

If Biden wants to help American families recover from the pandemic, his plans should emphasize good jobs ^[1]

Kids do better when their parents have more control over their time and better working conditions

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Source: Washington Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Jun 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

To help the U.S. economy recover from the pandemic, the Biden administration has put forth two plans to assist Americans returning to work. The American Families Plan would invest in universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, offer direct support to reduce child-care costs for low- and middle-income earners, and extend tax credits for working parents. The American Jobs Plan would spend federal funds to upgrade the country's physical and social infrastructure, thus encouraging new jobs in manufacturing, construction, caregiving, and research and development. With 2 million women out of work, these policies have the potential to accelerate women's reentry and retention in the labor force.

And if implementation emphasized creating high-quality jobs, it could also strengthen parents' connection to their children.

Our research shows that parents working in noxious jobs — jobs that are, for example, monotonous or physically hazardous or that involve frequent contact with aggressive or angry individuals — spend less time with their children. By contrast, mothers and fathers working in jobs with more autonomy spend more time caring for their children. Researchers know that working mothers in draining and difficult jobs are more likely to feel guilty and worry about their children and to leave employment. Our research shows toxic jobs follow parents into their home lives, depleting their energy to spend time with children.

The benefits of high-quality employment would extend beyond simply adding jobs and encourage more parental time with children, which would improve children's health and well-being.

How we did our research

To understand whether job quality was associated with parents' time with children, we used data from the American Time Use Survey for 10,274 parents from 2011 to 2019, in which different parents were surveyed each year. Each parent reported how they spent their time across a 24-hour period. We looked only at those who were employed at the time of the survey.

We linked parents' reported occupations to the Occupational Information Network database, which classifies occupations based on workplace demands such as competitive pressure, time pressure, aggression and conflict with discourteous individuals, monotony, conflict, physically hazardous work, resources, autonomy and authority.

We then tested whether parents working in more-unpleasant jobs spent less time with children. We also checked whether these patterns were similar for mothers and fathers.

We categorized time with children in three ways: (1) simply being together with children; (2) physically caring for children in tasks such as feeding, bathing and dressing; and (3) interactive care, such as talking, playing, teaching and reading to children.

More toxic jobs lead parents to spend less time with their children

We found mothers working in more-toxic jobs — those with more-competitive pressure, experiences of aggression and conflict, monotony and physical hazards — spent less time simply being with children and less time physically caring for them. Fathers in monotonous and physically hazardous jobs also reported less time with their children, but the time didn't drop as much as it did for mothers.

In physically hazardous jobs, for example, mothers spent 23 and fathers five fewer minutes per day with their children than when in jobs that weren't hazardous. Notably, we find these patterns only on workdays, meaning parents were affected by a difficult day on the job. Mothers and fathers in jobs with more autonomy — allowing the worker greater freedom in how to get their work done — reported more time caring for children. Mothers, in particular, spend more time reading, playing and otherwise interacting with their children, activities that research finds are particularly valuable in developing children's brains, language and social skills.

What does this mean for the future?

As has been widely reported, mothers were hit hard by the extra work that the pandemic brought on, losing jobs, sleep and well-being. Mothers took on a larger share of housework, child care and home schooling than fathers. As a consequence, they reduced work hours and left employment at higher rates than fathers.

Even among those who could telecommute, mothers' work time suffered more than that of fathers as they tried to manage their children's schooling. Hispanic and Black mothers had the highest unemployment rates. Black women who remained employed reported receiving less support from supervisors in managing the pandemic's challenges than those of other racial or ethnic groups. School closures disproportionately knocked Black and Hispanic mothers out of employment, while schools in predominantly White districts were more likely to continue meeting in person.

The pandemic revealed or exacerbated long-standing racial and gendered patterns: Mothers' work and family lives are deeply linked, and Black and Hispanic mothers' disadvantages multiplied under the pandemic.

If the Biden administration is looking to mitigate some of this damage, it may wish to include in its plan incentives to make "bad" jobs or bad aspects of jobs better. This could include redesigning scheduling practices to allow predictability and flexibility, enforcing strong safety standards, and giving front-line staff more input in how they do their jobs. These aren't impossible dreams. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, close to half the workers in countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark can adapt their work hours, within limits, while 1 in 4 in Iceland, Italy and Spain are able to vary their daily start and stop times. Simply, bad jobs are not inevitable; they are created by choice.

As governments and employers invest in creating jobs and reimagine Americans' relationships with their work, they may wish to consider how to develop more high-quality jobs – with less toxicity and more worker autonomy – to benefit not just parents or children, but society as a whole.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: women's labour force participation ^[4]

economic recovery ^[5]

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