Changing Work, Changing Families, and Public Policies Toward Low-Income Families

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The twenty-first century has seen major changes in both the nature of work and the nature of families in the United States—even before the COVID-19 pandemic upended nearly every aspect of economic and social life beginning in the spring of 2020. Many ongoing, longer-term changes in work and family life have occurred gradually over the past half century or more; some have occurred after shorter-term disruptions to society and the labor market. Technology has rapidly evolved, opening new industries and opportunities in the economy; other job sectors have calcified and faded in prominence; some jobs now require much less human labor as technology has become more sophisticated. Professional jobs—those that require a college degree or higher—have become increasingly well compensated even as the wages of so-called unskilled jobs have remained flat or even declined and the federal minimum wage has not kept pace with inflation. As a result, overall economic inequality has notably increased (whether measured by earnings, income, or wealth), and many lower-income families today experience poverty and economic hardship. Many observers posit that the United States' public policies have failed to keep up with social and economic changes—or have done so unevenly across localities, with particularly deleterious consequences for the most disadvantaged individuals and families. At the time of this writing, the policy landscape that low-income families in the United States face is undergoing rapid and potentially dramatic change. It is therefore a critical moment to grapple with how policy could best help low-income families navigate the new realities of work and family life amid economic uncertainty.

In this issue, we aim to provide new research evidence about work and family issues in the twenty-first century for low-income families brought about by broad societal changes in the labor market and family patterns, and to highlight promising policy options to meet ongoing and emerging needs. We hope that this volume

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informs efforts to develop, reform, and implement public policies and programs that effectively support low-income workers and their families. We first describe the broad historical trends in both work and family that motivate the current issue, and then turn to a description of the pressing work-family issues that these trends have brought about for today's low-income families and children. We then describe the ways in which public policies have and have not evolved to meet the current times, as well as the opportunities for change that now exist in the new landscape created by the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude with brief summaries of each article

CHANGES IN WORK

Low-income workers today face a very different labor market than they did fifty years ago. Recent research documents key changes affecting workers that have emerged in recent decades.

Earnings and Education

We know that the job opportunities for those with low skills have diminished amid a rising premium for high skills (Autor 2014), and real wages have stagnated for those with less formal education (Groshen and Holzer 2019). David Autor (2014) describes some of the key trends behind rising premiums to education and high skills; he finds that the earnings gap between college and high school–educated men roughly doubled in the three decades between 1979 and 2012, and that this trend is nearly as strong for women. Thus those without a college degree are increasingly left out of experiencing the fruits of economic growth. Further, these earnings gaps are not just about less-educated workers gaining at a slower rate—instead, their earnings have actually declined in real terms, by 22 percent among those without a high school degree and by 11 percent among those with only a high school degree. This leaves those with lower education levels less able to provide for themselves and their families, absent help from government policies and programs. The reasons for this divergence are many and are being actively debated in the literature (Autor and Dorn 2013; Autor 2014), but the net result is a much-weakened standing of the non–college educated in the U.S. labor market in favor of opportunities for those with higher levels of education. The COVID crisis may have further reduced the availability of low-wage jobs and hastened the automation of lower-skilled jobs (Autor and Reynolds 2020). At the same time, the supply of more highly educated workers has not kept pace with rapid technological change (Goldin and Katz 2018, 2020). Some scholars argue that sustained levels of immigration among those with less education—at least until the Donald J. Trump presidency—put further downward pressure on the wages and earnings of those without a college education (Borjas 2014).

Job Stability and Quality

In addition to declining earnings and labor-market position for the less educated, job stability also seems to be becoming more rare. Matissa Hollister and Kristen Smith (2014) find that job tenure has declined for men overall and for never-married women. Some increases in women's labor-force attachment have masked these trends, and public sector jobs may be a bit of an exception (Hollister 2011). Yet, there does seem to be an overall and pronounced decline in job stability. Arne Kalleberg (2011) describes these and other trends as reflecting the growing "precariousness" of work—which comes in the form of fewer benefits, less control over one's time, and fewer protections against job loss (see also Hill 2013). As David Howell and Arne Kalleberg (2019) note, using data from the Economic Policy Institute, the decline over recent decades in the share of workers receiving paid health insurance benefits from their employer has been concentrated among low-wage workers. Employer-provided pension coverage has also declined, and the nature of such coverage has shifted away from defined-benefit plans that historically provided workers with more economic security and less risk.

Nonstandard Schedules

Work schedules are also more variable, and work is more likely to occur during nonstandard hours (Presser 2003; Lozano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016; Craig and Powell 2012; Golden 2015); and unstable work schedules have been linked with a lower likelihood of having health insurance (Lim 2019) and greater adverse health outcomes (Schneider and Harknett 2019). Lonnie Golden (2015) shows that nearly one in five workers in the United States (17 percent) have irregular or on-call schedules, work split, or rotating shifts. The lowest-income workers face the highest rates of irregular schedules. For parents of children, these unstable schedules are a routine and disruptive occurrence. For example, in a sample of workers with young children, Elizabeth Ananat and Anna Gassman-Pines (2021) find that over the course of thirty days, fully 87 percent of service-industry employed parents in a California city experienced at least one unanticipated work schedule change, and these schedule changes were associated with negative mood changes and reductions in sleep quality. Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett (2019) further document how unstable schedules are linked with psychological distress, poor sleep quality, and general unhappiness. Unstable or unpredictable work schedules can be a source of perceived and real economic insecurity for workers (Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019), and a long line of research documents the associations between economic insecurity and family stress (Masarik and Conger 2017). Sigrid Luhr, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett (2022, this issue) highlight how unpredictable work schedules for mothers make parenting more challenging, increasing the difficulty of arranging care for children and increasing work-family conflict.

