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Employer Policies and Working Mothers of Infants: An Overview

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**EMPLOYER POLICIES AND
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Employment Among Mothers of Infants

One aspect of the broader pattern of demographic changes occurring within the female labor force is that mothers of infants (defined here as women with children under 1 year of age) have become an increasingly significant subgroup of all women workers. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics document that about 50 percent of mothers of infants currently participate in the labor force (i.e., are employed or looking for work). Further, about one employed woman in twelve has an infant. It is noteworthy that during the 1980's, labor force participation increased more among these new mothers than among any other group of women. The importance of employment among new mothers has been recognized only recently, however; labor force statistics were reported separately for this group for the first time in 1986 (Hayghe, 1986).

Specifically, in the most recent published data (for March, 1988), 50.8 percent of mothers of infants were employed or looking for work, with rates of 51.9 percent among the married, and 44.9 percent among those maintaining families (U.S. Department of Labor, 1989a). In addition, 8.3 percent of all employed women (2.84 million of 33.81 million, or about one in twelve) had an infant in 1985, the most recent published data permitting this calculation (derived from Hayghe, 1986). The labor force participation rate of mothers of infants in 1988 represented a 42.2 percent increase from the 1978 level (35.7 percent). By contrast, the proportional increase between 1978 and 1988 in labor force participation by mothers with a youngest child aged 2 was 28.3 percent; for youngest child aged 3-5, 21.8 percent; for youngest child aged 6-17, 22.1 percent; and for those with no child under 18 in their household, 8.9 percent (U.S. Department of Labor, 1988a, 1989a). In the most recent data, as yet unpublished, 49.4 percent of mothers of infants were in the labor force in March, 1990 (Hayghe, 1991), suggesting that this group's labor force participation rate has stabilized in the last several years. Nonetheless, mothers of infants clearly represent a larger component of the female labor force now than they did even as recently as a decade ago.

Parental Leave

Parental leave is available to mothers in two main forms: (1) leave for the period of medical recovery after childbirth, offered as part of broader temporary disability coverage, and usually called disability leave, and (2) non-disability maternity or parental leave, usually taken after or in addition to disability leave. Several recent surveys of employers and employees have documented the extent to which these forms of parental leave are available to mothers. Some provide data only on the proportions and characteristics of employers who offer leave (e.g., Christensen, 1989; Kamerman, Kahn, and Kingston, 1983; Trzcinski and Alpert, 1990). Fewer studies provide information on the proportion of employees entitled to parental leave. The most recent estimates based on national sample data are provided by the Employee Benefits Surveys conducted by the BLS. In the 1988 survey, 89 percent of full-time women workers in private establishments with 10 or more employees (about 75 percent of all wage-and-salaried workers) had short-term disability leave that included pregnancy (Meisenehimer, 1989). The 1989 Employee Benefits Survey shows that 40 percent of women workers had non-disability parental leave available to them (Hyland, 1990; data on disability leave not reported for this survey). Other recent studies have focused on the costs of leave policies to employers, e.g., Trzcinski

and Alpert's (1990) analysis of the proportions of women who use these policies when available and the costs of training temporary replacements for them, compared to the costs of hiring a permanent replacement if women leave their jobs permanently because leave is not provided.

Analyses directly focussing on the impact of parental leave policies on the labor force experience of mothers of infants are limited. First, the State Parental Leave Study (Bond, Lord, Galinsky, Staines, and Brown, 1991) compared new mothers' rates of return to the same job before and after the enactment of mandated parental leave in four states in 1988 (Minnesota, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin), and found equally high rates of return (85 percent) at both periods. However, these results should not necessarily be interpreted as showing that parental leave policies have little impact on return to work, because such policies were typically quite generous in these states prior to passage of the new legislation (perhaps one reason these states enacted mandated leave while other states did not), so that enactment led to changes in leave policy among relatively few employers. Perhaps more important, this study did not analyze the effect of the availability of at least some parental leave, or of variations in the length or nature of the parental leave provided, on return to work within the sample of mothers. In a second study, an analysis of data from the Mothers in the Workplace Survey, whether employers offered job-guaranteed maternity leave was the single strongest predictor of mothers' return to work in the same job (NCJW Center for the Child, 1988). However, this analysis did not investigate the influence of variations in the length and other characteristics of the leave provided.

