

Work Constraints of Rural, Low Income Mothers and Their Partners

Rural low income parents are likely to work in jobs that provide little flexibility for them to combine their work and family lives. This paper uses the words of mothers participating in the Rural Families Speak project to identify some of the issues they face.

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Rural communities in the United States tend to have a higher rate of poverty than urban communities. Using an ecological perspective, Cotter (2002) found that when holding household characteristics constant, nonmetropolitan status increased the likelihood of being poor by 40 percent. When Cotter added controls for the labor market characteristics, the increase of poverty in non-metro areas fell to 19 percent, leading him to conclude that the "...context of nonmetropolitan America rather than the *composition* of nonmetropolitan Americans" (emphasis in the original) may be the real story of rural poverty (Cotter, 2002, p. 549). Living in a rural community constrains the employment choices for rural residents. The purpose of this paper is to examine how low income rural mothers handle job requirements and constraints to blend their work and family life.

Herzenberg, Alic and Wial (2000) constructed a theory of the structure of the U.S. labor market based on the organization of production and regulation of task performance in occupations. Their framework addresses the factors that are endemic in rural low wage jobs. *Tightly constrained* (TI) work systems, such as those in food service, have very controlled work boundaries and a high level of supervision. Skill requirements are low, and little training is needed. These jobs can be fast-paced, high-stress, with little opportunity for advancement, resulting in a high turnover rate. Workers are relatively easy to replace. *Unrationalized, labor-intensive* (ULI) work systems, such as custodians or nurse's aides, typically have a fixed set of tasks to complete, but the quality and quantity of work may be difficult to measure. Although these jobs may not require a lot of skills, those who have experience are more efficient workers, and therefore more desirable to the employers. In these types of jobs, too, advancement to a higher paying position is difficult. Non-standard job hours are common. *Semiautonomous* (SA) work systems, which include police and security officers, require skills and training. Work is not highly supervised due to the complexity of the work, wages are higher and advancement is possible. Finally, the *high-skill autonomous* (HSA) work systems, which include teachers, managers and professional positions, are based on occupational skill and pride. These kinds of jobs require formal training and education, and workers are carefully screened prior to being hired. Job tasks are often complex and difficult to evaluate. The possibility for advancement is greater. Replacing these workers is costly. This analysis will use this framework to examine the work and family constraints of rural, low-income mothers and their partners, focusing primarily on the *tightly constrained* (TC) and *unrationalized, labor-intensive* (ULI) work systems which theoretically provide the couple with the least amount of flexibility in combining their work and family lives.

Results

Thirty-five participants were partnered at all three interviews, and both participants and partners were employed at all three interviews. Sample participants were 34.4 years old (SD = 8.19). . Eighty percent of the couples were married and 20% were living together. Participants worked an average of 27 hours per week in their primary jobs and their partners worked an average of 44 hours per week in primary jobs. Mean monthly household income in Wave 1 was \$2000. The majority of participants in Wave 1 were employed in the service industry (60%), and 14% were employed in administrative support. Their partners were employed in the production sector (32.4%), management (14.7%) and service industries (11.8%). In eighty percent of the couples, both worked in either a TC or ULI work system job.

Both the TC and ULI work system jobs are characterized by little job flexibility, low wages and variable hours. When both spouses are employed in such jobs, juggling work and family concerns can be quite challenging.

Thirteen participants and 17 partners were employed in TC jobs, 17 participants and 14 partners were employed in ULI jobs, and five participants and four spouses were employed in either SA or HSA jobs. In only 20% of the couples did one or both work in either SA or HSA jobs. Hours worked and child care arrangements were the two predominant challenges faced by the couples.

Several mothers talked about work schedules and hours worked, especially non-standard schedules. Whether it was their own schedules or their partners' schedules, when they worked could impact the family. Misty, a 27-year old waitress whose fiancé was a truck driver complained about her boss giving her more hours than she wanted: *"I feel like I've been working too many hours, ... They scheduled me for a lot. ... that's the second time he's asked me."* Marilyn, a married mother of two who does child care in her home, talks about the long hours her husband is working and why he does it in Wave 2: *"He got a new job at ... (factory job) and he works at night, midnights. He works 10:30 to 7:30 in the morning. And then he works with his dad from like 8 - 2 and then he comes home and goes to bed until the next night. ... He does not get much sleep, but we have benefits now. It is worth it to us."*

A few mothers mentioned how they thought that their work hours interfered with family life. For example, Emilina, mother of three whose husband had taken a job that was a five-hour drive away in Wave 2, talked about how she felt when she worked late in her job as an administrative and sales assistant for a real estate firm, a ULI work system job:

"Well sometimes, when I do get out late, I feel like, you know, ... like I feel like I'm a bad mother, or a bad parent, 'cuz I don't spend enough time with them. But then they tell me, oh, well my aunt helped us do this, or my aunt did this, and, you know, I don't feel as bad [laughing]. But sometimes, because I do...office hours are from 11 to six pm. So sometimes, ... I don't get out until like eight, maybe. And that's when I come home, and the kids are already sleeping, and I feel like, empty. Cuz, you know, I didn't put them to sleep, ..."