Unions

Another important change in the nature of work in recent decades is the role of both private- and public-sector unions. Unions, which have historically bolstered workers' wages and benefits, cover significantly fewer workers today than in the past. Bruce Western and Jake Rosenfeld (2011) find that between 1973 and 2007, private-sector unions' coverage of American workers declined from 34 to 8 percent for men and from 16 to 6 percent for women. This declining coverage, in turn, seems to have contributed to some of the patterns in wage and earnings inequality described. Some research has even found that union density or coverage predicts positive spillovers to wages of nonunion private-sector employees (Denice and Rosenfeld 2018), suggesting that the decline in union membership affects the economic potential and economic security not only of union members themselves. This also seems to be true in the public sector, where state-level public-sector union membership has been associated with higher wages among nonunion public sector workers (Rosenfeld and Denice 2019). Related to and compounding these challenges is the declining real value of the federal minimum wage, which has further weakened the economic position of low-wage workers (Card and Krueger 2015; Mishel 2013).

Rise of Gig Work

Another fundamental change is the rise of so-called gig work, which is increasingly an income source for many Americans. Though definitions of gig work are contested and in flux, they generally refer to work that is not paid through a wage or salary and is not governed by a contract—and often does not entail a predictable work schedule or earnings (Abraham et al., 2019). There is little consensus even on the extent to which the gig economy has "risen"—Abraham and colleagues note that data sources often conflict when trying to estimate the scope of the gig economy, but that one fact is clear: there has been an unambiguous surge in the number of "self-employed passenger drivers" in recent years. Tax data also shows a rise more generally in rates of self-employment. Scholars posit that the rise of gig work may create desired flexibility for high-skilled workers but may leave low-skilled workers without stable and well-remunerated work (Spreitzer, Cameron, and Garrett 2017). At present, there is very little research on the effects of gig work on workers' incomes and economic insecurity, and these effects likely depend on whether engaging in gig work is voluntary and used as an income supplement, or is involuntary and used as a means of coping with inadequate well-remunerated opportunities in the formal labor market. Given the rise in this new type of work in at least some sectors of the economy, more research will be necessary to unpack its net impacts on work and workers.

Taken together, these many changes in the nature of work, in whether and how much individuals are working, and in the compensation derived from work are all pieces of the fundamental changes in the labor market and in the economy over many decades. These changes have especially—and negatively—affected less-educated workers and have strikingly increased the inequalities observed between those at the low and high ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, whether measured by wages, benefits, job quality, or job security. This already bleak situation was only made worse by the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit low-wage workers the hardest (Gould and Kassa 2021) and further increased inequalities on a host of outcomes by education and race-ethnicity (Perry, Aronson, and Pescosolido 2021). Although yet to be fully understood, what has been termed the Great Resignation—record numbers of Americans quitting their jobs in 2021—may reflect a profound reevaluation of Americans' views of and attachment to work (Thompson 2021); this is especially true for low-income service workers, who both faced the worst working conditions and also greatly benefited from the income supports available in the pandemic relief bills. This phenomenon is yet to be fully explored in research, but recent news articles suggest that individuals are not so much rejecting work as they are essentially renegotiating the terms and conditions under which work occurs (Rosalsky 2022). Time will tell regarding the longer-term realignment within the labor market that may have emerged from the pandemic.

CHANGES IN FAMILIES

Over the same time that the economy and labor market have changed, American families have also changed dramatically. Sometimes referred to as the second demographic transition, striking changes since the middle of the twentieth century have been observed in the United States and across most Western industrialized countries in regard to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and fertility behaviors (Cherlin 2014; Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006). These changes have decreased the homogeneity of "typical" family experiences and have increased both the instability and diversity in American family life. As Frank Furstenberg (2014, 12) observes in his review of family change over fifty years, the American family system has moved "from consensus to complexity." These changes have occurred alongside—and perhaps in response to—the changes in the labor market and growing inequalities described. Family patterns themselves are increasingly characterized by inequality. First identified by Sara McLanahan (2004) as "diverging destinies" for children resulting from parents' differential family behaviors by socioeconomic status, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing patterns differ by education and income, with important implications for family and child well-being (Amato et al. 2015; Lundberg, Pollak, and Sterns 2016; Raley and Sweeney 2020).

Marriage

At the core of changes in family life over the past half century have been shifts in the nature of union formation and marital behavior. Marriage has become less central to the life course both because individuals are marrying later and a small—but perhaps rising—fraction are not marrying at all (Cherlin 2009). In the United States, the median age at first marriage is today higher than it is has been at any point since such data were first observed in 1890: 28.6 for women and 30.4 for men in 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau 2020, 2021). Annual marriage rates (marriages per thousand unmarried women) declined from 76.5 in 1970 to 31.3 in 2018, and the proportion of women currently married declined from a peak of 65 percent in 1960 to a low of 46 percent in 2018 (Schweizer 2020). Recent opinion data suggest that most Americans hold positive views of alternatives to marriage (for both partnership and rearing children), but the majority (54 percent) still say that marriage is "important but not essential" for living a fulfilling life (Horowitz, Graf, and Livingston 2019).

Marriage patterns have not unfolded evenly across groups. In 1940, the proportion currently married ranged from 53 to 63 percent, regardless of racial-ethnic group or educational attainment. Since that time, greater declines in marriage among racial-ethnic minorities and individuals with less than high school education have yielded large gaps in current marriage by race-ethnicity, 26 percent of Black women and 43 percent of Hispanic women versus 51 percent of White women, and by education, 27 percent of those with less than high school versus 59 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or more (Schweizer 2020). The latter trends are certainly not independent of the labor-market changes noted earlier in that the deteriorating economic fortunes especially of working-class men are linked with lower family attachments (Edin et al. 2019), a phenomenon first observed by William Julius Wilson (1997) and noted by many other scholars (Coile and Duggan 2019; Edin and Nelson 2013; Nelson 2004).

