The Stress of Balancing Work and Family:
the impact on parent and child health and the need for workplace flexibility

RESEARCH PAPER

THE NEXT SOCIAL CONTRACT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American families confront major challenges in balancing work and family life. Workers report that they would prefer fewer hours, while new technological capabilities require parents to bring more job responsibilities home with them. Mothers and fathers encounter strain in work and home environments alike. Polling and surveillance data confirm that the balance between work and family care needs attention.

Some of the most quantifiable and severe costs of this burden on families are adverse health outcomes. This paper catalogues a number of factors linked to job stress and work/family conflict: metabolic syndrome, hypertension, heart disease, poor dietary habits, obesity, and mental illness.

These chronic and systemic harms place a heavy burden – financially, logistically, and psychologically – on American middle-class families. Families are the fundamental building block of the next social contract; they raise the next generation of Americans. Only through sound policy solutions and broader workplace flexibility can America overcome the challenges that its families face.

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American families are under increasing stress as parents struggle with the demands of being both caregivers and workers. The growing difficulty parents experience in trying to balance work and family responsibilities is reflected in the public discourse. However, one aspect of work-related stress on families that has not received enough attention is its adverse impact on the health of both children and parents.

Recent headline stories have focused on the changes in the number of hours parents spend at work and with their families, reporting that even as parents are spending more time on the job they have not sacrificed time with their children. However, such a simple accounting does not tell the whole story. For parents, work-family conflict is also a function of how much control they have over their time and how secure they feel in meeting their responsibilities. For children, work-family conflict is a function of how much attention they receive from their parents when they are together and the spillover of negative emotions from stressed parent to child.

The consequences of work-family conflict may be most visible in the form of detrimental lifestyle choices and a negative impact on health. It appears that one of the most serious implications of work-family conflict is its significant contribution to childhood obesity, which has become such a serious problem that overall indicators of child health are 30 percent lower than in the mid-1970s.[1] In the last generation, as work and family conflict has substantially increased, the percentage of children who are overweight has roughly tripled. By 2004, nearly 19 percent of children aged 6 to 11 and 17 percent of children aged 12 to 19 were overweight.[2] This trend negates improvements in other health indicators such as infant mortality and health insurance coverage.[3] Moreover, numerous studies using rigorous statistical methods have documented direct links between work-family conflict and both child and adult obesity, as well as adult mental health disorders, metabolic disorders, transference of anxiety to children, and child behavioral problems.

Poor health outcomes such as these impose substantial burdens on American families. Not only do they point to a clear need for policy solutions increasing workplace flexibility; they also underscore the importance of revisiting how employers, households, and the government fit together in the broader social contract. This paper examines how the growing demands on parents contribute to work-family conflict, and the likely implications for children and families, particularly with respect to their health. Findings concerning stress and work-family balance can be difficult to interpret because they are inherently subjective.

Therefore, we examined evidence from the medical community, government agencies, and the scientific literature in order to gain further perspective on work-family conflict beyond that which has been reported in the popular press or is merely intuitive. The balance of this evidence indicates that work-family conflict is a significant and growing problem, with quantifiable consequences for both adults and children.

THE NEXT SOCIAL CONTRACT

Families occupy an important role in the social contract, the grand bargain between citizens and across sectors of American society. More than just providing for the welfare of their members, families raise the next generation of Americans. Many working parents are sandwiched between caring for children, themselves, and their parents. The resulting stress may worsen health outcomes, impose further medical and financial burdens, and even curb the life prospects of children afflicted by illnesses.

As it stands, the current arrangement between workers, employers, and their government falls short. As the stress of balancing work and family takes its toll on parents and children, the social contract grows increasingly deficient in ensuring the security and well-being of American middle-class families. It is time to strike a new bargain. The next social contract must equip families to meet new economic realities, and it must be founded on the bedrock principle of lifelong citizenship, from childhood to old age. These values and principles bring the challenges American families face to the forefront, and leaders going forward must meet these challenges by encouraging policy innovations such as workplace flexibility.