As discussed above, at least some parental leave is available to most women (in the form of short-term temporary disability policies that include pregnancy). As a result, the policy debate is increasingly focussing less on whether to mandate employers to provide leave, and more on the length and nature of the leave to be mandated. Thus, analysis of the impact of variations in leave policies (rather than simply whether leave is available or not) is needed. Further, research investigating this influence of leave policies should not restrict its focus only to whether women return to work, but should consider other aspects of women's progress in the labor force such as productivity, earnings, and job satisfaction.

Employer Supports for Child Care

In recent years, the importance of child care for employed mothers has been increasingly recognized. Child care has begun to be identified as a workforce issue more broadly as well, as reflected, for example, in the 1988 report of the Secretary's Task Force, Child Care: A Workforce Issue (U.S. Department of Labor, 1988b), and the Women's Bureau's Employers and Child Care: Benefitting Work and Family (U.S. Department of Labor, 1989b). Surveys of the child care arrangements used by employed mothers are now being conducted on a regular basis (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). These surveys document that group (or center-based) care has become more common in the last two decades as the primary arrangement used by working mothers (23 percent in 1985, compared to 6 percent in 1965), that care provided by relatives has become less prevalent (dropping from 62 percent in 1965 to 48 percent in 1985), and that use of family day care has risen somewhat and stabilized at about 22 percent (Phillips, 1989).

In addition, the proportions and characteristics of employers offering various kinds of child care supports have received attention. The Survey of Employer-Provided Child Care Benefits, conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1987, indicates that 11.1 percent of establishments with 10 or more employees provide some direct child care benefit or service, i.e., employer-sponsored day care, assistance with child care expenses, information and referral services, or counseling services (Hayghe, 1988). Over 30 percent of employers with 250 or more workers provided at least one such benefit (see also Christensen, 1989, for parallel results from a recent survey of large corporations).

Some prior research has focussed on the impact of child care arrangements on women's employment status and progress. Several studies suggest that the ease with which women can arrange for the care of their children, their satisfaction with their arrangement, and the amount they pay for it affect their calculation of potential gains from employment. In one widely cited study, a special survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census in 1982, suggested that about 13 percent more mothers of preschool children would work if reasonably priced child care were available. Lack of affordable child care was an obstacle for employment to an even greater degree among unmarried and never married mothers, among blacks, and among women with lower education and family income (O'Connell and Bloom, 1987). In a 1987 survey of 750 Massachusetts families, Marshall and Marx (1991) found that 41 percent of those not currently employed with a child under thirteen would look for work, and 46 percent would enter school or training, if satisfactory and affordable care were available; again, these rates were even higher among those in low income families. The impact of child care on mother's employment is confirmed by five other studies, several of which are smaller sample investigations suggesting that some women with low earnings find employment profitable only because they have access to free or very low-cost care from relatives (Marshall and Marx, 1991; National Research Council, 1990: 34-37).

Other research has documented links between child care problems and productivity on the job. A study of dual-worker families with children under 13 found one of every four parents with preschool children had difficulty making their current child care arrangement, and such difficulty was one of the most significant predictors of absenteeism. A quarter of the mothers had experienced two to five breakdowns in their arrangements in the last three months; breakdowns in arrangements were associated with coming to work late or leaving early (Galinsky and Hughes, 1987). In a study of five large technology firms, Fernandez (1986) also found that difficulties with child care were correlated with absenteeism, short work days, and spending time on family issues during work hours.

