

Women caught up in 'rug rat race'

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College-educated mothers in the United States are caught up in a "rug rat race." They are going to extremes to secure elite college admission for their kids, say University of California, San Diego economists Garey and Valerie Ramey. Since the mid-1990s, these women have dramatically increased the time they spend coordinating and driving their children to organized activities, trading in nine hours of their own leisure time every week to do so. All in the name of landing their progeny a seat at a top university.

The Rameys dub the phenomenon "the rug rat race" and describe it in a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper of the same name.

The study has an autobiographical inspiration. When the Rameys moved to San Diego's University City neighborhood, they found children's schedules were packed with sports, arts and other classes. Over time, the Rameys, especially Valerie, found themselves caught up in the competition.

"I was shocked to find moms with graduate degrees who had quit their jobs because they needed more time to drive their children to activities," Valerie Ramey said.

At first, they thought this was just a local fad. But after reviewing data from 12 U.S. surveys describing how people spend their time, from 1965 to 2007, they realized they were onto a national trend.

The researchers found that, after three decades of decline, the amount of time dedicated to childcare went up dramatically in the past 20 years, even while the number of children per household decreased. The rise began in the mid-1990s. It was twice as great for college-educated parents and was most pronounced among mothers.

On average, the amount of time college-educated women spent on childcare went up from 13 to 22 hours per week since the mid-1990s. By contrast, the amount went up from 11 to 16 hours for women without a college education. Meanwhile, childcare went up from four to 10 hours for college-educated fathers, and from four to eight hours for fathers without a college education.

Most of the increases came from time spent with older, school-age children - and especially from time spent on taking the kids from one activity to the next.

The researchers first analyzed the data to see if any of the conventional explanations could account for the shift. But it wasn't that their sample had changed over time. It wasn't due to an increase in income, or an increase in crime rates, which would cause parents to spend more time supervising their children. It wasn't that parents enjoyed spending more time on childcare. In fact, mothers said in surveys that childcare was less enjoyable than cooking and housework. It wasn't that parents enjoyed more flexibility in their work schedules, either.

The increase happened just as college admissions became more and more competitive. The number of high school graduates eligible to go to college has gone up dramatically in the past two decades, but college slots haven't, the Rameys noted. The increase also happened around the same time when college graduates started making a lot more money than everyone else. So the Rameys came to a novel conclusion: Parents were filling their children's schedules with activities in the hopes that it would

get them into a good college and help them secure a lucrative job later on.

To test their hypothesis, the researchers compared childcare data for the United States and Canada, where many of the same social fads take hold but where college admissions are also a lot less competitive. The Rameys found that the amount of time parents spent on childcare in that country remained flat during the past two decades.

"Suddenly everything came together," Valerie Ramey said. "None of the pieces of evidence we have is bulletproof, but we have a lot of pieces that all point in the same direction."

"If investing in your kids like this also makes them better citizens or has other benefits for society, then this increase in time spent on childcare might be a good thing," Ramey said. "But it could also be that these private decisions are not socially optimal."

If further study suggests that this is indeed "wasteful overinvestment," the authors write, perhaps it could be mitigated by expanding the number of slots or by modifying college acceptance rules to place greater emphasis on criteria that cannot be directly influenced by parents.

Meanwhile, it's unclear how long parents will have to compete in the rug rat race. Demographics dictate that the number of high school graduates eligible for college will drop once children of the baby boomers graduate. Also, a number of groups and popular authors have begun a rebelling against overly structured parenting, Valerie Ramey said, citing the "free range children" movement and the book "The Idle Parent" by Tom Hodgkinson.

"I think we're already seeing a backlash," she said.

Provided by University of California - San Diego

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