PRESSURES FROM THE WORKPLACE

The labor supply of parents has increased dramatically over the last generation. In 1970, almost two-thirds of married couples had one spouse at home to handle family needs; by 2006, 61 percent of married couples with children under the age of 18 had both parents working outside the home.[4] In addition, parents are working longer hours. Work hours for both mothers and fathers increased by about one to three hours per week between the mid-1970s and the early years of this decade.[5] As a result, total time on the job for the average family increased by about 12 hours per week during roughly the same period. By 2002, dual-earner couples with children spent about 91 hours a week in paid and unpaid work.[6]

While the additional work hours are not necessarily bad for all families, there is also evidence that most parents are working more hours than they desire, often under pressure from their employers. Roughly two-thirds of men and women say that they would like to work fewer hours; three-quarters of those reporting moderate-to-high levels of work-to-life conflict say they would like to work fewer hours.[7]

The gap between actual and desired hours of work is not trivial; men and women who preferred to work less averaged 50 hours of actual work, as opposed to 31 hours of desired work. Moreover, according to the Families and Work Institute, it appears that over half of those working more than their desired number of hours are doing so due to employer preference rather than for personal or financial reasons.[8] As further evidence that many workers are on the clock more than they wish, the institute reports that 25 percent of workers do not take all the vacation time to which they are entitled due to job demands.[9]

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Employment demands also place increasing pressure on family time as technology allows work issues to impinge on nonwork hours. Both a blessing and a curse, tools such as cell phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs) allow some employees greater freedom to respond to work demands without going to the office, but they also make it harder for many parents to separate work and family time. Forty percent of workers say they use technology for their jobs during nonwork hours. Furthermore, being wired to the office is not always by choice—over a fifth of workers say they are required to be available to their employers during nonwork hours.[10] By some estimates, this adds up to a full month of extra work annually in addition to that performed during standard office hours.[11]

The timing of work hours can also add to work-family conflict. In roughly a third of families one parent works the late shift, and in nearly half of families one parent works on weekends.[12] Some parents may find shift work beneficial due to higher pay, greater ease in sharing child-care responsibilities, or more flexibility with respect to other commitments such as attending school. However, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, roughly two-thirds of shift workers have not sought irregular hours for these benefits, but rather are compelled to work such schedules because the job requires it and they cannot find other work.[13]

THE RESULTING TIME SQUEEZE

Several studies have sought to assess the detrimental effects of growing work demands in terms of the reduced time parents have for their children. However, we still lack a complete understanding of whether children receive more or less time from their parents now than in the past. Different studies seem to draw inconsistent conclusions about the amount of time children and their parents spend together. For example, a landmark 1999 report by the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) noted with alarm that parental time available for children had fallen by 22 hours a week since the 1960s. Yet, several recent studies report that both mothers and resident fathers are spending more time in child-care activities now than in the 1960s.[14]

It is only upon considering more closely the outcomes examined across studies that one sees how both conclusions may be true. While the CEA report looked at potential time available for children, which is almost certainly in shorter supply now than in the past, more recent studies look at time parents actually spend with children, which appears to be rising nonetheless, as parents do whatever it takes to meet their obligations both at home and the office.

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Adding to the mix of findings and conclusions are those studies that examine the amount of time children report receiving from their parents, which may differ from the amount of time parents report spending with their children and the amount of time children report receiving from their parents. These two measures of time may differ for several reasons, most notably family composition. That is, both mothers and resident fathers may have increased the amount of time they spend with their children, but if fewer children have resident fathers, total parental time per child may be falling nonetheless.[15]

These two measures of time may also differ due to the number of children in the household, and the extent to which the mother's time spent on children overlaps with the father's time spent on children. In fact, one of the few studies that looked at total parental time received per child found that average hours remained virtually unchanged from 1981 to 1997, roughly the same time period during which the number of hours spent by parents with their children as reported by Bianchi and her colleagues showed the biggest increase.[16] Further obscuring our understanding of just how much time parents and children spend together is the fact that studies typically examine time spent in child-focused activities; we know much less about changes in the amount of time parents and children spend together in general, or its relative importance.

