

**Influences of Family Structure and Partner Characteristics
on Mothers' Employment Trajectories**

Extended Abstract

Women's employment rates have increased dramatically over the last four decades and the increases have been particularly steep for mothers of young children. Between 1960 and 1998, the percentage of married women with children under age six in the labor force more than tripled, from 19% to 64% (U.S. Census 2003). While only 34 percent of mothers with children under age 3 worked in 1975, 61 percent of these mothers worked in 2002 (U.S. Department of Labor 2005).

At the same time, the context of childbearing and childrearing has changed considerably. While the vast majority of women had their children within the context of marriage in 1960, non-marital childbearing is no longer such an anomaly. In 1999, one in three births was to an unmarried woman (Ventura and Bacharach 2002). Non-marital childbearing has increased in all subgroups of the population, but has increased the most among women with low levels of education and women in ethnic and racial minority groups (Ellwood and Jencks 2004).

Previous research on women's employment has identified a multitude of factors that affect women's employment including human capital characteristics, labor markets and employment opportunities, cultural and institutional factors, family characteristics, and attitudes about women's roles in the family and the public sphere. Recent research on women's employment shows that the effects of family characteristics on women's employment has been decreasing over time such that the number of children that a woman has, her marital status, and the characteristics of her husband are less predictive of her employment levels now than in previous time periods or for older cohorts of women. Moreover, the employment patterns of married and unmarried mothers have become more similar over time. Nonetheless, women's family situations – in particular, whether they have children and are married – continue to be highly predictive of their employment levels. Few studies have compared the employment patterns of new mothers by their marital and relationship statuses even though different patterns in employment are likely given the sizable differences in access to resources such as other income and child care help as well as differences in preferences for work versus homemaking and in human capital. Additionally, although there is an established literature documenting how married women's husbands' characteristics affect their employment, little is known about the effects of male partners' characteristics on unmarried women's employment. Given the decreasing proportion of women that live with a husband – in 2005, 51% of women over the age of 15 were not living with a spouse – and the large proportion of women who bear and raise their children in non-marital relationships, these gaps in the literature are problematic.

In this paper, I address this shortcoming in the literature by examining the employment patterns of married and unmarried mothers in the five years after a birth. I consider whether differences in employment patterns remain (or emerge) after we take account of differences in demographic characteristics, human capital, family resources and constraints, and sex-role attitudes. I also consider how the characteristics of their babies' fathers affect their employment above and beyond their own characteristics and whether this effect varies by the mother's

relationship with the baby's father. I explore variation among unmarried mothers by looking at differences between mothers by whether they are co-resident with the baby's father.

The two main research questions of the paper are the following: 1) After controlling for human capital characteristics and other family resources and constraints, do the employment trajectories of mothers with a recent birth differ by the status of the mother's relationship with the baby's father? What factors best explain these differences in trajectories? 2) Does the influence of the baby's father on the mother's employment trajectories depend on the type of relationship they have? To answer these questions, I use growth curve models - a type of structural equation models - to model the trajectories of mothers' weeks of employment over the first five years following the focal birth. Growth curve models are appropriate for this type of analysis since changes in mother's employment are, at least in part, a function of the age of her child. These models allow me to take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data, by modeling the curve or line that best describes the employment trajectories or histories of these women instead of predicting employment at a single time-point.

The data for this analysis are from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of a birth cohort of approximately 3700 children born to unmarried parents and 1200 children born to married parents in 20 large urban areas. Data collection started with an in-person interview of the mother while she was in the hospital for the birth and other data collections occurred 12 months, 30 months and 60 months after the child's birth. For a more thorough description of the study design and response rates, see Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel and McLanahan (2001).

Table 1 shows the distribution of the mother's characteristics by relationship status. Table 2 shows the distribution of the father's characteristics by the relationship status at the birth. Table 3 displays the correlations between mothers' and fathers' characteristics. Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations of mothers' hours of employment per week and weeks of employment per year by relationship status. Table 5 shows results for a series of models predicting employment trajectories in weeks worked over the five years following the birth. Additional models (not shown) test the effects of fathers' characteristics on employment and map trajectories in hours worked per week over the five year period.

