

Time single working moms spend with kids surprises researchers

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"Time poor" single mothers come surprisingly close in the number of hours they spend caring for their children compared to married mothers, and the difference is explained almost entirely by socio-economic factors and the kind of jobs they hold, say University of Maryland sociologists in a new study. The researchers conclude public policy focuses too heavily on the mother's marital status.

The study, published in the December issue of the *"Journal of Marriage and Family,"* is the first to provide a detailed look at the amount and quality of time single mothers are able to give their children.

Based on data from time use diaries, the study finds that single mothers who may lack a large support network still manage to provide 83 to 90 percent of child-rearing time as their married counterparts. While the difference is statistically significant, the researchers expected a greater gap.

"We were surprised that these women managed to pull it off so well, often working long hours with little help, yet devoting up to 90 percent of the time to their children that married women do," says Sarah Kendig, a doctoral student at the University of Maryland and the principal researcher. The research served as Kendig's master's thesis. Suzanne Bianchi, University of Maryland chair of sociology and Kendig's advisor, co-authored the article.

"Of course, something has to give, and these time-poor women have to

cut corners not only on the amount of time they spend with children but also on what we'd normally think of as 'quality time' with their kids," Bianchi says, adding that these compromises don't come easily.

"The current policy focus on marriage and disadvantages of children in single-parent families seems to miss the important fact that all mothers try to privilege investments in their children over other things, to the extent they are able," says the report. "It is conceivable that spending time with their children may become especially precious to single mothers and the focus of their energies."

TIME USE DATA

The researchers analyzed American Time Use Survey data collected between 2003 and 2004 – an annual federal survey that asks participants to fill in a detailed diary of how they spent the preceding 24 hours. The study is based on responses from 1,821 single mothers and 4,309 married mothers with children less than 13 years of age.

SOME SPECIFIC FINDINGS

- Single mothers, on average, spend between three and five hours less time per week on child care than married mothers. These differences were statistically significant.
- Unmarried mothers who live with the father spend about the same time on child care as married mothers.
- The reduced amount of time single mothers spend on child care are accounted for by differences in available resources – type and hours of employment, education, maternal age, age of children. When these factors are statistically controlled, the differences disappear.
- The researchers divided child-rearing time into two categories: basic care and "interactive" time – what is often called "quality time." All

groups of parents managed to provide basic care. Mainly, differences lay in the "interactive time."

-- Some mothers are more "single" than others – they differ in the support network available to them, such as help from the father or relatives.

-- Poorer single mothers tend to work longer hours or work full-time, whereas most married women tend to work part-time and therefore can spend more time with their kids.

-- Women working full-time tend to spend much less time with their children than those who are not employed – about an hour less a day or seven hours less a week, other things equal.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The researchers chose to focus on the differences in child-rearing time between single and married women because "this distinction receives so much policy attention," the report says.

"Mothers' motivation to be good parents and their love for their children are likely high among mothers of all marital statuses and living arrangements and hence, we can count on mothers to invest in children," the report continues. "What we have to work on are the binding constraints that limit their ability to act on those motivations and that curtail the efficacy of the investments they make in mothering."

The researchers describe the study as a first step. The deeper unanswered question is the impact on the children and the health and well being of mothers created by the lesser "quality time" available.

"To me, the findings suggest that our public policy needs to pay greater attention to the resources and educational opportunities for mothers, regardless of their marital status," says Bianchi. "What better time to take a second look than in the midst of a harsh financial climate? Some

of these women are often at the bottom of the economic heap."

Source: University of Maryland

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