"A Routine Juggling Act: Managing Childcare and Employment"

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Rising labor force participation among mothers of young children since the 1970s and the passage of strict work requirements for welfare recipients in 1996 have increased scholarly attention to the challenge of balancing the often conflicting demands of work and family. This challenge is particularly acute for mothers at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, who are more likely to be single (Duncan and Rodgers 1987) and more likely to work non-standard hours or weekends (Presser 2003, pp. 34-35) than middle- or upper-class mothers.

For working mothers of all social classes, a central element of the work-family juggling act is obtaining and retaining child care, without which most mothers cannot participate in the labor force. Since the 1970s, scholars have explored several aspects of the relationship between child care and work among mothers of young children. Research on the demand for quality care suggests that, were such care available at what mothers perceive to be "reasonable" cost, significant numbers of mothers not in the labor force would look for work, while some mothers working part-time would increase their hours (Presser and Baldwin 1980). Research on job turnover has linked motherhood and the provision of child care by relatives rather than professionals to increased risk of leaving work (Hofferth and Collins 2000). Research on child care costs indicates that high child care prices act as an impediment to employment although the size of the effect is uncertain (Han and Waldfogel 2001; Meyers, Heintze and Wolf 2002).

Far less is known, however, about mothers' daily experiences managing child care and employment. While a growing ethnographic literature examines welfare recipients' experiences with child care (London et al. 2004; Clampet-Lundquist et al. 2004), no large-scale survey research of which we are aware has addressed such basic questions as how often mothers' regular child care arrangements fall through, how often child care problems cause mothers to miss work or how often mothers experience stress stemming from conflicts between child care and work.

In this paper, we take an initial look at these questions and other related work-child care dilemmas using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which follows a cohort of 3,712 children born to unmarried mothers in 20 U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 and includes a comparison group of 1,188 children born to married mothers. The Fragile Families data are representative of all unmarried births in cities with populations greater than 200,000. We use data from the first three waves of the survey, including information collected when the children were approximately 12 months and 30 months of age as well as baseline data, in order to track mothers' experiences with child care and employment over time. Response rates were generally high, including 87 percent of eligible unmarried mothers and 82 percent of eligible married mothers at baseline, 90 percent of unmarried mothers and 91 percent of married mothers eligible at 12-month follow-up and 87 percent of unmarried mothers and 89 percent of married mothers eligible at 30-month follow-up.

The Fragile Families data are particularly well suited for our purposes because they focus on unmarried mothers, who tend to be low income and who may face particularly acute child care dilemmas because of their low socio-economic status (London et al. 2004) and because they

lack a spouse who might be able to help when child care arrangements fall through. (It is unclear, however, how often spouses help in such situations and how whatever assistance with child care emergencies unmarried mothers receive from the fathers of their children or from current partners compares with that married mothers receive from their husbands.) In addition, the longitudinal nature of the data allow us to examine whether problems related to employment and childcare tend to improve, stay the same or worsen over time.

In order to provide a nationally representative point of comparison, we also include a comparative, descriptive analysis based on data from the basic questionnaire of the Current Population Survey (CPS), which asks about reasons for work absences, including child care problems. The CPS does not include as rich an array of childcare-employment questions as the Fragile Families study. But using the CPS enables us to establish the frequency with which both mothers and fathers of young children report missing work due to child care problems nationwide. (Fathers in the Fragile Families study were not asked questions about child care unless they had physical custody of the child, an uncommon arrangement.)

Since little is known about mothers' daily experiences with childcare and employment, we begin with descriptive statistics, focusing on six related outcomes. These include: how many times in the past month working mothers report having had to make special arrangements because their regular childcare fell through; how many times in the past month working mothers report having missing work due to a childcare problem; the proportion of working mothers who report that they must miss work when their children fall ill because their child care providers won't accept sick children; the proportion of working mothers who report having quit a job due to child care problems; the proportion of working mothers who say their shift or work schedule caused stress for them or their children; the proportion of working mothers who report difficulty dealing with child care problems during work hours; and the proportion of working mothers who report that their work schedules are not flexible enough to allow them to handle family needs.

We then examine how closely correlated these various measures of childcare-employment problems are with one another. This allows us to evaluate whether different groups of working mothers tend to experience different childcare-employment problems or whether mothers who experience difficulties report multiple problems. We also examine the persistence of childcare-employment problems over time, asking whether mothers who report a given problem when their child is approximately 12 months old are likely to see the problem improve, worsen or stay the same over the subsequent year and a half. In addition, because childcare-employment problems may be particularly acute among single mothers and among mothers who work non-standard hours or weekends, we compare the prevalence of these problems among single and married mothers and among mothers who work standard and non-standard hours or weekends. And we examine particular forms of child care are associated with particular childcare-employment problems.

