain in the same job over time. No one factor explained the differences in the job volatility or intermittent employment or single mother employment. The policy issues around the interface with the mothers, employers, stability of employment, and the complexity for the families and community were discussed by Dolan in the last paper of the special session.

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