From the descriptive results, we see that married mothers are much more advantaged than unmarried mothers on human capital, family income and social support, factors which promote employment. Thus it is surprising that Table 4 show that married, cohabiting and non-resident mothers work similar weeks per year on average. The grow curve models show that among mothers with similar demographic and human capital characteristics, unmarried mothers work more weeks/year. Accounting for family resources and constraints and sex-role attitudes reduces the differences between married and non-resident mothers in the 1st year but explains less of the predicted difference between married and cohabiting mothers. Adding father characteristics improves the model fit only slightly and while a few father characteristics are significant predictors of mothers' employment trajectories, these predictors vary by relationship status and do not explain much variance.

Preliminary results show that the similarities in mothers' employment trajectories results from a combination of factors. Unmarried mothers work more all else equal, but married mothers have much higher levels of human capital, which is associated with higher employment rates. Considering fathers' characteristics adds to our understanding of mothers' employment but only marginally. Net of other factors, mothers' relationship statuses appear to influence employment most in the first year following a birth and little after that.

Table 1. Mothers' Characteristics by Relationship Status (at Birth of Focal Child)

	Married	Cohabiting	Non-Resident
<i>N</i>	1187	1784	1927
Demographic Characteristics			
<i>Age</i>	29.3	24.3	23.7
<i>Under Age 20</i>	3.3	18.2	25.3
<i>Race</i>			
White	41.9	18.2	10.8
Black	26.1	45.5	65.9
Hispanic	24.3	33.2	20.3
Other	7.7	3.1	3.0
<i>Immigrant</i>	27.4	17.8	9.9
Human Capital Characteristics			
<i>In Poor Health</i>	4.4	8.7	8.6
<i>Uses Drugs</i>	1.5	2.6	4.3
<i>Spanish as primary language</i>	7.0	8.0	4.3
<i>Cognitive Score (Range:0-15)</i>	7.6	6.5	6.4
<i>Own Education</i>			
< High School	16.6	40.0	41.2
High School Only			
> High School	63.4	26.6	25.3
<i>Maternal Education</i>			
< High School	20.6	22.0	13.8
High School Only	41.5	48.1	51.9
> High School	29.6	17.4	19.3
Missing	8.3	12.6	15.0
<i>Last Employment Spell</i>			
Within last month	50.1	35.9	33.5
2-6 months before birth	16.4	26.9	26.8
7-12 months before birth	9.3	15.0	16.3
1-5 years before birth	16.1	12.0	12.6
More than 5 years or never	8.2	10.2	10.9
<i>Hourly wage rate from most recent job¹</i>	12.95	8.19	7.85
Family Constraints & Resources			
<i>Twins</i>	2.0	2.1	1.7
<i>Number of Children in Household (excluding new birth)</i>	1.1	1.2	1.4
<i>Grandmother living in Household</i>	6.9	15.2	43.0
Attitudes			
<i>Sex-Role Attitudes (scale 0-4; 4 is most traditional)</i>	2.1	2.1	2.0

Notes: 1. If a woman has never been employed, her wage rate is the federal minimum wage.

Table 2. Characteristics of Child's Father by Relationship Status at Birth.

	Married	Cohabiting	Non-Resident
Demographic Characteristics			
<i>Age</i>	31.7	27.1	26.6
<i>Under Age 20</i>	.4	7.9	12.2
<i>Same Race as Mother</i>	87.1	85.4	85.4
<i>Race</i>			
White	41.5	14.7	7.4
Black	27.7	47.5	69.1
Hispanic	22.6	33.1	19.9
Other	7.3	3.8	3.2
<i>Immigrant</i>	27.4	19.4	8.6
Human Capital Characteristics			
<i>In Poor Health</i>	5.3	7.4	5.0
<i>Uses Drugs</i>	4.2	8.6	12.0
<i>Own Education</i>			
< High School	17.0	39.7	37.5
High School Only	24.3	34.8	40.2
> High School	58.6	25.3	22.3
<i>Criminal Record</i>	11.5	26.4	19.3
Employment History			
<i>Unemployed the week before baby's birth</i>	6.6	17.6	23.8
<i>Weeks not employed in year before baby's birth</i>	4.6	10.1	14.6
Attitudes			
<i>Sex Role Attitudes</i>	2.4	2.4	2.4
<i>(scale 0-4; 4 is most traditional)</i>			

