

Industrial & Labor Relations Review

Volume 61, Issue 3

2008

Article 86

When Work Is Not Enough: State and Federal Policies to Support Needy Workers

Robert P. Stoker*

Laura A. Wilson†

*,
†,

certification, which, he argues, offers many of the benefits of licensing but provides more competition and reduces barriers to entry.

Another strength of the book is that each chapter can be read on its own. The author repeats some of the material, when necessary, to give the complete story within a given chapter, rather than making readers go back to previous chapters to understand the background. At the same time, the chapters all fit together, so that one can also read the entire book for a complete picture on the topic. Overall, I highly recommend *Licensing Occupations* to academics and practitioners who wish to learn more about this increasingly important institution.

Adriana Kugler

Associate Professor
Department of Economics
University of Houston

Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions

When Work Is Not Enough: State and Federal Policies to Support Needy Workers. By Robert P. Stoker and Laura A. Wilson. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006. 214, viii pp. ISBN 978-0-8157-8191-2, \$24.95 (paper).

This book provides descriptions and analysis of “work support programs” in the United States. These programs are aimed at providing assistance to “needy workers,” allowing them “to combine earned income with means-tested tax and transfer benefits” (p. 1). The specific work support programs included in the book are minimum wage rates; the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); the child tax credit; Medicaid, transitional medical assistance for former welfare recipients, and state Children’s Health Insurance Programs (S-CHIP); food stamps and free and reduced-price school meals; earned income disregards under the main U.S. cash welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); child care grants; and rental housing assistance.

After an introductory chapter, Chapters 2 and 3 explain how these programs were chosen for the book, sketch their history, and describe how they work. Chapters 4 and 5 provide estimates of the state-by-state total maximum benefits available from these programs for full-time and half-time minimum wage workers, both in nominal terms and adjusted for estimates of local price variation.

Chapters 6 and 7 provide estimates of, respectively, the decline in benefits as a household moves from welfare to work in the various states, and participation rates in these programs for households with at least one worker but with a total income below 200% of the poverty standard. Chapter 8 examines participation rates in these programs by state, and combines these estimates with estimates of state real benefits to produce an estimate of each state’s benefit generosity, as well as to identify the determinants of generosity. Finally, Chapter 9 presents some policy recommendations for improving the U.S. work support system.

When Work Is Not Enough provides useful descriptive information on the design of work support programs and the extent of their benefits. The book emphasizes the point that these programs have the potential to help pull many needy workers and their families above the poverty line. However, this potential will be realized only if many more needy workers participate in the programs. The book also points out that many states that provide more extensive work supports also have higher local costs of living, which significantly reduce the real value of those benefits.

Some of the analytical procedures in the book could be questioned. For example, some but not all of the analysis of cross-state variation in the real value of “work support” benefits assumes that all local prices vary the same amount as the prices of owner-occupied housing, which is an exaggeration. In addition, the discussion of implicit tax rates on work support benefits defines implicit tax rates in a way that will be confusing to many economists. The book focuses on benefit tax rates, defined as the percentage of these work support benefits that are lost as household work increases. In contrast, many economists would focus on how the reduction of work support benefits with work reduces the net wage rate from work, which economists would see as the crucial factor in affecting work incentives. Finally, the analysis of variations across states in participation in these work support programs only controls for whether households have children, not for the distribution of earnings among low-income households in the state. Therefore, it is unclear whether the book’s measures of state “generosity” in work support benefits reflect state policy, state prices, or the distribution of earnings in the state.

However, the book brings attention to an important issue: how well are we supporting needy workers? And the book’s bottom-line policy recommendations are valuable. As the book points out, if we want to provide needy workers with a higher standard of living, useful policy alternatives include expanding food stamp program partici-

pation; providing needy workers who have not recently been on welfare with some of the work support benefits that are currently available only to those transitioning from welfare; expanding the EITC; and broadening participation in rental housing supports.

Timothy J. Bartik

Senior Economist
W.E. Upjohn Institute for
Employment Research

Changing Rhythms of American Family Life. By Suzanne M. Bianchi, John P. Robinson, and Melissa Milkie. New York: Russell Sage, 2006. 249 pp. ISBN 978-0-87154-136-9, \$37.50 (cloth).

In *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*, Suzanne Bianchi, John Robinson, Melissa Milkie, and their collaborators draw on historical time-use data collections and their own recently collected time-diary data to examine how women's increasing participation in the work force affected the time use of American parents and children between 1965 and 2000. This is an ambitious study in what it covers: parental time use and subjective feelings about time, children's time use, relationships between mothers', fathers', and children's time use, and cross-national comparisons of parental time with children. Surprisingly, Bianchi et al. show that parents spent at least as much time interacting with their children in 2000 as in 1965. They managed to do so by increasing their reliance on multi-tasking and by incorporating children into adult leisure activities.

The authors' demonstration of the creative ways parents have restructured their lives to maintain interaction time with children even as their own time has become increasingly squeezed—by, most notably, the increase in women's paid work hours—is a significant contribution to the literature. Mothers greatly reduced time spent on housework, but not time spent in child care. How did they maintain time with children? First, even as a culture of intensive mothering has increased expectations of maternal time with each child, the number of children in the home decreased over the period. And while rising maternal employment meant that families were busier, the authors show that in addition to performing less housework, women were increasingly multi-tasking to maintain time with children. Men also contributed to the increase in child care time. Fathers' time contributions in the less "fun" aspects of child

care—clothing, bathing, and feeding—modestly increased over the time period of the analysis, from 2 hours per week to 7. Most provocative is the authors' surprising finding that parents were maintaining time with children by including children in parental leisure-time activities. Parents shifted from adult-only activities to activities that incorporate children. This shift may have important implications for understanding parental engagement in community life, and may point to a fruitful explanation of declining parental involvement in adult-focused activities such as voluntary and charitable causes, as recently documented in other research.

Related to the incorporation of children into adult leisure may be women's reports of too little time with their husbands (though the men in this study did not express this sentiment). This points to another strength of this study—its presentation not only of data on time trends, but also of information on how individuals feel about time use. Not surprisingly, women (especially single mothers) felt more stressed about time than men did—although fathers reported experiencing greater time shortages with children than mothers did. The authors' investigation of men's and women's subjective perceptions of busy-ness and time constraints gives context to the study's time diary data.

Another innovative and fascinating analysis in *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* is the authors' investigation of correlations between men's and women's activities using the unique interconnected diaries of mothers and fathers within the same family (Chapter 6). Among the interesting results are strong positive correlations in child-care provision, suggesting that men and women often jointly spent time with their children, in contrast to trading time off against each other. The finding that men did not significantly fill in for women's decreases in unpaid work is further evidenced in the finding that the more the wife worked for pay, the more her husband slept or watched TV. Employed women, unable to depend on their husbands to make up for their lost household-work hours, increasingly purchased external services for that purpose.

The increase in men's household hours, which is frequently discussed by the authors, was large in percentage terms, but only because the men's initial contributions were so low; in fact, these small upticks in unpaid work did not fully compensate for declines in the unpaid work of women, particularly that of employed women. This can be found in the comparative analyses presented, as well, where the separate graphs for men and women juxtapose men's small increases against