



Research Brief

Job Volatility of Rural, Low-Income Mothers

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Stable employment is the key to economic self-sufficiency. However, many rural, low-income mothers find remaining in the workforce, especially at the same workplaces, to be challenging. Researchers in the Rural Families Speak Project studied the *Job Volatility*, longitudinal employment patterns, among low-income mothers living in rural areas.

Why Job Volatility Matters

The irregular employment often affects the individual and family functioning negatively because of changes in employment related resources. In particular, moving between employment and unemployment or changing workplaces can create additional vulnerability in low-income families by causing unstable income that hinders rational planning for family life (Wilson, 1996). These challenges have been important barriers for low-income families to achieve financial stability.

What This Research Found

The 245 mothers were categorized into three groups according to their longitudinal employment patterns: (1) *stable employment*, (2) *intermittent employment*, and (3) *continuous unemployment*.

Stable employment

- Only 40 (16.3%) of the mothers remained in the same job over time.
- It was more important for these mothers to have *flexibility at work* and to be *satisfied with their job* than to receive higher wages in maintaining stable employment. Flexible work environment, especially, enabled them to combine work and family responsibilities.
- Having a *strong social support network* (e.g., family, supervisors, or co-workers) was also essential in remaining employed.

Intermittent employment

- 149 (60.8%) changed their employer or were employed on and off over time.
- These mothers changed their employment status due to *lack of flexibility at the work place* or *difficulty in balancing work and family responsibilities*. Their employment was interrupted when their job did not allow them to care for their family in case of unexpected situations (e.g., a child being sick)
- The mothers who faced *short-term health issues* or minor disabilities were also unable to remain in the same job over time.
- Mothers were more likely to be intermittently employed, compared with those maintained stable employment, if their *youngest child* was younger, the household experienced higher *food insecurity*, and they received *transportation assistance*.

Continuous unemployment

- 56 (22.9%) were continuously unemployed over time.
- Some mothers were unable to participate in the laborforce due to *chronic health problems*, including health of self and/or a family member.
- Others *chose* to remain unemployed to care for their children. Despite limited income, taking good care of their children was a priority.
- The likelihood of continuously unemployed over the years, compared with the stable employment group, increased if their *youngest child* was younger, experienced higher *food insecurity* and *lower life satisfaction*, *did not have a car*, and received *transportation assistance*.

Highlights across three groups

The data showed that all three groups struggled to overcome barriers to care for their families, especially children. However, mothers with stable employment could maintain work and family responsibilities because of flexible work environments and strong support networks, while the intermittently employed could not due to work and family struggles. Continuously unemployed mothers chose to avoid these struggles by staying home with their children.

How Policy can Influence Job Volatility

Supportive workplaces

The findings of this research imply that policymakers and employers should enhance job flexibility and work conditions to increase and maintain participation in the laborforce of rural, low-income mothers. *Consideration into care responsibilities* can create an environment where low-income mothers are able to thrive both at work and at home. One option to consider is *expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)* of 1993. Currently, this policy allows workers at companies with more than 50 employees to take up to 12 workweeks of unpaid leave to care for family members. In rural areas, many employers do not have this many employees. This benefit will help stable employment among rural, low-income mothers.

Access to resources

This research highlights how critical it is for rural, low-income mothers and their families among all employment groups to have access to resources. *Affordable child care and transportation* along with *strong social support* will improve their employability and maintain long-term employment. Most of all, quality affordable child care needs to be provided to enhance stable employment given that caring for young children was an over-arching theme across three groups of mothers. For instance, child care subsidies need to be expanded to assist rural, low-income mothers in finding and maintaining employment. Since affordable quality day care centers are scarce in most rural communities, rural low-income mothers will

benefit from the support for family child caregivers in the form of child care subsidies and educational resources.

Job readiness programs

Job readiness programs should try to match the *interests* and *aptitudes* of the low-income mothers, with the understanding that they will be more likely to remain employed in a position that meets their job satisfaction needs. Job training programs also need to include sessions on the topics of *balancing work and family* and *identifying support systems*.

How This Research Was Conducted

This study explained the job volatility of 245 rural, low-income mothers across 14 states using both qualitative and quantitative data, drawn from the Rural Families Speak Project. The mothers were categorized into three groups according to the changes of their employment status over three waves of data collection. Qualitative data analysis identified emerging themes from each group of mothers. Quantitative data were analyzed to examine which factors contributed to the membership of intermittent employed group and continuously unemployed group comparing to the mothers with stable employment as a reference.

References:

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This research was supported in part by USDA/CSREES/NRICGP Grants 2001-35401-10215, 2002-35401-11591, and 2004-35401-14938. Data were collected in conjunction with the cooperative multi state research project

NC-223/NC-1011 Rural Low-income families: Tracking Their Well-being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform. Cooperating states are California, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

For more information:

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