Cohabitation

Delays and declines in marriage have meant that individuals spend a longer time unmarried, but this does not imply that individuals are not entering unions. Cohabitation has risen steadily since the 1970s (Hemez and Manning 2017), and fully 76 percent of recent marriages (2015–2019) were preceded by cohabitation (Manning and Carlson 2021). Cohabitation has essentially replaced marriage as the first union for the majority of young adults, as U.S. individuals have been entering a first union at about the same age over the last twenty years (Manning, Brown, and Payne 2014). In fact, the majority of adults will cohabit with a partner at some point, and for adults ages eighteen through forty-four between 2013 and 2017, a higher proportion had ever cohabited (59 percent) than had ever married (50 percent)—a reversal of the situation for the same age group in 2002 (Graf 2019). Yet cohabitation is not a unitary status but instead plays many roles in family formation patterns and is broadly characterized today by diversity and inequality (Sassler and Lichter 2020). Cohabitation may be a precursor to legal marriage—or an alternative to marriage—at different stages of the life course or across groups of people (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). For those with higher education, cohabitation is more likely a stage in the transition to marriage, whereas working-class individuals are more likely to move in together out of necessity and less likely to transition to marriage (Manning and Smock 2005; Sassler and Miller 2011).

Divorce

Divorce rose notably in the United States in the 1970s, reaching a peak annual rate of 22.6 divorces per thousand married women in 1980, followed by a mostly steady decline since that time (Schweizer 2020) and reaching a forty-year low in 2019 of 15.5 divorces per thousand (Reynolds 2020). Still, about half of all marriages are expected to end in divorce in the United States (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014). Divorce rates are much higher among the socioeconomically disadvantaged, and a recent decade review article notes that "divorce is a stratified and stratifying life event" (Raley and Sweeney 2020).

Repartnering

After a union dissolves, many adults will repartner, and Americans are especially likely to do so (Cherlin 2009). In fact, in a comparison of family experiences across eighteen Western industrialized countries, Americans were most likely to repartner within six years of a prior union dissolution, 65 percent, relative to their counterparts in all other countries analyzed, from 14 percent in Italy to 60 percent in Belgium (Andersson, Thomson, and Duntava 2017). High levels of union dissolution and repartnering imply that many individuals will have more than one partner over their life course, by either marriage or cohabitation. Repartnering provides a new opportunity to share economic resources, give and receive emotional support, and experience companionship and sexual intimacy, and thus may offset some of the negative consequences of divorce for adults and children (Amato 2010). Repartnered relationships may be more complicated or less "institutionalized" than first partnerships when it comes to rearing children (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994), but recent research suggests that stepfather involvement may have changed in recent decades and may be more beneficial to children's well-being (Gold and Edin 2021).

Fertility

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, handwringing was evident about the overall decline in U.S. fertility in recent decades, with below-replacement fertility rates observed since the 1970s and an historically low total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.64 in 2020 (Osterman et al. 2022). Yet U.S. fertility rates have remained surprisingly high relative to many other Western countries, where they have remained far below the replacement level TFR of 2.1. The COVID-19 pandemic may have further diminished U.S. rates, raising new questions and concerns and generating front-page news stories such as the *New York Times* story on "Why American Women Everywhere Are Delaying Motherhood" (Tavernise et al. 2021). The extent to which current patterns portend an even greater long-term aggregate fertility decline depends greatly on whether the current trend reflects a real decline or simply a delay in U.S. childbearing. In other words, will U.S. fertility "catch up" after the profound economic and other uncertainties of the pandemic have passed? This remains unclear.

One aspect of fertility where striking change has been clear over the last half century concerns the proportion of births occurring outside legal marriage. From 6 percent of all births in 1960, a steady and notable rise over the next fifty years led to fully 40 percent by 2010 (Ventura and Bachrach 2000; Curtain, Ventura, and Martinez 2014), a fraction that has remained about the same over the past decade, 40.5 percent as of 2020 (Osterman et al. 2022). Much of the recent increase in nonmarital childbearing can be attributed to births to cohabiting couples. In the United States, 18 percent of all children were born to cohabiting mothers between 1997 and 2001 (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008), and fully 58 percent of nonmarital births between 2006 and 2010 were to cohabiting couples (Curtain, Ventura, and Martinez 2014). At the same time, being born to cohabiting parents does not mean that children necessarily enter a stable union because many cohabiting unions will break up—even more so in the United States than in other nations (Kiernan 1999; Osborne and McLanahan 2007). Recent research using data from the Gender and Generations Surveys and other comparable sources across Europe and the United States suggests that U.S. children born to cohabiting parents are more likely to see their parents break up by age fifteen, fully 73 percent compared to 22 to 52 percent for their Western European counterparts (Andersson, Thomson and Duntava 2017).

Although traditional family formation typically followed a linear course in the middle of the twentieth century—first dating, then marriage, and then childbearing, the rise in nonmarital childbearing (along with concomitant changes in union formation) has yielded a range of complex and diverse family arrangements. This is especially true for disadvantaged individuals in the United States, who are likely to have children outside marriage in relationships that are likely to break up (Cancian, Meyer, and Cook 2011; McLanahan 2011; Mincy and Pouncy 1999). Also, many cohabiting households include children born to couples living together or that one or the other partner had from a prior relationship (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Thomson 2014).

Family Complexity

Amid high levels of union dissolution and nonmarital childbearing, a large proportion of adults today have (or will have) biological children by more than one partner, sometimes referred to as *multipartnered fertility*. Recent studies focused on the United States have identified that a sizable proportion of individuals across various demographic groups have children by more than one partner (Carlson and Meyer 2014; Guzzo and Dorius 2016; Meyer, Cancian, and Cook 2005). Union instability in the context of childbearing implies that individuals will experience multiple family forms with various dimensions of complexity; adults are likely to spend time living with more than one partner, and children may experience changes in the adults with whom they coreside or who serve as parental figures to them. This means that families often span households, that family members within households may not all have the same biological or relational ties, and that the involved individuals may have different definitions of who is in their family. Moreover, these factors are likely to differ over time and across sociodemographic groups. In addition, recent decades have seen large numbers and increased recognition of children living with their single- or repartnered father and without their biological mother present in the household (Grall 2018; Livingston 2013). Together, these trends have resulted in growing uncertainty about family forms, relationships, and stability (Seltzer 2019).