While the Fragile Families data are longitudinal, questions about mothers' experiences with childcare and employment are asked at only two discrete points in time. Thus, we inevitably miss turnover in childcare and employment that occurs before the month 12 follow-up survey and in between months 12 and 30. The lack of continuous childcare and employment histories for mothers prevents us from sorting out causal relationships between mothers' reports of childcare problems and employment problems. We can, however, use multivariate models in a descriptive manner to explore associations between childcare problems and employment problems while controlling for a variety of factors likely to affect these associations. These include: mothers' demographic characteristics (marital status, race-ethnicity, education, age and

number of young children); mothers' labor force characteristics (hourly wage, hours worked, self-employment, working evening, weekend or night shifts, and working more than one regular job); child characteristics (age, sex, birth weight, pre-term status, and mothers' current evaluation of health status); childcare characteristics (childcare type, hours in childcare); and mothers' social network characteristics (number of employed adults in household, number of unemployed adults in household and relationship with the child's father).

All the outcome measures to be studied are discrete, either in the form of counts (e.g., of days of work missed), which we will analyze using Poisson regression, or of binary or ordered categorical indicators (e.g., reports of quitting and experiencing work-related stress always, often, sometimes or never), which we will analyze using logistic and ordered logistic regression. Because we observe outcomes in several domains for each respondent and have repeat measures for these outcomes for most respondents, we will also explore correlated random-effect variants of the discrete-outcome models. This will enable us to detect the presence of unmeasured factors that influence two or more of the outcomes and therefore determine which outcomes tend to occur in combination. To ensure that our findings are representative of the experiences of working mothers in large U.S. cities, we weight the data.

Preliminary analysis suggests that a non-trivial share of working mothers experience child care problems likely to take a toll on employment (Table 1). More than a quarter of working mothers reported that their regular child care arrangement had fallen through at least once in the past month at both the 12-month and 30-month follow-up. Twelve percent of working mothers at the 12-month follow-up and 16 percent at the 30-month follow-up reported missing work at least one day during the past month due to a child care problem. Eight percent of working mothers reported that they had quit a job due to childcare problems some time between the child's birth and the 12-month follow-up, and nine percent reported having quit a job due to childcare problems between the 12-month and 30-month follow-up.

Somewhat smaller numbers of working mothers reported experiencing stress related to work and childcare (Table 2). At 12-month follow-up, 10 percent of working mothers reported that their shift or work schedule always or often caused them or their child "extra stress." Eight percent reported that they always or often had difficulty dealing with childcare problems during work hours. Six percent reported that they never had enough flexibility in their work schedule to handle family needs, and another 18 percent reported that they only sometimes had this flexibility. Reported levels of work and childcare-related stress were similar at the 30-month follow-up.[1]

[1] This preliminary analysis includes all working mothers at both 12 and 30 months follow-up, including some mothers who were interviewed only at 12 months and some who were working at the time of only one of the two follow-up surveys. The section of the final analysis that examines whether childcare-work conflict worsens or improves over time will be limited to mothers who were interviewed and were working at both times.

References

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for dependent variables regarding child care failures, work absences and leaving work

	Regular childcare fell through		Missed work due to childcare problem		Quit work due to childcare problem		Must miss work if child ill	
Frequency/occurrence of event in month before interview (proportions)	12 mos.	30 mos.	12 mos.	30 mos.	12 mos.	30 mos.	12 mos.	30 mos.
0 occurrences/Yes	0.73	0.71	0.88	0.84	0.92	0.91	0.67	0.67
1 occurrence/No	0.14	0.14	0.06	0.09	0.08	0.09	0.33	0.33
2-4 occurrences	0.12	0.05	0.05	0.06				
5 or more occurrences	0.02	0.10	0.01	0.01				
N	*1,137*	*1,298*	*1,137*	*1,298*	*1,143*	*1,300*	*1,136*	*1,277*

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for dependent variables regarding childcare- and work-related stress

	Shift/work schedule caused stress		Difficult to deal with childcare problems at work		Have enough flexibility in work schedule to handle family needs	
Frequency of event (proportions)	12 mos.	30 mos.	12 mos.	30 mos.	12 mos.	30 mos.
Always	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.63	0.64
Often	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.14	0.13
Sometimes	0.33	0.35	0.18	0.16	0.18	0.18
Never	0.58	0.57	0.74	0.77	0.06	0.06
N	*1,629*	*1,629*	*1,630*	*1,626*	*1,641*	*1,630*