

At a time when the majority of American women are employed outside the home, many single mothers and fathers are heading families on their own, and older Americans increasingly need care from younger relatives, the challenges of meeting family responsibilities and holding down a job have become more difficult than ever.

When U.S. families need care for children or elderly relatives, they rely primarily not on government policies and programs but on themselves and their employers. Employer supports, however, are inequitably distributed, with the best packages of benefits going to the highest-paid workers. As a result, employees who may most need employer assistance in meeting family needs may be least likely to receive it. Heavy reliance on employers can also be costly to firms, especially small businesses. And dependence on employers has slowed the development of appropriate work-and-family public policies, especially in comparison with the policies of other developed countries, many of which offer paid maternity and paternity leave, sick leave, annual leave, and opportunities for flexible employment to all workers.

Devising strategies to meet the challenges of work-family conflict requires rethinking some common assumptions—that work-family issues are of concern to women only, that employer and employee interests necessarily collide, and that families, employers, and in some cases government are the only essential actors. In fact, male employees too face conflicts in managing family and work responsibilities. Workplace flexibility policies that make it easier for employees to meet their family care responsibilities have been shown to benefit employers as well. And other sectors of society, such as preschools, schools, health care providers, and other community organizations can also help address work-family challenges by, for example, changing the hours they are open or providing more coordination of care.

The Findings

Contributors to this volume examine a variety of work-family conflicts and assess their effects both on the well-being of American employees and their families and on the productivity of American employers. The authors also suggest approaches to help working parents meet the challenges of work-family conflict.

*Providing short to moderate periods of paid parental leave (from three to twelve months) for all workers is unlikely to have negative repercussions in the labor market and is likely to have positive benefits for child and family wellbeing.

*Increasing access to high-quality early childhood education and care would ease the work-family conflict and promote sizable gains in school readiness for disadvantaged children. Although raising the quality of care will raise costs, a challenge during a period of strained family and public budgets, in the long run raising quality will yield sizable benefits.

*School-aged children require care and supervision before and after school and during school vacations. Schools, out-of-school care providers, and employers can ease work-family conflicts by taking account of changes in working families. In today's economic climate, workplace flexibility options may have the most potential for meeting families' diverse scheduling needs.

*Parents not only provide direct care to sick children but also coordinate and facilitate the often complex care their ill children receive. If parents were no longer to perform these roles, the health care system for children, as it is currently configured, would cease to function. Both private and public actions could ease this burden for working parents.

*Work-family policies that provide support to both men and women who have responsibility for children and elderly relatives will become increasingly important.

*Workplace flexibility is a promising approach to easing work-family conflict. For employees, it is linked with job engagement, satisfaction, retention, and better health; for employers, with higher productivity and a better “bottom line.” Workplace flexibility should be made more available to less advantaged employees.

*Although government has played a relatively small role in the work-family arena in the United States, current activity, especially at the local and state level, offers promising possibilities for future policy action, workplace flexibility, and family and medical leave.

*The United States might learn valuable lessons from many of the world’s most competitive nations, in which extensive paid work-family supports coexist with a robust economy.

Policy Implications

Employed family caregivers act as busy hubs of service delivery for their children, as well as for their parents and other elderly relatives. As family caregivers increasingly voice concern about work-family conflict, employers, as well as local, state, and federal government policy makers are exploring ways to alleviate that conflict. The findings of this volume have three clear policy implications.

First, expanding the use of workplace flexibility could help workplaces become more family friendly. “Right to request,” for example, allows employees to request permission to change temporarily to part-time or flexible hours knowing that their request will be seriously considered and will not put their job security or career advancement at risk. “Compensatory time” or “banked hours” enables employees to work extra hours, bank them, and then take off those hours as needed, on a flexible basis.

Second, work-family policies must become more equitable. Today the lowest-paid workers are least likely to be able to take paid leave to attend to family care responsibilities; taking care of their families can put their wages—or even their jobs—at risk. But many small businesses would be hard pressed to provide additional paid leave on a significant scale. While all employers should be asked to provide a minimal amount of paid sick leave and other leave time to all employees, longer leaves, for parents of newborns or for caregivers of family members with serious health conditions, would be best provided through a social insurance fund.

Third, schools, the health care system, and community-based and other providers serving children and the elderly could and should do more to take pressures off family caregivers. All must recognize the reality that most family care-givers today are also working in the labor market.