

Women, especially mothers, continued to join the paid labor force in increasing numbers throughout the twentieth century, with large growth beginning in the 1940s. In the past, research found that mothers of young children were less likely to be employed than other women (Heckman 1974). Today, however, mothers with children at home are actually more likely to be employed than other women. Hayghe (1997) finds that 63.9 percent of women with children under age six, and 78.3 percent of women with children ages six through seventeen were in the paid labor force in 1997, compared to 59.5 percent of all women.

Although more mothers are working today than in the past, not all women have equal access to employment. Residence can impact labor force participation. People living in rural communities face higher levels of underemployment, unemployment, and poverty, lower incomes, and longer distances between home, childcare, and work than those in urban communities (Rural Policy Research Institute 1999).

There are several potential barriers for women to meet their work preferences in rural areas. First, lack of transportation may prevent adequate employment. The Rural Institute at the University of Montana (1999) finds that although 25 percent of U.S. residents live in rural areas, only 6 percent of transportation funds are allocated to rural areas. While urban residents without automobiles take approximately 20 publicly subsidized trips per week, rural residents average fewer than one per week. In addition, 37 million residents (40% of rural Americans) live in communities without public transportation. The rural poor are likely to be affected most by the need for public transportation since only seven percent of all families on welfare own automobiles (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1997).

The second barrier is the availability of employment. Rural areas are plagued by higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and poverty. Job growth is slower, and per capita

income and earnings per job are lower (Cook and Gibbs 2000). This results in fewer job options for those living in rural communities.

The third potential barrier is family structure. Single mothers in nonmetropolitan areas face higher rates of poverty, more barriers to welfare receipt, and lower economic returns than mothers in urban areas (Brown and Lichter 2004). Cohabitation has become increasingly common in the United States as now over half of Americans enter into a cohabiting relationship at some point (Bumpass and Lu 2000), but little is known about cohabitation patterns in rural areas. Snyder and McLaughlin (2003) point out the need for further research on the economic and family circumstances of nonmetropolitan mothers due to a lack of adequate information.

The relationship between economic stress and psychological well-being has been well-documented. Depressive reactions often follow events such as unemployment. Dooley et al. (2000) finds that any change from adequate employment to involuntary under- or unemployment leads to depression.

The current study takes an in-depth look at the impact of giving birth on the work preferences and actual work hours of mothers living in poor, rural communities in the United States. Whereas previous studies on these topics have typically focused on metropolitan areas, the present study examines these facets of life in a rural context. We draw on the Labor Utilization Framework developed by Hauser (1974) to study the effects of underemployment on the psychological health of mothers living in rural poverty.

Persistent poverty in the United States has been largely identified in four areas: the Black South, Appalachia, Northwestern Indian reservations, and the lower Rio Grande Valley (Wimberley and Morris 2003). These poor rural communities have more people at-risk economically per capita than other areas, including racial/ethnic minorities, female-headed

households, and high school dropouts (Whitener et al. 2002). The data for the present study focuses on approximately 1,200 women from three counties in both the southern Black belt and Appalachia who gave birth two months prior to their interviews. The counties selected for the dataset were chosen due to high African American populations in the South (40%) and high poverty levels (nearly half of children are in poverty).

The current study proposes to examine employment, work preferences, and psychological outcomes of mothers in rural America. Factors such as the lack of transportation, unavailability of employment, and less stable family structures of those living in rural poverty lead us to expect to find that work preferences often do not meet current labor force participation. Some rural mothers may be underemployed, while others may have to work due to limited rural employment options for their partner or due to the absence of a partner. All in all, this study will focus on the unique circumstances of rural working mothers following the birth of a child, focusing special attention to how their employment or lack of employment affects their mental health during this distinctive time in the life course.

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