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# ***Workplace Conditions and the Lives of Hourly Workers and their Families***

Working for Change: A Conversation on Workplace Flexibility  
Research, Business Practice and Public Policy

Georgetown Law  
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# Martin Luther King, Jr. addresses Striking Sanitation Workers

Memphis, Tenn., March 18, 1968

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- “So often we overlook the worth and significance of those who are not in professional jobs, or those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity, and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive. For the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician. All labor has worth.”



# Goals of Presentation


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- Highlight the unique needs of workers at lower level of socio-economic strata: hourly, low-wage workers
- Link the needs of low-income workers to the goals of Workplace Flexibility 2010
- Set the stage for conversations about why low-wage workers are important to consider as we formulate policy

# Low-Wage, Hourly Work in the United States

- Most common jobs in low-income and working-poor strata are in three main occupational areas (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007).

 Service occupations

 Sales and office occupations

 production, transportation, and material moving



- A primary aim of my comments today is to highlight the distinct characteristics of low-wage employment that create unique social ecological niches to explore work-family issues and policies.



# The “Place” of Hourly Jobs: Views from the Top and The Bottom

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- Important to consider the perspective of Employers about salary versus hourly employees
  - The language of “recruiting and retaining talent” for salaried, professional employees

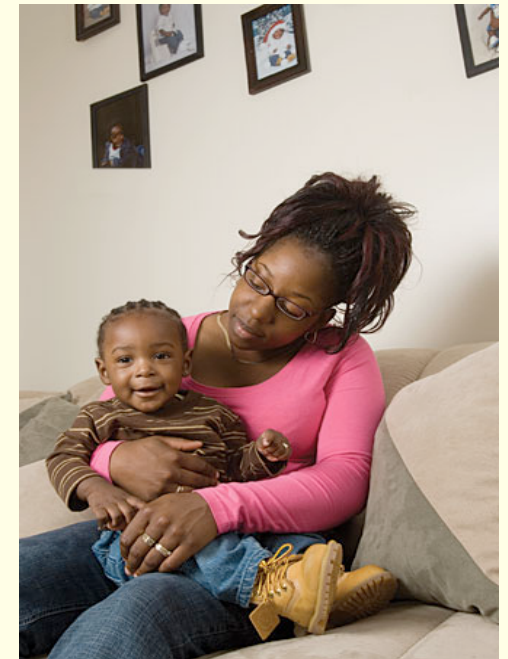
versus....

- The language of “cost containment” for hourly employees



# What are the Unique Challenges Facing Low-Wage Workers?

- Stories and data from the Work and Family Transitions Project
  - Longitudinal study of over 300 low-wage two-parent and single-mother families that has been ongoing for the past 10 years
    - Funded by National Institute of Mental Health.
  - Families interviewed at a critical time in their lives, as they are having a baby
  - Aim is to examine how work conditions and workplace policies experienced across the transition to parenthood are related to the mental health and relationship quality of new parents and their children.