Only a handful of prior studies focus on the influence of child care supports provided specifically by employers. In analyses using the Mothers in the Workplace Survey, it was found that among mothers who took maternity leave but then quit work before returning, 20 percent said that not being able to make satisfactory child care arrangements was a deciding factor in their decision to quit (NCJW Center for the Child, 1988). Further, the presence of employer supports for child care had a significant positive effect on new mothers' return to work (NCJW Center for the Child, 1989). In a study of 25 Massachusetts companies providing child care subsidies of various kinds, Marshall (1991) reported that many companies perceived that employees using child care benefits performed

better. For example, 40 percent of the companies surveyed indicated that workers using child care benefits had lower turnover, and 30 percent that these workers showed lower absenteeism. Prior research does not appear to have investigated the potential positive contribution of child care services, either in the community or supported by employers, on other outcomes such as earnings and job satisfaction. Further, excepting the Mothers in the Workplace Survey, prior research has not investigated the role of child care supports and arrangements specifically on the labor force experience of mothers of infants.

Flexible Work Schedules

Flexible work schedules potentially have an important impact on employed mothers (Christensen and Staines, 1990). Indeed, in the 1987 Survey of Employer-Provided Child Care Benefits, flexible schedules were considered to be an indirect child care benefit (Hayghe, 1988). The principal forms of flexible work schedules are flextime (being able to vary, within limits, starting and ending time), voluntary part time, and flexible leave (personal leave, vacation not restricted to a specific time of year, and sick leave not restricted to illness). Data indicate that 11.1 percent of all employed women had flextime in 1985 (Mellor, 1986); more recent BLS estimates of the proportion of workers with flextime, based on employer surveys, do not disaggregate by gender (e.g., Hyland, 1990). In 1988 data, 31.7 percent of employed mothers with children under 3 work part time (U.S. Department of Labor, 1989a). About three-quarters of all women working part time are classified as doing so on a voluntary basis, rather than because only part time work is available (Kahne, 1985, 1991). National data on the availability of flexible leave is limited to the proportion of employers who offer it, 42.9 percent of establishments with 10 or more employees in 1987 (Hayghe, 1988).

Of the different forms of flexible schedules, research has focussed most on flextime, and given greatest attention to its consequences on productivity and job satisfaction. These effects are generally found to be positive but small (see reviews in Ronen, 1984; Christensen and Staines, 1990). A handful of studies focus on the effects of flextime on parents' time spent in family roles, perceived conflict between work and family life, and satisfaction with family life; positive effects for the first two are modest, and not confirmed for the last (see review in Christensen and Staines, 1990). One more recent study has investigated the effects of flextime specifically among employed mothers of infants, using data from the State Parental Leave Study. High-flexibility flextime (allowing daily variation in arrival and departure times) had a positive effect on job satisfaction and reduced work-family conflict, but flextime allowing no daily variation did not (Staines, 1990).

Other related research concerning the consequences of workers' control over their schedules (not specifically over starting and ending time) suggests that schedule control reduces conflict between work and family life (Staines and Pleck, 1983, 1986). There has been little research attention to the potential effects of the availability of voluntary part time work and of flexible leave on women's participation and progress in the labor force. Thus, most prior research concerning the effects of flexible schedules on women's labor force experience has been restricted to flextime, focussing primarily on its consequences

for productivity, job satisfaction, and family variables. Almost no research has investigated the influence of other aspects of flexible schedules, and of effects specifically among mothers of infants.

Race, Ethnicity, and Class Effects

Little research is available concerning the differential availability and impact of the employer policies discussed here on racial, ethnic, or social class subgroups. The major exception is the lower availability of affordable child care for low income women workers and minority women workers (Marshall and Marx, 1991; O'Connell and Bloom, 1987). Mothers of infants who are black, Hispanic, or of lower SES may be at a disadvantage with regard to parental leave and flexible work schedules as well.

The consequences of employer policies have not as yet been investigated with racial and class subgroups. It is possible that when parental leave, child care supports, and flexible schedules are available, they have even greater impact on labor force participation and progress in these subgroups. On the other hand, since women workers in these groups face considerable other obstacles to labor force participation and progress, the incremental effects of these policies may be minimal compared to their effects for other women.

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