Finally, we must consider that societal notions of how much parental time with children is adequate are not static. Increased concerns over child safety and higher expectations regarding child socialization and development have placed greater demands on parental time in terms of supervised

play, transporting children to and from and attending sporting and school events, participation in school fund raisers, and other such activities. Thus, even if parent-child time together has increased over time, this tells us relatively little about whether that amount of time is adequate. In fact, 70 percent of working parents say that they do not spend enough time with their children.[17] Likely contributing to this feeling is the fact that working mothers spend significantly less time with their children than their nonworking counterparts—a total of 22 hours a week less, including five hours a week less in primary child-care activities.[18]

Although assessing the adequacy of parental time with children is difficult, at the very least, it appears that parents have avoided making drastic cuts in the time they spend with their children, but at a price. Parents end up sacrificing time for themselves, for each other, and for household functions. On average, employed mothers spend 14 hours less per week on themselves (including time for sleep) and eight hours less per week with their spouse as compared with their stay at home counterparts.[19] One study found that both mothers and fathers spent roughly 40 percent less time on personal activities during their waking hours in 2002 than in 1977.[20]

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Another way in which parents cope with increasing time demands is to cut back on household chores. While time spent on household tasks has shifted somewhat from mothers to fathers, total parental time spent on household chores has fallen by roughly 8 hours a week, or 20 percent.[21] Many families make up for this by hiring cleaning services, sending out laundry, and buying prepared meals. The reliance on such services is not necessarily negative, but is a concern to the extent that it leads to a less healthy lifestyle. Moreover, many lower-income families are cannot afford such services.

Parents also increasingly divide their attention between multiple tasks at any given moment. According to one study, by the year 2000 the amount of time parents spent multitasking when they were with their children was 74 percent for mothers and 77 percent for fathers, up from 53 percent and 64 percent, respectively, in 1975.[22]

These distractions and competing interests do not go unnoticed by children. According to a landmark survey of children conducted by the Families and Work Institute, only 62 percent of children say their mothers can readily focus on them when they are together, and 52 percent say the same of their fathers. Roughly 45 percent say that the time they have with their mother is rushed or distracted, and 37 percent say this of their father. Unsurprisingly, the number one wish of these children was not for more time with their parents, but for their parents to be less stressed and tired during the time they were with them.[23]

INCREASED STRESS AND WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

Reports abound in the popular press about the increasing pressure on working parents. On balance, research findings agree that work-family conflict is a significant and growing problem, although results vary widely as to its magnitude. Opinion polls tend to indicate the highest levels of work-family conflict, suggesting that it affects at least two-thirds of the population. More rigorous studies estimate that it is a problem for at least a third of the population.

Developing an objective assessment of trends in stress-related outcomes is difficult because stress is inherently personal and subjective. Opinion surveys are likely to be sensitive to changes in societal norms regarding the perception of stress and work-family conflict. Therefore, we have also examined trends in more objectively measured stress outcomes as reported by various government and employer agencies.

What the Opinion Polls Say

There is little doubt that work-related stress and work-family balance are problems for many families. In 2006, CNN, in a story headlined "Five Warning Signs of Job Burnout," featured the following statistics based on the recent CareerBuilder.com Survey of American Workers: [24]

- Half of workers report feeling a "great deal of stress" on the job.
- Thirty-three percent of workers report checking in with the office while on vacation.
- Forty-four percent of mothers report bringing work home at least once a week, and 19 percent of mothers report they "often or always" work on weekends.
- Thirty-six percent of fathers say they bring work home at least once a week, and 30 percent say they often or always work weekends.
- Thirty-seven percent of fathers say they would consider a lower paying job if it offered more work/family balance.

