

A Balancing Act for Low-Income Workers Managing Work-Life Issues in Low-Level Jobs

by Gretchen Knowlton

A new research study examines the work-life conditions of lower-skill jobs and the implications for low-income families. A study conducted by Susan Lambert, Evelyn Brodtkin, and Julia Henly at the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, considers how employer practices impact the lives of lower-skilled working parents by complicating family life and creating stresses and pressures that lead to negative employment outcomes. The study highlights the need for low-income advocates to focus on *workplace development* and not just workforce development and suggests specific interventions that could improve employer practices and the lives of low-income workers.

WHY CARE ABOUT LOWER-SKILL JOBS AND WORKPLACE CONDITIONS?

Much of the public policy debate on issues of low-income workers looks at the situation from one point of view or the other. One side of the argument is that any job is a good start and the goal should simply be to get low-income individuals into the workforce. Opponents to this "step up" philosophy argue that if jobs don't provide a living wage, they are a "dead end," and the focus should instead be on removing barriers to employment so that low-income workers can get better jobs. According to Lambert, Brodtkin and Henly's research, both of these views are too simplistic and it is time for public policy to move the focus away from just changing people (workforce development) and toward changing jobs (workplace development). Their research found that workplace conditions were linked to family outcomes related to employment, family stability, marital stability, child well-being, and ultimately economic self-sufficiency.

WHAT WORKPLACE CONDITIONS AFFECT OUTCOMES?

Nonstandard work conditions presented significant challenges to the family life of low-income workers in this study. Nonstandard work can be broken into two categories; nonstandard work hours (early morning, evening, weekend, overnight, variable schedules) and nonstandard work status (temporary). Nonstandard status typically increases the chance of layoffs (temporary work reductions, "furloughs") and limits eligibility for employee benefits (health insurance, paid leave); all things that have proven to be necessary to employment stability, economic success, and positive family-life balance.

According to the research, labor market statistics often do not adequately capture the true impact of these workplace conditions in the low-skill sector. The reason for this is that companies have complex and varied definitions for the terms used to describe workplace benefits and conditions. For example, the researchers found that many of the companies they examined did not report a single layoff over a given year, yet they admitted that, as much as 70% of their workforce, experienced reductions and furloughs during the same period. These work reductions meant that workers were still considered employees while they were not working, and therefore did not qualify for Unemployment Insurance. Practices like these make it difficult to assess the true nature of workplace conditions for low-income workers.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF NONSTANDARD WORK CONDITIONS?

Low-income women with children disproportionately hold jobs with involuntary, nonstandard work conditions. This study found a link between nonstandard work and family life challenges among the women studied. Nonstandard work may increase feelings of stress, increase divorce rates, limit parental-child involvement, and create negative cognitive and behavioral outcomes for children. Specifically, the study found that low-income families were forced to orchestrate and maintain complex and non-traditional child-care arrangements to accommodate their nonstandard work schedules. These arrangements tend to be precarious and had a high likelihood of disrupting employment when they failed.

Family routines and the quality of family life were also impacted. Low-income women working nonstandard jobs reported work schedules that overlapped with normative family routines and practices such as eating meals together, morning and bedtime routines, social activities. Balancing family and work involved a need to accommodate family schedules to jobs and jobs to schedules. The difficulty of meeting the demands of both family and work schedules produced stress that affected both home and work life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Not surprisingly, these workplace conditions have ramifications which ultimately result in high-turnover rates which translate into poor employment outcomes for low-income workers. The findings of this research study have implications for the child care sector, the employment sector, and organizations delivering services to the low-income community. It is evident that formal sector child care is not adequate to meet the needs of non-standard workers and more attention needs to be given to modifying the current system. Employers need to be made more aware of the importance of work-family issues at all pay levels within their workforce including low-wage positions. Improving the predictability of schedules and allowing for employee-driven flexibility could go a long way to improving workplace conditions for low-income workers. These are challenges that low-income advocates can begin to bring to policy discussions about low-income workers.

Increasing workforce participation of low-income parents requires that workforce development efforts focus more on work-life issues. This involves several things:

paying closer attention to job matching that fits with workers' family schedules, providing child care linking services and offering family support services to low-income workers.

COMMUNITY ACTION'S ROLE

With so much at stake for low-income workers, the findings of this study present a strong case for partnerships between community action agencies and the business sector. Encouraging employers to establish workplace conditions that are conducive to helping low-income workers stay in the job and maintain their family life is a role community action agencies can get involved in at the policy level. At the programmatic level, agencies that are involved in workforce development may need to pay increasing attention to the workplace environments to which they refer and place low-income workers.

For more ideas, tools, and tips on how to make an impact on the work-life balance of low-income families, visit: www.winningworkplaces.com.

