



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family Change and Time Allocation in American Families

Suzanne M. Bianchi, UCLA

Several key changes in the family occurred in developed countries in the latter half of the 20th century, setting the stage for more diverse family forms in the 21st century. These include changes in marriage and childbearing, the dramatic increase in women’s employment, and the aging of the population.

To summarize, women’s participation in paid employment has grown substantially, reducing the number of hours that women – the primary caregivers in the past – have available to provide unpaid care to family members. Delayed marriage and childbearing heighten the likelihood that the greatest childrearing demands come at the same time that job and career demands are great – particularly among the well-educated. Delayed childbearing also increases the likelihood that one’s parents may begin to suffer ill health and need assistance before one’s children are fully launched. Difficulty with balancing work and family demands may be contributing to the increase in childlessness. There are also more single parents trying to both support and provide time to children without the help of a partner. Work-family balance may be particularly elusive for this group, which may rely heavily on support from their own parents. Those parents are increasingly likely to be employed, at least part-time, as older adults remain in the labor force longer than in the past. Given this complex picture, many Americans will experience multiple periods during their working lives when caregiving demands will push up against work demands and vice versa. The most intense period will likely remain the years of rearing young children. However, the later years of the life course also may entail a complex mix of obligations to elderly parents, a spouse who may face a health crisis, or the needs of adult children and grandchildren.

Time diary evidence from parents over the latter half of the 20th century (and into the first decade of the 21st century) indicates three important trends.

1) As mothers increased their labor force participation, they shed hours of housework but protected to the extent possible their hours devoted to childrearing. Maternal time spent in childcare activities is as high or higher today as during the 1960s when a far higher proportion of mothers were in the home full time.

2) Father’s time in childcare also increased over the last two or three decades. For fathers, childcare hours are added to long paid work hours, especially for married fathers who average more than 40 hours of work per week (regardless of the age of their children).

3) American parents seem to be engaged in a more intensive form of childrearing than in the past, and raising children takes longer as young adults delay the transition to adulthood. Children, at least middle-class children, participate in a large number of extra-curricular activities, many of which require parental involvement and transportation. Why this is occurring is not totally clear but some argue that parents are increasingly concerned with giving their children a wide range of opportunities with the hope that this will ensure children’s later life educational success. Despite their heavy involvement in childrearing, the majority of mothers and fathers still report that they have “too little time” with their children. This may reflect the hurried nature of modern family life – when time together is often spent rushing to the next activity or commitment.

“Working mothers in particular give up leisure time and sleep (compared with mothers not in the labor force) to meet demands of children and jobs.”

What do parents give up to devote time to work and family?

1) Mothers continue to scale back paid work hours when children are young and when they are able to do so financially, with evidence that this has long-term negative consequences for their own income security later in life or in the event that their marriages dissolve.

2) Time diary evidence suggests a reduction in the time spouses spend together – both the total amount of time and time alone as a couple. Large percentages of both husbands and wives report they have “too little time” for themselves.

3) Working mothers in particular give up leisure time and sleep (compared with mothers not in the labor force) to meet demands of children and jobs. Large percentages of mothers, no matter their labor force status, report they “are always rushed,” are “multi-tasking most of the time,” and that they have “too little time for themselves.”

4) Single mothers seem to have considerable difficulty fitting everything in. While they have maintained high involvement in tasks of childrearing, their total time with their children has declined and they spend less time, on average, with family and friends than in the past.

Thus, parents have been managing to do both “work and family” – and with a somewhat more egalitarian division of labor than in the past. However, women still do far more of the unpaid, caregiving hours in the home and men do more of the paid hours in the labor market. And the total hours (paid+unpaid) add up to high average workloads per week for mothers and fathers when there are young children and high levels of expressed stress over time pressures. Given this portrait of busy working parents of children, is there any time left over to meet the demands of aging parents or extended kin? The good news is that most adults do not face serious caregiving demands from their parents until their own children are older and less demanding of day-to-day care. That is, only a small proportion are “sandwiched” with care both for parents and young children (Pierret, 2006), though these individuals face a substantial burden.

Women still dominate in providing emotional support – to parents, adult children and friends and neighbors. They also are more likely than men to assist elderly parents, usually mothers. But men are very much involved in providing help around the house to adult children and parents – probably because the help needed is in those tasks that men typically do (e.g., help with yard work, household repairs). As men transition from their fifties to their sixties, and as many of them retire from the labor force, they become increasingly involved in the care of their grandchildren. Evidence on intergenerational help and support suggests an active network of exchanges among family members and across generations that extends across the life course.