# What are the Unique Challenges Facing Low-Wage Workers?

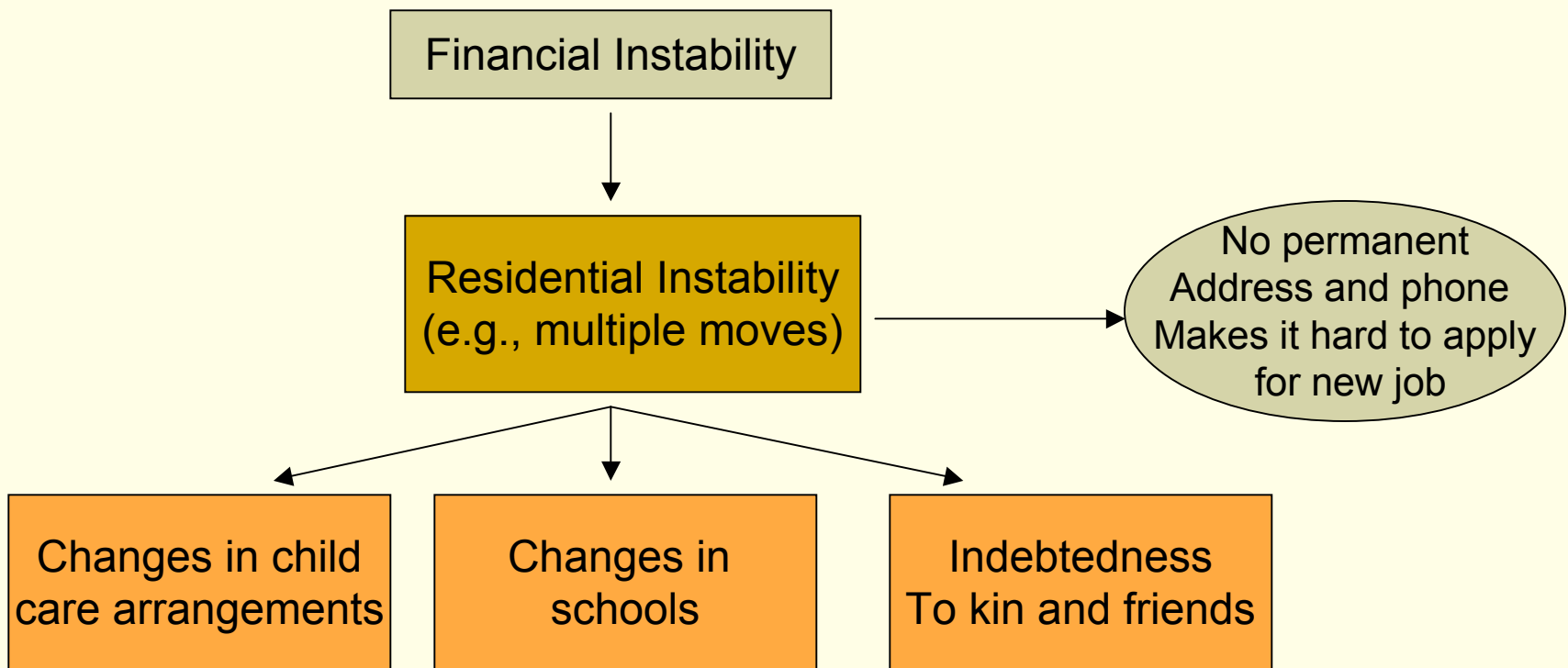
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- The primary focus on my comments will be on issues of flexibility, since that is focus of the conference.
- Important to note, however, that flexibility is a non-issue for many hourly workers whose major problem is securing full-time, year round employment.
- Workers might be on the payroll
  - but their hours vary week to week, from zero to 60 plus, with virtually no warning



# Unpredictability of Hours and Schedules

- Instability of employment wreaks havoc in the lives of employees and their families





# Consider the Story of Colleen and Jacob

- Colleen works for a package delivery company and Jacob is a janitor at a small college. They have just had their first baby.
  - Colleen took 6 weeks off, that was all they could afford of unpaid leave. She used up all her vacation and personal time.
  - Her work schedule upon return to work was not guaranteed.
    - Two days before return to work she was switched from the 7-3 shift to 11am-7pm shift
  - Not allowed to take break back at the office so pumped her milk in the back of her delivery truck in the middle of February.



# Consider the Story of Janessa

- Janessa worked for a communication company in her “perfect” job. She had held down the job for 2 months, but would not be permanent until she had a good work record for twenty weeks.

- She was pregnant when I met her and had a long-term boyfriend. They wanted to marry but could not afford it yet. Janessa took a 4-week, unpaid parental leave when her son Issac was born.

- A month after she returned to work her baby became ill; her boyfriend had left for Army boot camp. Not knowing what else to do, she stayed at home with her ill child. She was immediately let go from her job



# Linking the Needs of Low-income Workers to the Goals of Workplace Flexibility 2010

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1. *“A major goal of our project is to better understand how families juggle the demands of work and family life. What are the most difficult challenges you face in managing the demands of work and family life?”*

THE ANSWER:

**TIME and \$\$\$**

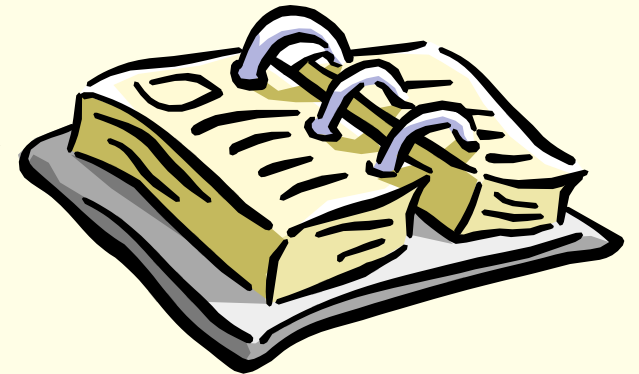


# What about Time Matters?

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## Predictability:

- Work schedules
  - Schedules come up four days in advance.
  - Number of hours and the timing of those hours change weekly to accommodate demand in service sector
- The challenges of shift work



# What about Time Matters?

- Predictability of overtime
  - Extra income vital
  - Mandatory Overtime
    - *Hours above the standard work week (usually 40) that the employer makes compulsory with the threat of job loss or the threat of other reprisals such as demotions, assignment to unattractive work shifts or task, and loss of a day's or multiple days' pay (Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938).*
  - Unpredictability hard to manage
  
- Sick Time
  - Personal time has replaced sick time
  - Need to plan "sick time", virtually impossible



