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Christopher Jencks

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# COMMENTARY

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Philip Robins and Charles Michalopoulos make a strong case for two propositions. First, if we offer earnings supplements to single mothers for full-time but not part-time work, more mothers will work full-time. Second, because such an earnings supplement induces some mothers to shift from part-time to full-time work, it can raise single mothers' overall income without costing the taxpayer more than the existing system.

These propositions are qualitatively consistent with the results of Canada's Self-Sufficiency Project. The exact magnitude of such a program's effects in the United States inevitably involves some guesswork, but I want to focus not on whether the authors have given us the right numbers but on whether their goal of getting more single mothers to work full-time rather than part-time is a sensible objective for government policy.

The principal goal of the federal welfare legislation enacted in 1996 was to move single mothers into the labor force. This goal had overwhelming public support. Indeed, it has been an avowed goal of federal welfare policy since 1967. But while most Americans clearly want single mothers to work, it is not clear how much work the public thinks single mothers should do. In order to become completely self-sufficient, a single mother with two children who needs paid child care would have to earn at least \$20,000 a year. For a mother earning, say, \$6.50 an hour, that would mean working a bit over 3,000 hours a year, or sixty hours a week. If asked, most Americans would

probably think that sixty hours of work per week is too much, especially for a single parent with young children. But if sixty hours is "too much," how much is "enough"? Should we aim for forty hours a week, thirty hours a week, or what?

Most Americans' ideas about how much mothers should work depend partly on how old the mother's youngest child is. When Aid to Families with Dependent Children was established in 1935, the law assumed that mothers would stay home until their children reached the age of eighteen. This norm was outmoded by 1970. Most married mothers now work outside their home once their children are in school, so the argument that unmarried mothers with school-age children should be exempt from work requirements commands little political support. But most Americans still think that mothers of newborns should stay home for a while. But it is unclear as to for how long.

The norms that state legislatures set for unskilled single mothers will inevitably reflect the behavior of other members of society. If most unskilled married mothers work full-time, legislators will expect unskilled single mothers to do the same. Likewise, if most skilled single mothers work full-time, legislators are quite likely to think that unskilled mothers should do the same.

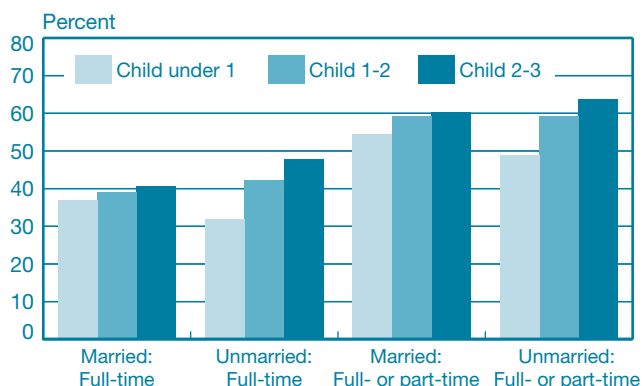
Chart 1 shows the rates of full- and part-time employment for both single and married mothers with children under age three. Even among mothers whose youngest child is less than a year old, at least half work. But only a third work full-time.

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CHART 1  
**Percentage of Married and Unmarried Mothers with Children under Three Who Worked in 1998-99**  
 By Child's Age



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Characteristics of Families in 1999." News release, June 15, 2000.

Among unmarried mothers, the percentage who work full-time rises sharply as children get older, presumably because it is easier to find child care for a one- or two-year-old than for a newborn.

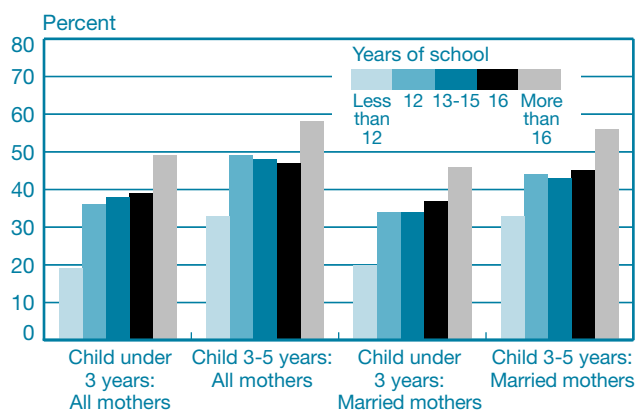
Chart 2 shows variation by educational level in the rate of full-time employment among mothers with preschool children. Among those who did not finish high school, only 19 percent work full-time when their children are under age three. In part, this reflects the economics of work. High-school dropouts earn very little, so if they have to pay for child care, they barely cover their costs. For mothers with graduate degrees, the economic incentives look quite different. But these differences in rates of employment have a nonmonetary dimension as well. Taken as a group, the better educated mothers are likely to be much better at managing their time, juggling the competing demands of work and motherhood with fewer adverse effects on both themselves and their children. Thus, even if their wages were the same, we would expect to find better educated women working more. Consistent with this view, the effect of a mother's education on her chances of working full-time falls as her children get older and require less intensive care.

In a society where only half of the best educated mothers manage to combine caring for a young child with holding a

full-time job, it seems unrealistic to expect that most unskilled mothers will have the energy, competence, or financial resources to do this. Thus, as time limits begin to bite, I think we will need to think more carefully about how much work we should expect of unskilled single mothers. We should, I think, expect them to do some work. But if we want them to work full-time, I think we will need to establish a much denser network of child-care centers and subsidies, so that single mothers are not forced to devote huge amounts of energy to organizing, reorganizing, and financing child care. At the moment, there is no political support for creating such a system in America.

Under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, federal time limits are based entirely on one's lifetime use of public assistance. Some states apparently take the child's age into account, at least informally, when enforcing time limits, but we are still a long way from a consensus on what rules the new system should follow. I fear, however, that if states really expect all single mothers with young children to hold down a full-time job, they will be building a system in which many unskilled mothers fall through the cracks. If I am right, building a support system for unskilled mothers who work part-time while their children are young should be an even higher priority than improving the support system for single mothers who work full-time, as Robins and Michalopoulos propose.

CHART 2  
**Percentage of Mothers Employed Full-Time**  
 By Education, Marital Status, and Child's Age



Source: Current Population Survey (March 2000).

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