Myriad other surveys echo these concerns:

- MSNBC recently reported that nearly all workers (81 percent) said they were "unhappy with their work/life balance," and 60 percent reported feeling overworked, according to results from a Monster.com survey.[25]
- ComPsych Corporation's Stress Pulse Survey reports that 63 percent of workers say they are stressed to the point of "feeling extremely fatigued or out of control."[26]
- Sixty-three percent of workers said that job pressure interferes with family life, according to the tenth annual Attitudes in the American Workplace Survey conducted by the Marlin Company in 2004.[27]

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These polling results reveal that work-family balance is clearly on the minds of most parents. However, interpreting the true seriousness of these results is difficult due to the limited information available on sampling frames, response rates, and overall questionnaire structure underlying the survey results.[28] One survey of worker opinion that is extensively documented is the periodic National Survey of the Changing Workforce conducted by the Families and Work Institute, long recognized as a reliable producer of indicators regarding working families. According to the institute, a third of all employees can be classified as chronically overworked.[29]

Among working parents, 45 percent report "some" or "a lot" of interference between work and family; this represents a significant increase over the 34 percent who said the same in 1977.[30] According to survey data, feeling overworked and reporting work-family interference is related not only to total time on the job, but also to the degree of flexibility and control a worker has over the hours spent on the job. [31]

What Surveillance Data Reveal

Given the difficulty of interpreting opinion poll results, we have also looked at surveillance data, which provides us with an additional analytical tool. Some surveillance data are reported directly by employers, while other surveillance data are derived from self-reports, similar to opinion polls. However, self-reports are generally collected by disinterested parties through scientifically rigorous means and questions that are phrased to be as objective as possible. There are few such indicators of work stress, but three related measures are days of work missed due to stress, workmen's compensation awards due to stress, and incidence of frequent mental distress. Since surveillance data tend to focus on more drastic outcomes the prevalence rates for these indicators are much lower than for broader measures of work-family conflict. Nonetheless, the data show sharp increases in stress-related outcomes, consistent with the increases discussed above. Furthermore, because the data are based on either very large samples or universal reporting, observed trends are highly reliable.

One such data source is collected by CCH Inc., a leading supplier of labor market indicators for employer groups and human resource organizations. Its annual survey of unscheduled absences indicates that employee absences attributed to stress doubled from 1995 to 2005, from 6 to 12 percent.[32]

Data gathered by the Bureau of Labor Statistics also reflect a significant increase in reports of work-related stress during roughly the same period. These data show that workers' compensation claims attributable to stress increased by about 38 percent from 1992 to 2002. It should be noted, however, that work stress was one of several hundred detailed causes listed, and stress-related claims remained a small fraction of workers' compensation cases. They grew from roughly 3 to 5 percent of non-injury claims (e.g., illnesses and disorders not directly resulting from slips, falls, burns, etc.), and were less than 1 percent of claims overall. To help put the relative importance of work–related stress in perspective, it is useful to note that the number of work-stress claims were equal to roughly one-sixth the number of claims attributable to repetitive motion or carpal tunnel syndrome.[33]

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that the number of people with "frequent mental distress" (defined as 14 or more mentally unhealthy days in the past month) rose by 20 percent between 1993 and 2002 (from 8.4 to 10 percent of the population). While the published CDC tables pertain to the general population, just over two-thirds of those surveyed were members of labor force, and the proportion in the labor force was statistically constant over the period in question.[34]

Because work-related stress and work-family conflict is an inherently personal experience even surveillance data reflects some measure of subjectivity. However, this research, together with the polling data cited above, strongly suggests that work-family conflict is on the increase and that it is a concern not only among workers, but among employers and government agencies as well. The fact that various employer organizations and government agencies have begun to monitor worker stress lends credibility to perceptions conveyed by the popular press. While the magnitude of the effects of work-related stress on the family may elude us, especially as a self-reported measure, there are studies suggesting that these outcomes translate directly into diagnostically measured outcomes such as clinical depression, metabolic changes, and childhood obesity.

THE EFFECTS OF WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT ON PARENT AND CHILD HEALTH

Even among parents who successfully meet their work and family responsibilities, many still experience work-family conflict and struggle to achieve a sense of balance, security, and control. This has put an alarming amount of stress on American families, leading to adverse health outcomes for many parents and their children as well.