Zoe, a cashier (TC) with two young children, whose husband is a forklift operator (ULI), was adamant about the hours she would work: *"... I refuse to work at night anymore, because the kids won't go to bed for their dad. And it's just too hard to come home at midnight, and find Garrett on the couch watching TV, this one (younger son) in his crib screaming, and my husband's deaf, so he can't hear them."*

The problem of child care was by far the most dominant topic of discussion. Some parents worked different shifts in order to care for their children. For example, Comfort is a certified nursing assistant (ULI), her husband is a mechanic (ULI) and they have three children. She explains their child care system when asked who cares for her children: *"My husband. ...I have to work evenings and weekends. ...and that's why I work the opposite shift as my husband, because he's home with the kids, I can't afford childcare and work too because I pay \$5 an hour for my boys to be in childcare."*

Working different shifts allows parents to reduce child care costs, but time as a family may be minimal. Tait and her husband Theodore worked different shifts to minimize the cost of child care for their five children. She talked about having family time: *"We just do. I mean, we have family time and ...we work it so Theodore can stay home with the kids in the morning and I come home with them in the afternoon. Anything that needs to be done in the morning, he takes care of it, and in the afternoon I do."*

Extended family members also help with childcare. Zoe worked hours when her father was available to take care of her two sons. *"...I don't like the hours that I work, but I do that for my parents so that my dad doesn't have to have both the kids at the theatre with him in the morning."*

More than one mother chose to care for others' children as well as her own to deal with the problem of finding child care in a rural community. Janelle and Tobias had custody of their three grandchildren, ages 6 to 11. Janelle talked about her decision to quit her job and become a childcare provider (ULI):

"Very difficult to find childcare for anyone over the age of eight. Uh, and when you do find childcare, unfortunately, in our case, since the children are a separate family, I cannot get help-financial help for childcare, and it was- for the summer, it was going to cost me right around two hundred and eighty dollars a week. ...For the three of them, which, you know, that isn't worth going out and working, and still being away from the children all day long, so, I gave it up, and decided to go into childcare."

Having a supportive supervisor was essential to maintaining employment when child care arrangements fall apart or children were sick. Comfort talked about the difficulties she and her husband ran into with their "opposing shifts" child care strategy:

"In the wintertime when the [neighboring town] goes on snow watch, they need a mechanic there if they're out plowing in the middle of the night. And he did call, it was in January, I think it was, he, a couple different nights I had to call into work because he couldn't leave [neighboring town]."

And I was working 11:00 to 7:00 at the time, and I just, there was no way I could get my kids-... And there was no way I could get the kids anyplace to go to work. So I had to call in. [I: How did your supervisor react?] Actually, they were quite good about it. They completely understood."

Not all supervisors are understanding, however. Layla, who worked for Head Start (ULI), talked about what happened when her son got sick when she was working at the local hospital: *"I got written up twice where I worked. ...I worked at Community Hospital, and when my son got sick he was a patient at Community Hospital. I spent the night, I spent all my time there with him, and they knew this, but they still wrote me up twice for missing work ...when my son was sick and in the hospital. Not a very understanding hospital!"*

Conclusions

The majority of low-income rural mothers and their partners were employed in jobs that fell into the tightly constrained or unrationalized, labor intensive work systems. These work systems are characterized by low wages, non-standard hours, and little control over the hours one works. Mothers, and fathers, in this study struggled with meshing their labor force participation with their family life. Child care was a consistent concern. Several mothers quit other jobs in order to take care of their children and earn money by caring for other people's children. Some parents worked opposing shifts in order to minimize child care costs. This strategy worked well until weather or illness interfered. A supervisor who understood and was willing to be flexible was important, but not all supervisors took that approach. Long hours, being scheduled for additional hours, and/or working non-standard shifts all added to the complexity of family life for these 35 rural, low-income families. Although not explicitly discussed by the participants, it appears that one strategy for dealing with the constraints of their jobs was for the mother to work part-time. Because the partners typically earned higher wages, reducing the mother's hours was a sensible strategy to adjust for family needs.

Policy implications

These low-income families wanted to work to support their families, but they often found themselves having to choose between care for their children and having time with their families or working extended hours and/or during non-standard work shifts (other than 8 AM to 5 PM when formal child care is available). They also had incomes that were too low to pay for most formal child care. Public policies need to address the plight of the working poor families who are in such binds. The human capital development of these children is being jeopardized due to these constraints on their parents. Providing greater subsidies for after-school care and other child care arrangements would help these families make sure their children are cared for and safe while the parents are working. Having a sound family, with parents who have the time and energy to tend their children will go a long way to maintaining the health and overall well-being of these vulnerable children. Higher pay and provision of sick leave and vacation time will give many families the flexibility they need to care for sick children without the threat of losing their jobs. Training managers to accommodate these needs will also enable working parents to stay engaged in the workforce while caring for their children.

References

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