Family instability is of concern because research suggests that children who live apart from their biological fathers do not fare as well on a range of outcomes as children who grow up with both biological parents, especially within stable married families (Amato and Anthony 2014; Cavanagh and Fomby 2019; McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013). The research evidence is especially strong in the United States, although parents' union dissolution has been linked with various adverse outcomes across European and Anglo countries as well (Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien 2017; McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013). In broad scope, children in single-parent families are often deprived of two types of parental resources: economic (money) and relational (time) (Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994; Thomson and McLanahan 2012). Complexity in low-income families may also complicate children's access to income supports via public policies for which they would otherwise be eligible—such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (see Michelmore and Pilkauskas 2022, this issue).

Changing Labor Market, Changing Families

The changing family patterns described have not occurred in a vacuum, however, and many have suggested that the new patterns—and inequality therein—have been largely attributable to the changing economic landscape. Amid rapid technological change, deindustrialization, and globalization in labor markets, "good jobs" for those with low-to-moderate education became increasingly scarce (Kalleberg 2011; Cherlin 2014). Beginning in the 1980s, scholars began to understand that the limited job opportunities for low-skilled men, especially in poor urban areas, were shaping family behaviors among the disadvantaged (Blank 2009); the decline in "marriageable men" (that is, men who could get and hold a steady job) was seen as a key aspect of decreasing marriage rates, especially in large U.S. cities (Wilson 1987). Residential segregation by class has only reinforced the challenges of those with low education obtaining a "good" job and has reified the differences in labor-market experiences by socioeconomic status (SES) (Bischoff and Reardon 2013).

Starting in the 1970s, women increasingly entered the labor market, leading to new awareness of—and scholarly attention to—work-family issues and the extent to which working in the paid labor market was and could be compatible with family life. A robust literature has highlighted a range of work-family issues related to the household division of labor, work-family conflict, family stress, gender expectations, and children's well-being as related to parental work (Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel 2020). Public policies that facilitate parents' ability to reconcile work and family demands are shown to enhance children's health and reduce health disparities (Andersson, Garcia, and Glass 2021).

Compounding the described family patterns are related social and policy trends, which are also important but outside the scope of this discussion. The rise in mass incarceration since the 1970s has removed many fathers from their families and communities (Wakefield and Uggen 2010) and has increased "churning" within partner relationships (Turney and Halpern-Meekin 2021). In addition, the opioid crisis has left many parents ill-equipped to care for themselves or their children (Romanowicz et al. 2019). As a result, an increasing number of children are living with extended family members and grandparents, both out of financial necessity and as family stability has decreased (Pilkauskas and Cross 2018; Pittman 2015). Many children will end up in foster care, and recent estimates suggest that 6 percent of all U.S. children will be in foster care between birth and age eighteen—and the proportions are much higher among racial-ethnic minority groups, including 12 percent of Black children and 15 percent of Native American children (Wildeman and Emanuel 2014).

Overall, the past fifty to seventy-five years have witnessed dramatic changes in family behaviors in the United States, resulting in new and more diverse patterns of family experiences for adults and for the children they will raise. As described, family patterns have changed overall, yet they have unfolded quite differently across the socioeconomic spectrum, the largest differences in family demography observed between those with college degrees and those with less education (Lundberg, Pollak, and Stearns 2016). Families may play an important role in buffering the negative consequences of economic insecurity (Wiemers 2014), but when families themselves are unstable, their buffering role is threatened. This is where policy can usefully intervene to provide a social safety net. In the following section, we identify key issues linking today's labor market and low-income families.

TODAY'S LABOR MARKET AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

The trends outlined contribute to a deteriorating economic and social position for less-educated and lower-income individuals and families. Although poverty rates overall and among families with children have declined over the past fifty years, research shows that much of this decline has been achieved through policy that delivers income supports rather than progress delivered through the labor market (Fox et al. 2015; Wimer et al. 2016). For some groups such as young adults, poverty rates have actually risen over time even after accounting for government policies and programs (Wimer et al. 2020). This leaves today's workers facing increased pressures to make ends meet and support their families.

Many of the work and family trends outlined have put downward pressure on parents' earnings and incomes, which have been shown to causally affect children's short- and long-term development and well-being (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Duncan, Morris, and Rodrigues 2011; Chaudry and Wimer 2016; Wimer and Wolf 2020). Income is thought to affect family and child well-being in various ways, but two major dimensions are *family stress* and *family investments*. Family stress refers to the ways in which economic insecurity and the absence of resources increases parents' stress, compromises parents' mental health (such as increased anxiety or depression), and interferes with healthy and positive family interactions (for example, decreased relationship quality or harsher parenting). A long line of research provides evidence about the link between family stress and children's well-being in diverse populations and samples (McLoyd 1998; Conger et al. 2002; Evans and English 2002; Masarik and Conger 2017).

Although the family stress model is typically related to lack of income, hardship, and the like, it can be extended to encompass the various work pressures that contribute to the deterioration of low-income families' position in the labor market. Indeed, articles in this issue focus on these connections. For example, Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett explore the connections between scheduling unpredictability and various forms of parenting—arranging child care, work-life conflict, and parenting stress—and find evidence that such unpredictability is associated with difficulty with childcare and also work-life conflict. Elizabeth Ananat, Anna Gassman-Pines, and John Fitz-Henley II show that the Fair Workweek Ordinance in Emeryville, California, seems to have led to decreases in schedule unpredictability and increases in worker well-being and sleep quality. The central point is that increasingly common characteristics of low-wage jobs such as scheduling unpredictability can have direct implications for family stress processes and ultimately family and child well-being.