Table 3. Correlation between Mother and Father Characteristics

	Full Sample	Married	Cohabiting	Non-resident
Education	.466	.590	.376	.332
Age	.267	.276	.283	.093
Sex Role Attitudes	.252	.379	.214	.169
% Same race	85.8	87.1	85.4	85.4

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations of Weeks of Employment by Relationship Status

	Year One	Year Three	Year Five
<i>Weeks Worked</i>			
Married	24.7 (22.5)	29.7 (23.0)	43.7 (14.8)
Cohabiting	24.5 (21.6)	30.6 (22.2)	41.3 (15.8)
Non-Resident	24.5 (21.6)	30.2 (22.0)	41.1 (15.9)
<i>Hours Worked</i>			
Married	19.62 (20.3)	20.78 (20.5)	29.62 (18.9)
Cohabiting	20.35 (21.6)	22.68 (22.6)	35.59 (16.9)
Non-Resident	19.82 (21.1)	21.87 (22.1)	35.41 (17.0)

Table 5. Structural equation models predicting weeks worked by mother characteristics and relationship status.

	M0		M1		M2		M3	
	Intercept	Slope	Intercept	Slope	Intercept	Slope	Intercept	Slope
Relationship Status at Baseline								
<i>Cohab</i>	.13	-.33	3.08	-.52	3.04	-.50	2.82	-.48
<i>Non-resident</i>	-.09	-.34	2.71	-.37	2.41	-.25	2.17	-.23
Demographic								
<i>Age (years over age 20)</i>			-.00	--	.02	--	.03	--
<i>Under Age 20</i>			-.32	.03	-.61	.12	-.60	.12
<i>Race (reference: white)</i>								
Black			6.11	-1.35	6.21	-1.34	6.27	-1.34
Hispanic			2.88	-.40	2.84	-.36	3.00	-.38
Other			3.30	-.56	3.29	-.55	3.42	-.55
<i>Immigrant</i>			-.87	.97	-1.04	.99	-.63	.94
Human Capital								
<i>In Poor Health</i>			-4.62	1.01	-4.56	.99	-4.54	1.00
<i>Uses Drugs</i>			-4.80	-.20	-4.95	-.19	-4.87	-.21
<i>Spanish as primary language</i>			-2.17	.10	-2.12	.07	-1.88	.07
<i>Cognitive Test Score (standardized)</i>			-.03	.08	-.01	.08	-.14	.09
<i>Own Education</i>								
< H.S.			-3.79	.04	-3.68	.03	-3.54	.01
> H.S.			.87	-.03	.77	-.03	.65	-.02
<i>Maternal Education (reference: HS)</i>								
< H.S.			-1.02	-.26	-.97	-.27	-.80	-.28
> H.S.			.38	-.27	.33	-.26	.27	-.25
Missing			-1.03	-.46	-.99	-.48	-.94	-.50
<i>Last Employment Spell</i> (reference: Within last month)								
2-6 months before birth			-10.98	2.19	-10.89	2.17	-10.73	2.16
7-12 months before birth			-17.08	2.64	-17.00	2.64	-16.83	2.63
1-5 years before birth			-23.21	4.07	-23.16	4.07	-22.81	4.03
More than 5 years or never			-20.38	3.38	-20.38	3.39	-20.08	3.37
<i>Hourly Wage Rate at most recent job</i> (centered using minimum wage)			1.02	-.14	1.02	-.14	.99	-.14
Constraints & Resources								
<i>Twins</i>					-4.23	1.04	-4.18	1.03
<i>Number of Other Children in HH</i>					-.28	.01	-.27	.01
<i>Grandmother</i>					1.07	-.34	.98	-.33
Sex Role Attitudes (standardized)								
Intercept	24.35	4.15	30.76	3.06	30.95	3.04	30.69	3.05
Chi-Squared	4.62		69.57		68.84		68.77	
Degrees of Freedom	3		24		27		28	
RMSEA	.01		.02		.02		.02	
CFI	.999		.986		.987		.987	
TLI	.997		.958		.962		.963	

Notes: Bolded coefficients indicated statistical significance at .05 level or better.