

CALL FOR PAPERS

RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences

Issue on:

Low-Income Families in the 21st Century: Effective Public Policy Responses to Complexity and Change

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The 21st century has seen major changes in both the nature of work and the nature of families in the United States, some building on trends over the past half century and some representing breaks from the past. Many observers hypothesize that U.S public policies have failed to keep up with these changes—or have done so unevenly across localities, with particular consequences for low-income individuals and families. We seek paper proposals that provide research evidence on the changes in work and families, and the most promising policy options to meet contemporary needs. As such, the volume will inform efforts to develop, reform and implement public policies and programs that effectively support low-income workers and their families.

Low-income workers today face a very different labor market than they did fifty years ago. The job opportunities for those with low skills have diminished amidst a rising premium for high skills (Autor 2014), and real wages have stagnated and labor force participation has declined for those with low education (Groschen and Holzer 2019). Stable jobs with decent pay and good benefits are more scarce (Dutta-Gupta et al. 2018; Hill 2013). Work schedules are more variable, and work is more likely to occur during nonstandard hours (Presser 2003; Lozano et al. 2016; Craig and Powell 2012; Golden 2015), and unstable work schedules are linked with adverse health outcomes (Schneider and Harknett 2019). There are less clear and structured—and more divergent—career progression paths predicting economic mobility (Bernhardt et al. 2001). Unions, which have historically bolstered workers’ wages and benefits, cover significantly fewer workers today than in the past (Western and Rosenfeld 2011). So-called ‘gig work’ is increasingly an income source for many, which may create desired flexibility for high-skilled workers but may leave low-skilled workers without stable and well-remunerated work (Spreitzer et al. 2017). In short, today’s low-income jobs may be more likely to have various “bad” characteristics than low-wage jobs of the past (Kalleberg 2011). Perhaps as a result, traditional career ladders into the middle-class have become less common (Rolfe 2017).

At the same time (and perhaps partly in response), families have changed rapidly, becoming more unstable and complex. This is especially true among low-income families. Marriage rates have steadily declined, and they have declined the most among more disadvantaged families (Parker and Stepler 2017).

Cohabitation has risen steadily (Hemez and Manning 2017). Many births now occur outside marriage, and many unions among low-income parents will dissolve over the course of childhood (McLanahan 2011). As parents re-partner, multipartner fertility has increased, especially among low-income families, and many low-income children now experience multiple family arrangements, including co-residence with stepparents and so-called “social parents” (Furstenberg 2014). Compounding these patterns are trends in mass incarceration, which have removed many fathers from their families and communities (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). 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). 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.

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 (Cherlin 2014). At the same time, social policies and programs—many of which were enacted during the mid-20th 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, work and the causes of poverty, and federal policies do little to help individuals balance work and family demands (Boushey 2016). Overall, low-income families face more uncertainty today and bear a greater share of the risk than government and business (Hacker 2008; Murdoch and Schneider 2017).

Outdated social policies are numerous: Unemployment Insurance ignores the fact that many low-income workers patch together employment from multiple jobs and informal work arrangements over time. Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programs demand work and work readiness without regard for employer hiring demands or the barriers to work faced by many low-income families. The Earned Income Tax Credit essentially provides an annual wage subsidy for the working poor but is not responsive to the volatility in earnings and living arrangements that are common for low-income families. These are but a few examples, and it is time for a reexamination of social policies that could better support work and family life in the 21st century.

In this volume, we aim to consider aspects of work and family life for those in poverty or near poverty—and their intersection, highlighting the extent to which public policy is effectively serving low-income families and ways that it might be improved. The co-editors envision that papers will address a range of topics related to contemporary work arrangements (including paid and unpaid care work), family configurations, and public policy supports. Papers may focus on any particular aspect of work, of family, or both—but should explicitly address policy implications and needs, providing evidence about exemplar strategies and programs. We strongly encourage papers that directly focus on ways that policies are—or are not—meeting the needs of low-income workers and families. We envision papers from many disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches, and we expect that particular subgroups of interest (e.g., by race/ethnicity, immigration status) will be relevant. Examples of specific topics to be addressed include the following:

Work and Policy in the 21st Century:

1. Unstable/changing work schedules in the low-wage labor market and associated challenges of unstable income and unstable time with families

2. The ‘gig’ economy and how it is leveraged by parents to make ends meet (and may increase economic instability)
3. How incarceration (of fathers or mothers) affects employment prospects and family relationships
4. Low-income families that slip through the cracks of work and public policy (unhoused or hard-to-house families, and very poor families)

Family Change and Policy in the 21st Century:

5. The role of grandparents in rearing children (e.g., due to the opioid epidemic) and their eligibility for and access to limited policy supports
6. Availability and coordination of child care arrangements amidst changing work and family configurations
7. Shared custody and children living across households amidst policies that define custodial vs. non-custodial parents
8. How non-custodial parents earn a living and manage involvement with their children
9. Family geographic mobility and unstable housing amidst unstable work opportunities
10. The mismatch between family complexity (including multi-partnered fertility) and policies based on a nuclear family model (including roles/rights of non-biological parents regarding children, e.g. access to schools or health care)
11. How single-earner families raise children with limited money and time
12. High numbers of children in the child welfare system amidst the opioid crisis
13. Challenges arising due to public policy shifts affecting immigrant families, including when parents and children have different immigration statuses, etc.

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on January 7, 2020 to:

<https://rsf.fluxx.io>

NOTE that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline.

All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to <https://rsf.fluxx.io> will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org and **not** to the email addresses of the editors of the issue.

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on June 23, 2020 (with a group dinner the night before). The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 5/28/20**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 9/24/20. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 12/4/20. The full and final issue will be published in the fall of 2021. Papers will be

published open access on the RSF website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.

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