Balancing Employment with Child and Elder Care: The Implications of Changing Workplaces and Families

With our aging population and the changing composition of families with young children, Americans are struggling harder than ever to balance employment and family care responsibilities.

The numbers say it all: In 2010, the United States had more single-parent families (both divorced and never married) and nearly the highest percentage of women in the workforce than ever before. U.S. workers spend exceptionally long hours at work, lack access to paid family leave, and have limited access to publically provided or subsidized care.

Here’s a Closer Look:

» U.S. workers spend an inordinate amount of time on the job. In 2005, U.S. workers spent 1,834 hours in paid employment. That same year, German workers logged 1,463 hours, and in the Netherlands, 1,371 hours.

» More single parents and more women in the workforce means most families have less time to care for family members, young or old:
  • The United States has seen an increase in single-parent households, from 5 percent in 1960 to 14 percent in 2010.
  • Births to unmarried mothers rose from 18.4 percent in 1980 to 41 percent in 2009.
  • In 1969, 44 percent of married women were stay-at-home moms, compared to 26 percent in 2009.
  • In 1960, 38 percent of women 16 and older were in the workforce. By 2010, 59 percent of women were in the workforce.

» Our population is aging:
  • The median age in the United States has increased steadily since 1970 when it was 28 years. By 2010, the median age was 37.
  • The 2010 Census found that “the U.S. population 65 and older is now the largest in terms of size and percentage of the population, compared with any previous census.”

Balancing Employment with Child Care

» Women are working longer into their first pregnancies and returning to work more quickly after having their first children, requiring families to search for child care:
  • From 1961 to 1965, 44 percent of women were working 9 months before their first birth and 15 percent were working one month before the birth. Following the birth, 4 percent were working one month later, 14 percent 6 months later, and 17 percent 12 months later.
  • From 2005 to 2007, 67 percent of women were working 9 months before the birth of their first child and 52 percent were working 1 month before the birth of their first child. Ten percent were working one month after the birth of their first child, 57 percent were working 6 months later, and 64 percent, 12 months later.
U.S. workers do not have guaranteed family leave following the birth or adoption of a child, while most other affluent countries provide from 12 (Belgium) to 42 (Norway) weeks of paid leave.

Educated women have increased access to paid leave. Between 1971 and 1975, about 27 percent of women with a bachelor’s degree or more had access to paid leave following the birth of a child. From 2006 to 2008, 66 percent of women with similar educational attainment had access to paid leave.

For women without a high school degree, only 18 percent had access to paid family leave between 2006 and 2008, about the same percentage as in the years between 1971 and 1975.

Families in poverty who paid for child care spent 40 percent of their monthly income on child care.

**Balancing Employment with Elder Care**

More people are living longer:
- The size of the 60+ population grew by 25 percent between 2000 and 2010.
- The 85 and over population grew by 30 percent between 2000 and 2010.

Family members are often the caregivers for our aging population. While this may be good for patients, nearly all caregivers are unpaid and struggle with the demands and stress that caring for ailing loved ones inflicts.
- Sixty-seven percent of family care providers are women, and 44 percent are themselves over 65 years old.
- Estimates of family caregivers who are employed range from nearly 30 percent (for primary caregivers of people 65 and older) to over 60 percent (of all caregivers — not just “primary” caregivers — of people 50 and older).

Care demands can jeopardize the long-term financial health of care providers:
- Care providers may reduce hours of work and/or cut back to part-time.
- Care providers may use unpaid leave to care for family members.
- Care providers may quit or retire earlier than planned.

**A Look Ahead**

The struggle to balance paid employment and family care is likely to increase in the coming decades as the U.S. dependency ratio* is predicted to increase dramatically between 2010 and 2050.

In 2010, the U.S. dependency ratio was 59 percent. Based on the aging population and predictions about child bearing, this ratio is predicted to increase to 75 percent in 2030. This higher number indicates more children and elderly depending on fewer working adults.

Baseline data from 2011 data from National Health and Aging Trends Study/National Study of Caregivers is expected to be released in May 2012.

*Dependency ratio = population typically not in the labor force (people under 18 and over 65)/population likely to be in the labor force (people 18 to 64)