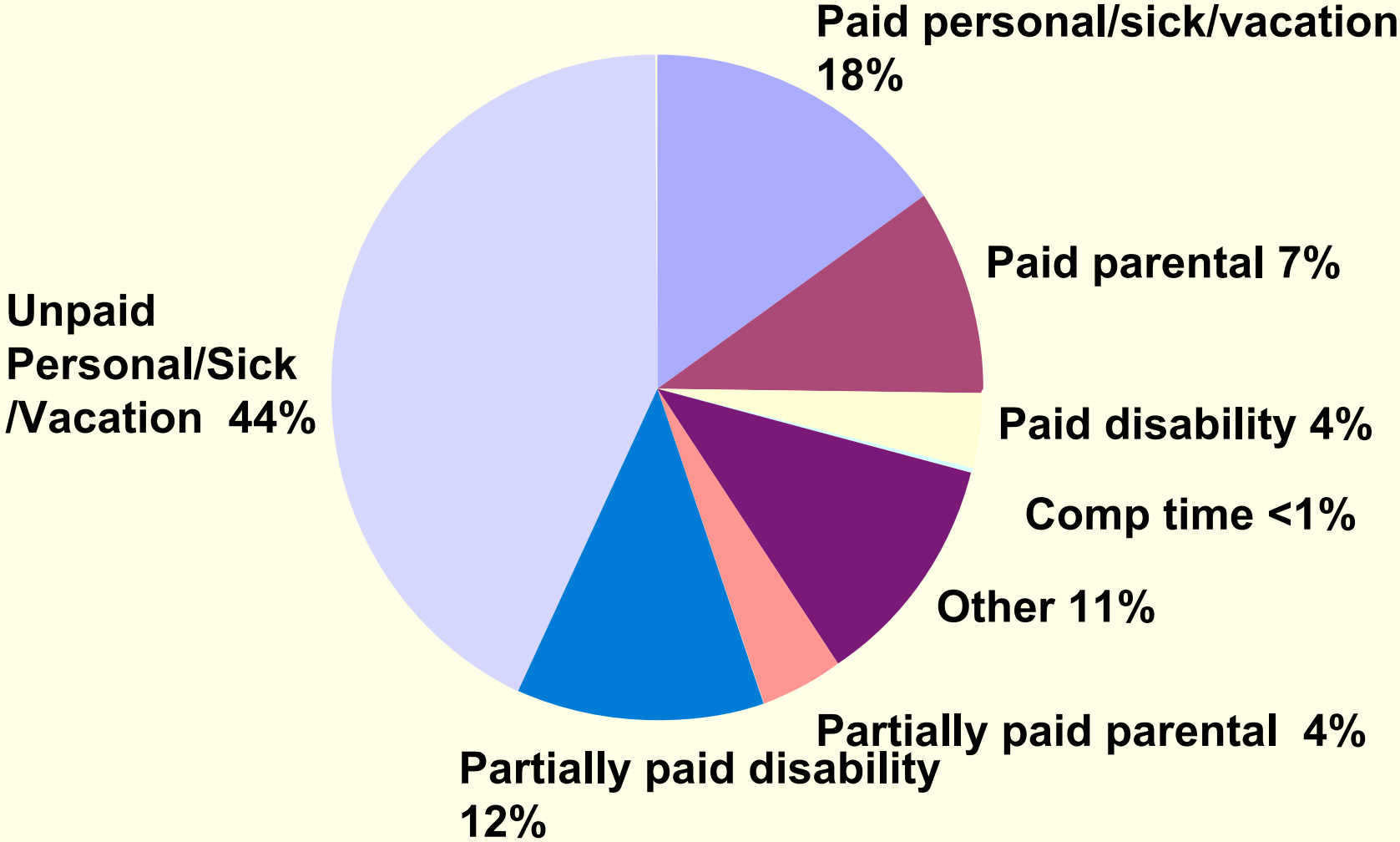
# Workplace Flexibility 2010

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- Flexibility in scheduling of work-day breaks
  - Example of Colleen wanting to pump her milk
  - Ability to check in on children
- Knowing you can keep your job
  - The problem of “benefit waiting periods”
- Family Leave Policies



# Maternity Leave



# Workplace Flexibility 2010

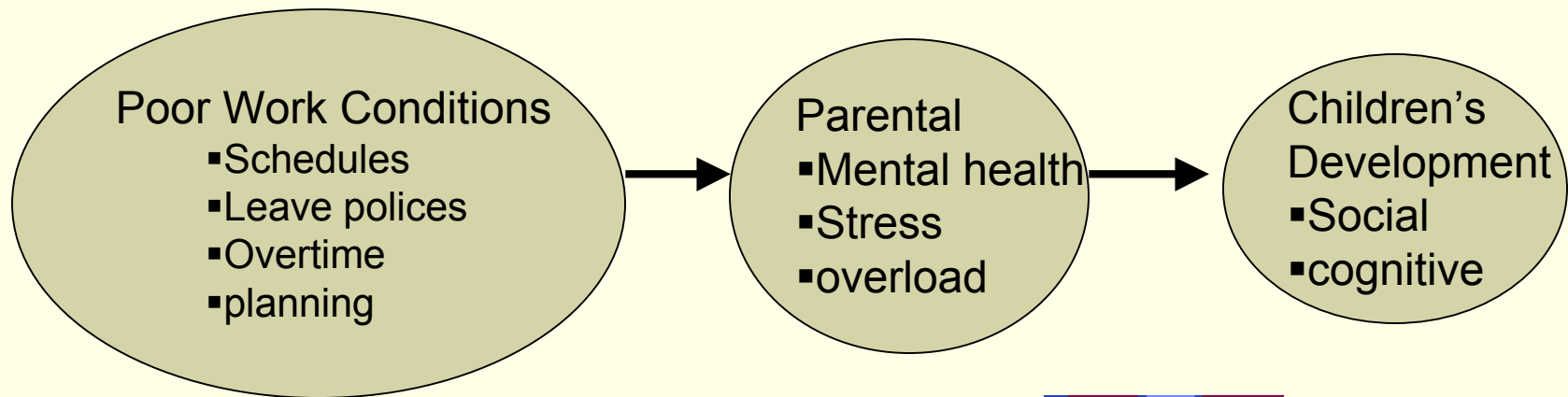
- Paid Parental Leave
  - Unpaid parental leave policies benefit those at the higher levels of the social strata and penalize those at the lower levels.
  - At my own institution, faculty receive one semester off at full pay for the birth or adoption of a child.
  - Secretarial staff receive 12 weeks unpaid leave.
  - This led one of our departmental secretaries to ask: “Is my baby really less important than a faculty members?”
  
- Part-time Work with benefits





# Long Term Implications for Children

- Primary goal of our research is to examine short and long term implications of parents' work conditions on children's developmental outcomes



# Back to our Values....

- “Every society must confront the problem of balancing self interested pursuits with care for others – including children, the elderly, and the infirmed.” (Folbre, 2001)
- We are here at this conference to consider the solutions to support working families in this country. I challenge each of us to take on this responsibility with an eye towards shaping our future society. I hope it is a society known more for its sense of care, its concern for the greater good and concern for the quality of life than it is for its wealth, profit margins and cost containment