The second major way economic insecurity is thought to affect family and child well-being is via family investments. When parents have limited resources—whether economic resources, time, or financial, social, or human capital—they are less likely to be able to invest in all of the things that support healthy family functioning and children's development and well-being. Lower-income families may be forced to invest their scarce resources into immediate needs, unlike families with more resources, who can invest in a broader range of inputs into family and child well-being (Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir 2012). As true of the family stress model, a long line of research supports lower family investments as a key pathway by which economic insecurity influences family well-being (Bradley and Corwyn 2002; Chazan-Cohen et al. 2009; Haveman and Wolfe 1994; Duncan and Magnuson 2003, 2011; Conger and Donnellan 2007). We know that differential resources by socioeconomic status are associated with differential parental investments (such as parental engagement and time use), which in turn are linked to SES gaps in child outcomes (Kalil and Ryan 2020). For example, low-income parents may not have enough money to buy books and learning materials for the child and may not have the time and knowledge to effectively and regularly use those books and learning materials; disadvantaged children are shown to have fewer books in their homes, and parents spend less time reading with children (Bradley et al. 2001). Also, economic disadvantage indirectly influences the resources available to children by affecting residential location, given that poor families live in areas with lower-quality schools and less generous public services (Allard 2019; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). As in the family stress model, these pathways have been extended beyond a focus on income and apply to other resources tied to work and family changes described earlier. For example, family investments also involve resources such as time and cognitive bandwidth, both of which can be influenced by the changing nature of work and family life that has altered not only direct economic resources but also associated nonmonetary resources.

The implications of the broad trends described about changing work and labor markets point to additional strain on already scarce resources among lower-income families (both monetary and nonmonetary) that are likely to further compromise their ability to invest in their families and children in a variety of ways. These are likely to be compounded, given the ways that changes in family formation, structure, and complexity sometimes constrain resources such as time, money, and other factors. Many of the articles in this issue speak to the ways such processes can unfold. For example, Sarah Halpern-Meekin and Adam Talkington (2022) discuss the ways in which men who have become "disconnected" from the labor force, given the broad trends in the labor market, have altered the ways they think about fulfilling their roles as romantic partners and as fathers. They highlight nontraditional contributions besides money, for example, by sharing in the caregiving role or finding ways to provide economic support through channels outside the formal labor market. In a much different setting, David Rangel and Elizabeth Peck (2022, this issue) show how Mexican immigrant parents deploy their resources in investing in their children's education through involvement in their schools. Given sometimes more tenuous labor-market positions and weaker school resources in terms of translation and advocacy for their interests, many of the parents in the study are forced to advocate for themselves in subtle ways, especially in an immigration context of heightened enforcement and limited educational supports.

These situations reflect some of the broader labor-market changes that put less-skilled workers in a more deleterious bargaining position with their employers. Alejandra Ros Pilarz, Heather Sandstrom, and Julia Henly (2022, this issue) highlight the various and complex ways that parents' jobs and financial situations—including work schedules and incomes—lead them to invest in different types of childcare arrangements they perceive to be either more or less planned and more or less desirable for themselves and their children. These contributions point to the ways that the connections between work and family life for low-income workers are complex and dynamic and depend on the various constellations of resources people have at their disposal to invest.

Family patterns themselves may in other important ways affect the need to work or access to resources or may condition particular challenges for low-income families. For example, the Michelmore and Pilkauskas article highlights how growing family complexity has left the majority of low-income children in some uncertainty around their ability to obtain the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)—the major cash benefit for low-income working families in the United States. In her article on diaper need, Jennifer Randles (2022, this issue) highlights the different diaper-related needs as a function of family structure, especially whether one or two parents are in the household. In sum, we see that changing work has affected families, and changing families affect the need for and circumstances surrounding work.

POLICY RESPONSES

The combination of these forces means that low-income and working-class families today face dramatically different circumstances than their counterparts a half century ago (Kalleberg 2011; Cherlin 2014). At the same time, social policies and programs—many of which were enacted in the mid-twentieth century and designed around the assumption of nuclear families—have evolved slowly or unevenly across locations. They are often based on outdated assumptions about families, about the availability and nature of work, or about the causes of poverty Also, U.S. federal policies have historically done little to help individuals balance work and family demands, unlike policies in many other Western industrialized countries (Boushey 2016). Overall, low-income families face more uncertainty today and bear a greater share of the risk than government or the business sector (Hacker 2019; Morduch and Schneider 2017).

Although a comprehensive history of the American welfare state and policies that affect low-income workers and families is beyond the scope of this issue and this introduction, we do draw out key trends in policies relevant to how they are or are not tailored to the evolving nature of work and family in the United States for low-income families and their children, as well as the current realities of work and family at the lower-end of the labor market and income distribution. We focus on developments over the past twenty-five years. We highlight important recent developments that may present key turning points in how policy may change going forward in ways relevant to the issue's key themes, with a special emphasis on how the recent COVID-19 pandemic and government's response to it are transforming the policy discussion and policy space.

Income Support Policies

Although income support policies are not often considered the key pillar of work-family policy, we argue that they loom large in relation to how low-income families balance work and family. Low-income families with children must balance effort in the labor market (which is often low-wage) with raising children and dealing with family obligations. Most current antipoverty policies that aim to provide income support are explicitly tied to levels of work (earnings requirements) and family constellations (different benefit structures tied to family arrangements such as marriage and household coresidence). Thus antipoverty policy can be thought of as work-family policy when it comes to the concerns of low-income families with children. It can be the basis for ensuring an adequate level of economic resources, and measuring economic status has long been the central indicator of individual and family well-being vis-à-vis policy inputs—even though articles in this issue point to more nuanced outcomes, such as workers' perceived control of their work circumstances and parents' ability to make planful decisions for their children's care. We recognize that income-support policies are not the only relevant policies at play and thus discuss additional policy domains.

In regard to income-support policy, the 1996 passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), known as welfare reform, brought to fruition a series of reforms that occurred through the mid-1990s in response to several key trends in safety net policy that themselves were a partial product of the changes to families and work discussed earlier (Moffitt 2008). These entailed reforms to the Aid to Dependent Families with Children (AFDC) program, which provided cash aid to low-income families with children in the form of a federal entitlement and was at that time seen as the main welfare program. By the mid-1990s, public and political sentiment had turned sharply away from support for the AFDC program, critics claiming that it disincentivized work and rewarded single-parent families (which had grown tremendously in recent decades, as described). Also, labor-force participation rates for women overall had risen dramatically between the 1970s and the 1990s, raising questions about why some women were being paid "to stay home." We locate welfare reform as a starting point for discussing the changing policy landscape, not because cash welfare is the policy currently critical to low-income families with children (indeed, to the contrary, its current role is highly circumscribed and now fairly minor relative to other policies). Instead, we argue that welfare reform set into motion a cascading series of fundamental changes to the social safety net that altered the equation for how public policies have helped (or hindered) low-income parents' ability to manage and balance work and family life.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, or PRWORA, which was signed into law by President Clinton in 1996, encompassed numerous changes to the safety net, but the central shift was the elimination of AFDC and its conversion to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (Blank and Haskins 2004). No longer was federal cash aid for the poorest families with children to be a federal entitlement. Instead, the program was converted to a block grant, whereby each state received a fixed amount of TANF money each year to be spent according to federal rules. Assistance was required to be temporary, such that recipients could "time out" after receiving five years of assistance if they did not meet work or work-related program requirements (Moffitt 2008).