A Serious Threat to the Health of Parents

Recent studies show that work-family conflict as reported by parents manifests itself as a significant and quantifiable risk factor for scientifically measured mental health disorders. According to one study based on the National Comorbidity Survey, parents reporting stress due to the spillover of work to family life are roughly 2.5 times more likely to suffer from an anxiety disorder and twice as likely to suffer from a substance dependence disorder than parents who do not report such stress. On the other side of the coin, parents reporting spillover from family to work were nearly 30 times more likely to suffer a mood disorder and 10 times more likely to have a substance dependence disorder than parents who did not experience such spillover. These results, published in the Journal of Applied Psychology, are based on nationally representative data collected by the CDC using the Composite International Diagnostic Interview protocol. Effects were estimated using statistical models that held other relevant sociodemographic characteristics constant.[35]

One of the difficulties in assessing the impact of job-related conflict is the fact that stress is often chronic rather than severe—that is, it builds over a long period of time, making its effects harder to observe. However, a British study that tracked the biological effects of work-stress in a group of individuals for 14 years found significant links to metabolic syndrome, a cluster of risk factors related to heart disease and type 2 diabetes. The presence of metabolic syndrome was assessed based on body measurements and blood chemistry, while work stress was calculated as an index based on self-reported levels of job demands and job control.[36]

Men who experienced high levels of job stress over at least half of the period were one and a half times more likely to suffer from metabolic syndrome than men who did not

experience high stress; women who experienced high levels of job stress for the same amount of time were twice as likely as other women to be similarly affected. Among those who experienced high job stress over three-quarters or more of the period, the risk of metabolic syndrome was even greater: roughly twice as high for men and over five times as high for women compared with men and women who did not experience episodes of high job stress. The British researchers found that the most harmful cases of job stress were not simply a function of time on the job or job demands, but rather job demands in relationship to job control. Interestingly, these findings reflect the effects of stress after controlling for other factors, such as diet, exercise, and drinking and smoking, as well as other demographic factors.[37]

Recent studies linking job stress to chronic hypertension and heart disease suggest that work stress elevates the risk of heart disease, although not the incidence of high blood pressure. In an extensive review of the research on this topic, published in Current Hypertension Review, Samuel Mann assessed findings from 48 different studies on the topic. He concluded that there was insufficient evidence to suggest that ongoing work stress contributed to chronic hypertension; however, "reliable studies have shown that ongoing difficulties at work can contribute to coronary artery disease."[38]

In addition to the direct effects that job stress and work-family conflict appear to have on the body, it is not surprising that such outcomes are associated with a number of lifestyle choices that also have detrimental effects on parents' health. One recent study found that both work-to-family and family-to-work spillover were significantly related to the consumption of more fatty foods, with additional significant relationships between family-to-work spillover and reduced physical activity as well as between work-to-family spillover and reduced consumption of healthy foods. These effects, published in The American Behavioral Scientist, persisted even when a variety of related sociodemographic characteristics were held constant.[39]

Further, a recent qualitative study published in the Journal of Social Science and Medicine, based on in-depth interviews with 51 low and moderate-income individuals, found that workers who reported high levels of work stress also were more likely to report poorer dietary habits, and that many cited a lack of time for meal preparation. However, the study also revealed that poor food choices were related not only to time pressures but also to a lack of control over work and free time—echoing themes identified in several of the studies referred to above. In addition, the consumption of fatty foods was cited as a coping mechanism, or as a treat, to make up for lack of time spent on one's self or with one's family.[40]

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While the linkage between increased work stress and deteriorating nutrition is certainly consistent with the general perception of how the American diet has changed over the last few decades, actual scientific data related to trends in eating is not available. Documenting specific changes in eating habits is difficult due to the lack of consistent historical data and reporting errors among respondents. However, consistent data are available on the U.S. per capita food supply. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has tracked the amount and composition of nutrients available to American consumers since 1910, and figures are viewed as a reliable indicator of trends in dietary intake given that the marketplace typically reflects consumption patterns.