For many proponents of the reform, PRWORA had its intended effect—a large shift of former recipients exiting from the program and increased work among former recipients as they left the so-called welfare rolls. But a move off welfare into work turned out not to be the panacea that critics of AFDC hoped for. Many who left the program for work entered jobs with low pay and minimal benefits even while contending with the new realities of having to balance work and family such as childcare, transportation, and providing for health care (Tach and Edin 2017; Moffitt and Garlow 2018).

Welfare reform coincided with major changes to tax policies aimed at providing support for low-income workers and their children. The Earned Income Tax Credit, a relatively small program when it was launched during the Nixon administration in the mid-1970s, was greatly expanded in the decades since, and by its largest margin during the first term of the Clinton administration in 1993. This was supplemented by the creation of the Child Tax Credit in 1997, which increased in both size and scope in the years following. The driving idea behind these was the prevailing policy mantra of the time that "if you work, you shouldn't be poor" (Ellwood 1988). Thus, the credits acted as wage supplements to low-wage work, augmenting the family incomes of those who were able to maintain sufficient work effort to yield the highest credit values from the programs (Hoynes 2019). The net result was a shift in support away from the most disadvantaged toward augmenting the incomes of the working poor, in a sense compensating for these workers' deteriorating labor-market positions over time (Moffitt 2015; Hardy 2016; Ziliak 2016). Yet many with low skills were left behind in the search for steady employment.

The other main federal entitlement for low-income families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps) initially also saw declines in caseloads after the conversion of AFDC to TANF. But following the dot-com recession of the early 2000s and sustained efforts by policymakers and states to enroll needy families in the program, caseloads reversed course and eventually boomed during the Great Recession, when opportunities in the formal labor market declined and need skyrocketed (Tach and Edin 2017; Ziliak 2016).

The combined effect of all of these changes was a fundamentally different safety net available to low-income families with children in the 2000s than had been available to their counterparts in the 1960s. Those who remained employed at adequate levels had their earnings augmented by sometimes large once-a-year tax credits in the form of the EITC (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015). For those who were not, cash aid was increasingly scarce and hard to come by, and families had to make due with a patchwork of in-kind assistance and reliance on sources of income such as the informal labor market and various "side hustles" to generate some cash for day-to-day needs. Thus, in recent years, nearly two-thirds of government assistance to low-income families with young children comes in the form of in-kind assistance and once-a-year tax credits, up from just 10 percent in 1968, when 90 percent came in the form of regular cash assistance (Pac et al. 2017). Overall, heterogeneity in families' economic situations under the new safety net is now greater than in the earlier era, such that families able to maintain employment are financially better off, on average, whereas those facing barriers to doing so—health and mental health problems, limited labor market skills and experience, undocumented immigrant legal status—are worse off (Danziger et al. 2016).

The policy developments are more complicated in the light of increasing family complexity. For example, tax rules for claiming children are built around residency with those who care for the children; as the makeup of families and households has shifted over time, the clarity of these rules and the resultant nature of who benefits from them has become increasingly murky, as Katherine Michelmore and Natasha Pilkauskas (2022, this issue) show in clear and stark terms. Likewise, SNAP benefits are built around who lives and cooks together, which also becomes more complicated to establish and treat fairly in an era of increased family complexity. Both programs also rely on reported income in the formal labor market, such that labor-market trends leading many to rely on more informal supports such as gig work and various off-the-books forms of income likely leads many families to be unable to claim the full value of benefits like the EITC and Child Tax Credit (CTC).

Other Policies

A number of other policies are also relevant to low-income families. Unemployment Insurance (UI), for example, is a critical support for many workers and their families when people lose their jobs. But historically, those at the margins of the labor market have benefited least from UI's income replacement function. This is because historically a person has had to be a covered worker and to have paid enough into the system under such employment to be entitled to UI benefits in the context of qualified work disruptions. Many of the lowest-income workers have instead been shut out of the program. As work has become more informal and varied in recent years, UI has become less protective. Housing has become increasingly unaffordable for many (Desmond 2018), but government housing assistance in the form of rental vouchers or public housing remains scarce, restricted by stringent rules related to increased earnings and living arrangements. Health insurance through employment is less available to families, but more available through public programs to children. The Affordable Care Act (ACA, also known colloquially as Obamacare) and associated state Medicaid expansions have made public coverage more likely but also more subject to where a person lives. Overall, the ACA has dramatically reduced the number of insured persons in the United States and increased access to health care (Blumenthal, Collins, and Fowler 2020). Lastly, disability insurance, through the Supplemental Security Income program and related programs, has seen growing enrollment over recent decades, though this seems to have slowed or even reversed in recent years (Autor, Maestas, and Woodbury 2020).

A wide range of additional policies are relevant to the ability of low-income families to navigate the challenges and responsibilities of work and family today. These include aggregate-level policies that regulate aspects of work (such as minimum wage laws and regulations about work scheduling), policies that affect families directly (such as childcare provision, child support enforcement, child welfare policies, early childhood education, and even the K–12 educational system) as well as policies that facilitate the integration of work and family (such as parental leave policies). A full review of all of these policy domains is beyond the scope of this article.

Growing recognition of the rising precariousness of employment for many, especially low-wage workers (Kalleberg 2009), has increased attention to policies that might improve working conditions and wages. Although the federal minimum wage rate has held at $7.25 per hour since 2009, a number of states and localities have enacted higher rates. Currently, according to the Economic Policy Institute,[1] thirty states have a minimum wage higher than the federal standard (led by California at $15.00 an hour), and forty localities have one higher than that of their state. As Ananat and Gassman-Pines explain (2022, this issue), in the past ten years, some local areas (several cities and the state of Oregon) have also begun regulating schedule irregularity by employers; these regulations vary but generally mandate that large employers provide notice of work schedules for hourly workers and pay some compensation if and when schedules are modified.

Another large group of policies directly affect family life in various ways, including by en-

1. Economic Policy Institute, "Minimum Wage Tracker," last updated January 1, 2022, https://www.epi.org/minimum-wage-tracker (accessed March 18, 2022).

suring financial contributions of nonresident parents, providing care and education for children, or providing a safe environment when biological parents face challenges in caring for their children (for a more detailed discussion of family policies, see Berger and Carlson 2020). Child support enforcement is a federal program that requires nonresident parents to provide financial support for their children, but the particular rules and degree of emphasis vary across states. Childcare enables parents to work, and instability in child care is common and can disrupt employment trajectories and vice versa (Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henly 2022, this issue). All states are required to provide schooling for children from kindergarten through high school, and education is a major predictor of social and economic attainment; however, school quality is shown to vary dramatically across states and localities. Finally, the federal child welfare system provides a system of foster care and adoption when parents are unable to care for their children, but effectiveness and outcomes across states vary notably. Taken together, these policies affect the resources and quality of environments available for children that may enhance their development and well-being.

Finally, some policies affect the extent to which parents are able to simultaneously engage in work and parenting. In particular, parental leave and care policies allow parents to take time off around the birth of their child(ren) or when care needs arise. The United States remains the only Western industrialized nation with no federal guaranteed, paid parental leave. Nine states and the District of Columbia have a paid leave program, but at the federal level, workers are entitled to only twelve weeks of unpaid leave, and only for employers with fifty or more employees. President Joe Biden has proposed to provide federal guaranteed parental leave, and it remains unclear as of this writing whether such will be enacted.

Overall, the 2019 U.S. safety net thus stood as geared toward work, tilted toward in-kind assistance for the neediest and once-a-year tax credits and income support for those able to maintain work effort; it was also splintered across many policies and programs serving different populations with different eligibility criteria and program rules, with notable state variation. Then COVID-19 arrived. The pandemic that swept over the United States and much of the globe during 2020—and continues in 2022 with new variants and concerns—may have rewritten the rules for how public policy interacts with changing work and family issues for the low-income population. COVID was first and foremost a public health emergency but also took a severe economic toll on the population given widespread shutdowns and the associated halting of economic activity. As these dual crises unfolded over 2020 and 2021, U.S. policymakers responded to meet the growing economic and public health needs and tried to rectify some of the major holes in the safety net that left segments of poor and low-income groups exposed to the vicissitudes of the labor market and their resultant economic insecurities. Over a series of bills passed by Congress and signed into law by Presidents Trump and Biden, the policy response to the COVID crisis took many forms. These included, but were not limited to major expansions to unemployment insurance, both in terms of benefit levels and who the system covered (including the self-employed, independent contractors, and others); expanded SNAP benefits and summer food assistance; economic impact or stimulus payments—direct payments to Americans meeting various income thresholds; eviction protections and increased housing assistance; aid to small businesses and child care centers; an expanded EITC for childless workers; an expanded Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit; and numerous other provisions.

Perhaps most consequential for the workers and families that are the focus of this issue, the American Rescue Plan, signed into law by President Biden in March 2021, included a temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit. This expansion increased benefit levels to a maximum of $3,600 per year for younger children up to age five and $3,000 per year for those age five through seventeen—up from a maximum of $2,000 per child under prior law. But even more critically, it extended this credit to all children whose parents were not making enough in earnings under prior law to qualify for the full credit; this included those with low or zero earnings, who constituted about one-third of all children in the United States (Collyer, Harris, and Wimer 2020). Further, these expanded benefits arrived monthly, beginning in July 2021. As of this writing these benefits have expired, but any future permanent enactment of such would represent a fundamental shift in the nature of social provision for children in the United States—more akin to Social Security for the elderly. Such an expanded CTC would essentially provide regular, guaranteed income support to all children (except those in the most affluent families) regardless of whether parents had enough earnings to qualify. Such a policy would likely fundamentally change the situation that many of the workers and families described in this issue face, who include not only the parents struggling to afford diapers (Randles 2022), but also those struggling with unstable work schedules, volatile childcare markets, and chronic health problems.

NEW RESEARCH IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue, we include eight new empirical articles that evaluate various aspects of work or family life for those in poverty or near poverty, highlighting the extent to which public policy is effectively serving low-income families and ways it might be improved. What unites these articles is a focus on how workers and families today are coping with their current environments, including public policies that may (or may not) meet their needs. The issue begins with three articles that address current challenges families face with respect to work and family life—precarious scheduling, being disconnected from the labor market, and childcare instability. Next are three articles focused on particular policy programs or issues, which include fair workweek policies that preclude employers' use of unpredictable schedule, the Earned Income Tax Credit as linked to complex families, and the lack of policy attention to diapers as a key need for parents. Finally, two articles focus on key subpopulations with respect to race-ethnicity and immigration.

Sigrid Luhr, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett's article uses innovative data from the Shift Project about mothers in the service sector with children age fifteen or younger to examine how unpredictable schedules are linked with parenting. In particular, they explore how having an uncertain schedule (including on-call shifts, changes in shift timing, volatility in work hours, and minimal advance scheduling notice) in low-wage work is associated with three aspects of parenting—difficulty arranging childcare, work-life conflict, and parenting stress. They find that unpredictable schedules are associated with increased difficulty arranging childcare and greater work-life conflict (but not parenting stress). They also find that family structure and race-ethnicity are important moderators, given that scheduling unpredictability has greater negative effects for single mothers and Black and Hispanic mothers. This is one of the first articles to directly consider how flexibilities granted to employers for managing worker schedules have direct negative consequences in the lives of service sector workers—at least workers who are parents, pointing to potential needs for policy to better regulate scheduling policies and provide other supports to parents.