Based on these data and its estimates of the amount of food stocks that go unconsumed, the USDA reports that per capita consumption of fats has increased by 38 percent since the early 1970s, and per capita consumption of sugars has increased by 20 percent, with high fructose corn syrup rising from just over 1 percent to nearly 50 percent of sugar intake.[41] While consumption of vegetables increased measurably over this same period (by 27 percent), the USDA reports that a third of all vegetable servings are now made up of potato chips, french fries, and iceberg lettuce. Overall, per capital calorie intake increased an estimated 12 percent between 1985 and 2000, and half of that increase was attrib-

utable to fats and sugars. The USDA cites changing dietary intake as the primary factor behind the increasing incidence of obesity among Americans. Currently 65 percent of American adults are overweight, an increase of more than a third between 1980 and 2002.[42]

While covarying trends in work stress and poor eating habits do not necessarily show a causal link between the two, there is a growing body of evidence directly tying work stress to increases in the body mass index, or BMI. Among them, a recent Finish study based on over 45,000 public sector workers found statistically significant effects of job control and job strain on workers' BMI, and these effects persisted even after controlling for other relevant sociodemographic characteristics as well as health-related behaviors such as smoking.[43] Another study, an offshoot of the metabolic syndrome analysis mentioned above, also found that work stress significantly increased the risk of both general obesity (based on BMI) and central obesity (based on waist circumference). These findings remained significant even after controlling for other related factors.[44]

A recent review published in the Journal of Public health found a total of 12 studies examining the link between work stress and adult obesity. Of these, eight found direct evidence of increased obesity resulting from work stress net of other socio-demographic factors. Four of these studies found the effects to persist even after controlling for numerous health-related behaviors.[45]

The Impact on Childhood Obesity and Mental Health

The increase in overweight children is even more dramatic. The percentage of American children who are overweight roughly tripled between 1980 and 2004, reaching nearly 19 percent for children aged 6 to 11 and 17 percent for children age 12 to 19.[46] According to the Foundation for Child Development's Child Well-Being Index, the increase has been so great as to drive down overall indicators of child health to levels 30 percent lower than observed in the mid-1970s, negating improvements in other health indicators such as infant mortality and health insurance coverage.[47]

The increase in meals eaten out by children is consistent with what one would expect given the rise in childhood overweight and obesity. Research based on data from the USDA suggests that between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, the share of children's meals eaten out more than tripled, from 4.7 to 16.7 percent.[48] While these data do not extend beyond the mid-1990s, other data based on the share of food budgets spent on restaurant and take-out food suggest that the proportion of meals eaten out has continued to grow steadily, with expenditures increasing from 39 percent of food budgets in 1990 to 46 percent in 2002.[49] Related to the incidence of children eating out is the rate at which children and parents eat meals together. It has been argued that sharing meals is the strongest predictor of higher academic achievement and fewer behavior problems among children, with communal meals playing a much more significant role than other factors, including time spent in school, studying, playing sports, in church, or in art activities.[50]

Parents who sit down and eat with children can find out about their activities, uncover and deter potential problems, share their values, and develop a communication pattern. Data from CDC's National Survey of Children's Health, as tabulated by Child Trends, reveals that in 2003 only 42 percent of adolescents ate meals with their parents six to seven days a week; an additional 27 percent of adolescents ate meals with their parents four or five days a week.[51]

Unfortunately, trend data on changes in this indicator are not available, but the fact that nearly a third of adolescents were eating meals with their parents only three days a week or less seems a clear impediment to improving child nutrition and suggests a role for policies that reduce work-family conflict. While the USDA data on estimated nutritional intake cited earlier are not broken out separately for children, the Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance data covering a narrower time period provide further evidence that dietary habits among children have deteriorated. According to these data, the proportion of high school students who reported eating no more than two servings of high-fat foods daily decreased from 69 percent in 1991 to 62 percent in 1997, a 10 percent decline in just seven years.[52]

These trends strongly suggest a link between parental work-family conflict and childhood obesity. The connection is borne out by multivariate models that directly estimate the effect of parent-reported work-family conflict on children's body mass index as reported in a recent study by Texas A&M University for the USDA. With other socioeconomic and employment factors held constant, the mother's work-to-family spillover increased the child's BMI by 1.67 points (relative to an average of 19.5 points), while an increase of

78 points was associated with the father's work-to-family spillover. Interestingly, the link between work-family conflict and children's BMI was stronger and more consistent than the link between parental time in the home and children's BMI—again, echoing earlier findings that the implications of work-family conflict are a function of more than just the number of hours parents spend on the job or in the home.[53]

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Interpreting changes in BMI is not entirely straightforward. The combined increase attributed to both parents' work-to-family spillover—2.45 points—is seemingly small in percentage terms, but it is sufficiently large to move a child from the 50th percentile, well within the healthy range, to the 80th percentile, just below the 85th percentile threshold for being at risk of being overweight.[54] Furthermore, parents who experience work-family conflict have less time to observe their children's health, less time to take children to the doctor, and less time to breast feed, and some see adverse outcomes in their children's health.[55] More than 40 percent of parents in one survey said that their working conditions had negatively affected their children's health in ways that ranged from a child missing a needed appointment with a doctor to a child failing to receive adequate early care which caused an illness or a medical condition to worsen.[56]

A number of studies suggest that parents' work stress has a negative impact on children's mental health as well. One recent study comparing both parents' and children's emotions before and after parents return home from work found that working mothers (though not fathers) transmit a significant portion of their anger and anxiety to their children on returning home. In fact, the mother's emotional state had a larger influence on her children than the children's own emotional state just before the mother's return. This study also showed that the degree to which both mothers and fathers transferred negative emotions to their children was higher among parents reporting a higher number of work hours or less time for themselves.[57]

Similarly, two recent studies found that maternal stress translates directly into mother-child conflict and behavioral problems among children. These include both internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety, worry, sadness) and externalizing behaviors (aggressiveness, noncompliance). The study conducted by Margaret S. Hart and others also found direct effects of work-family conflict with respect to both mothers and fathers on children's problem behaviors over and above those attributed to the parent-child relationship. In all, Hart estimates that 35 percent of children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors can be explained by parents' work and stress characteristics.[58]

Shift work and nonstandard hours can be particularly harmful to children. One extensive review of the literature, published in the edited volume, Work, Family, Health and Well-Being, found evidence in several studies that irregular hours led to behavioral problems and poorer school outcomes among children, particularly due to their detrimental effects on the health of parent-child relationships and parents' mental health.[59] The authors of the review also cited several studies indicating that the decline in family routines, such as parents and children eating dinner together, often associated with working irregular hours, has harmful effects on child outcomes ranging from increased anxiety levels to poorer school performance. This finding is consistent with a more recent study published in the Journal of Marriage and Family which found that, controlling for other sociodemographic characteristics, shift work by one or both parents significantly increased the likelihood of problem behaviors among children, and that half or more of the impact was due to a decline in parenting quality and parents' mental health.[60]

CONCLUSION

The number and percentage of households with two parents working outside the home has increased dramatically over the past generation. However, the structure of the workplace has not changed to meet the needs of these families and workers. In 1970, almost two-thirds of married couples had one spouse at home to handle family life needs; by 2000, 60 percent of married couples had both spouses in the workforce. Not only are more parents working, but the work week is also growing longer, with the majority of adults saying they work more hours than they would like, and most parents resorting to bringing work home or staying wired to the office after business hours. As parents try to satisfy these increasing work obligations while also trying to meet their family responsibilities, half or more struggle with work-family conflict. Parents are not the only family members struggling. Children also report serious concern over their parents' stress levels and how distracted their parents are during the time they spend together.

Much of the attention surrounding work-family conflict has focused on whether parents are spending less time with their children as the result of increasing work demands; however, simply measuring how parents spend their time does not tell the whole story and misses some of the most important consequences of work-family conflict. Evidence from a broad range of studies indicates that even as parents may be managing to meet their work and family time commitments, families are coming under increasing stress loads that have a seriously detrimental impact on the health of both parents and children.