Sarah Halpern-Meekin and Adam Talkington's article, which is based on an analysis of more than sixty qualitative interviews with so-called disconnected men in rural Wisconsin, tackles how the broad forces reshaping work and family over recent decades intersect in the United States today. Although some continue to endorse the traditional view of a male breadwinner supporting the family through formal labor-market activities, most have come to redefine the nature of both their work and family roles. Some men in the sample report a redefinition of the provider role in their participation in activities outside the formal labor market, such as informal cash or barter work, or in the disability income some contribute to the household. Others have embraced caregiving responsibilities as part of a new way of contributing to a joint maintenance of the household with their partners. Still others reject the model entirely, either choosing to go it alone without a romantic relationship or seeing their economic prospects as unrelated to their partnership potential. The article demonstrates the complex ways that individuals adapt to the forces changing the nature of work and family for low-income people in the United States. Individuals and families are constantly redefining what it means to be a worker, a provider, and a partner under the constraints of a changing set of systems.

Alejandra Ros Pilarz, Heather Sandstrom, and Julia Henly's contribution to the volume turns attention to childcare as a key component for facilitating employment stability. If childcare arrangements are unreliable or raise safety concerns, parents will be challenged to maintain their work schedules and expectations over the longer term. The article focuses on changes in child care arrangements and the extent to which they might be desired or planned. They find that nearly all desired changes were planned in advance, but undesired changes were often unplanned and might have resulted from the loss of a childcare subsidy, sometimes because of job loss. Their work helps us understand the complexity of trajectories of childcare and the need for policies that support childcare stability.

Elizabeth Ananat, Anna Gassman-Pines, and John Fitz-Henley II evaluate how implementation of a local law to reduce schedule unpredictability influenced parents' well-being. The authors used data on ninety-six working parents with young children to assess how a Fair Workweek Ordinance (FWO) enacted in Emeryville, California, in 2017 affected workers. This law required large retail and food service companies to give notice about scheduling and to pay workers for last-minute changes. They found that indeed, workers experienced lower schedule unpredictability as a result of the FWO law, but also had reduced work hours, potentially reducing earnings; at the same time, they find improvements in mental health, especially improved sleep quality. This article suggests that policies can directly affect worker outcomes in various domains.

The Katherine Michelmore and Natasha Pilkauskas article considers one of today's most important social safety programs for low-income families, the Earned Income Tax Credit. The authors use U.S. Census survey data about family structure to evaluate how many families might be exposed to uncertainties about their tax filing status for the EITC, given that only one parent can claim custodial responsibility for a child. They find that 60 percent of children in low-income households might be exposed to some ambiguity in tax filing status, and hence potentially reducing the amount of federal support they could be receiving. The authors conclude with several suggestions for policy improvements, including expanding the childless EITC and creating a noncustodial parent EITC. The ambiguities and complexities documented have particular salience in the current moment, when potential expansion to the CTC would likely have to reckon with similar issues.

Jennifer Randles' article focuses on an underrecognized hole in the contemporary social safety net for parents, diaper need. As described earlier, many parents now depend on the low-wage labor market and, if they are able to maintain adequate earnings in the formal labor market, will benefit from sometimes substantial work-based tax credits such as the EITC. Yet many are not able to balance work and family, and are increasingly likely to be only tangentially or unstably attached to the formal labor market. The current safety net has left these parents without regular cash assistance and reliant on a patchwork of in-kind supports such as food stamps. This leaves them scrambling to afford some of the basic necessities of raising a newborn, such as diapers. The article highlights how major trends in work and family have left many parents desperate to meet some of the most routine and necessary expenditures associated with raising a child and supporting a family.

Pamela Joshi, Abigail Walters, Clemens Noelke, and Dolores Acevedo-Garcia's article provides important evidence related to how changes in the labor market have played out unevenly by race, ethnicity, and nativity status. Using data from the Current Population Survey, the authors examine the extent to which low-income full-time working families earn enough to cover a basic family budget. They find that Black, Hispanic, and foreign-born households consistently have fewer economic resources and fewer employer-provided benefits than White households. This suggests that racial and ethnic minorities, as well as immigrant households, are likely to feel the effects of changes to work and families that have strained these households' resources and economic security. It is these households that will need the most targeting from public policies designed to correct for inequities.

David Rangel and Elizabeth Peck's article on Mexican immigrant parents of school-aged children in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona, underscores the ways parents' abilities to engage with their children's schooling emerge and are shaped by the policy context and resources these parents bring to bear. The key distinction between the two research sites was Phoenix's far harsher and more restrictive immigrant enforcement policy context. Parents in Phoenix operated under a climate of fear and restricted access to free, safe, and remunerative work—an underappreciated facet of the changing nature of work across the socioeconomic spectrum in recent decades. Operating in a largely informal and underpaid work sector, under an immigration enforcement regime putting parents under near-constant threat of deportation, created a series of barriers to parents' desires and goals of effectively managing their children's education. They in turn were more likely to have to structure their school involvement around their fears. This work and policy context made parents' involvement in education—an important input into children's development and educational success—quite challenging, despite the resourcefulness many parents in the sample displayed.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The societal forces reshaping the labor market and the family have been profound, and profoundly felt, especially by lower-income families, who have both had fewer resources to buffer against these changes and whose resources have been directly compromised by these changes. Lower-income families today are consistently working against the disadvantages brought about by the changes described in this issue. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these inequities; its long-term effects are yet to be fully understood but likely to be substantial. The articles in this issue cast into stark relief the public policy challenge of the moment, which cannot be simply to return to the prepandemic normal or tinker around the edges of the current policy regime. Instead, a broader rethinking of how public policies support workers and families is necessary and indeed in some respects seems to be under way. Our hope is that the current issue will contribute to that moment by illuminating particular linkages between policies that shape individual experiences and remuneration from work and policies that support families amidst growing change and complexity.

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