Rigorous studies have documented causal links between work-family conflict as reported by parents and diagnostically measured mental health disorders, obesity, and even metabolic changes. Work-family conflict has also been directly linked to children's obesity, with effects nearly large enough to move a child from the category of healthy to that of being at-risk. Additional studies document the significant effects of parents' work-family conflict on children's mental health and behavioral problems, including findings showing a direct transference of parents' negative emotions to their children.

Many of the studies found that the increase in work-family conflict and the negative consequences of this conflict for families are not simply a function of increasing work hours, but rather of a feeling on the part of parents that they lack flexibility or control over how they spend their time. This suggests that policies seeking merely to reduce the number of hours parents must work may not be sufficient to alleviate the strain faced by many parents. Families may be better served by policies that provide greater flexibility so parents can schedule their work and family time commitments to benefit themselves and their children. This notion is not simply wishful rhetoric. In fact, several major employers have already moved in this direction and found the strategies to be successful. For example, Jet Blue, PNC, Kraft Food, Wachovia, JCPenny, HEB Grocery Company, and Sodexho have sited the benefits of offering a mix of regular and compressed schedules, overstaffing by 15 percent combined with offers of voluntary time off, scheduling with more lead time, developing voluntary "relief pools" of workers who are cross-trained and typically looking to pick up additional hours, offering more part-time shifts and voluntary pick-ups, shift trades, and better technology to make scheduling more flexible, adaptable and responsive to worker and employer needs.

As parents try to satisfy these increasing work obligations while also trying to meet their families responsibilities, half or more struggle with work-family conflict.

The stress families are facing appears to result from the mismatch between the needs of families and the structure of the American workplace. Through voluntary employer actions and creative public policy, steps to provide working parents with short-term time off, flexible working arrangements, extended time off, episodic time off, reduced hours, and career exit and re-entry options could help reduce the stress on families. The next step for policymakers is to take the health impacts of work and family stress seriously and to look for creative solutions that increase the flexibility of the American workplace.

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[52] Author's tabulations, based on data from the Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance Survey, as reported in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Centers for Disease Control, various issues.

[53] Alec McIntosh et al., *Parental Time, Role Strain, and Children's Fat Intake and Obesity Related Outcomes* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2006).

[54] See BMI—*About Body Mass Index for Children and Teens*, http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/childrens_BMI/about_childrens_BMI.htm.

[55] Jane Waldfogel, *What Children Need* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[56] Jody Heymann, *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[57] See Jennifer L. Matjasko and Amy F. Feldman, "Emotional Transmission Between Parents and Adolescents: The Importance of Work Characteristics and Relationship Quality," in *Being Together, Working Apart*, ed. Barbara Schneider and Linda J. Waite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 138–58.

[58] See Margaret S. Hart and Michelle L. Kelley, "Fathers' and Mothers' Work and Family Issues as Related to Internalizing and Externalizing Behavior of Children Attending Day Care," *Journal of Family Issues* 27, no. 2 (2006): 252–70; and Elizabeth A. Vandewater and Jennifer E. Lansford. "A Family Process Model of Behaviors in Adolescents," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (February 2005):100–09. It should be noted that one difficulty in interpreting these and similar studies is that parent-child conflict and child behaviors are reported by parents. Thus, parental stress and work-conflict may have an impact not only on children's behavior but also on parents' perceptions of child behaviors.

[59] The authors further note that the nature of the relationship was complex and the impacts depended on such factors as gender of parent, age of child, family composition, and extent of co-parenting. See Ann C. Crouter, Ann C. and Susan M. McHale, "Work, Family and Children's Time: Implications for Youth, in *Work, Family, Health, and Well-Being*, ed. Suzanne M. Bianchi, Lynne Casper, and Rosalind Berkowitz King (Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005).

[60] Lyndall Strazdins et al., "Unsociable Work? Nonstandard Work Schedules, Family Relationships and Children's Well-Being," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68 (May 2006): 394–410.

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