

**“Balancing Work and Family:  
The Policy Problems and Opportunities of Child Care and Nonstandard Work Schedules”**

**Overview**

Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, sociologist Harriet Presser (2003) noticed a change in the economy with implications for the American family – a move toward what she labeled a “24/7 economy,” where workers were more frequently asked to work outside of traditional work hours and days. Presser identified “three interrelated factors that increased the demand for Americans to work late or rotating shifts and weekends: a changing economy” (e.g., an increase in service sector jobs), “changing demography” (e.g., an increase in labor force participation of women, postponement of marriage), and “changing technology” (e.g., the ability to always be on call) (Presser, 2004). Nonstandard work schedules are schedules that one works outside of what are considered traditional working hours or days. For example, working outside of approximately 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. or working weekends, either on fixed or rotating shifts. Unpredictable work schedules are generally characterized by irregular schedules, where a worker has different shifts/hours during each new scheduling period. Nonstandard or unpredictable work schedules affect a substantial portion of the population – estimated at least 20 percent of those working (e.g., see Enchautegui, 2013; McMenemy, 2007; Presser, 2003).

Following the path of Presser and other researchers, this dissertation examines the implications of nonstandard work schedules for work-family balance. Specifically, this dissertation is targeted toward the intersection of nonstandard and unpredictable work schedules of low-income mothers, maternal well-being, and child care. The basic idea behind the series of papers in this research is that nonstandard or unpredictable work schedules place strain on mothers through interrole conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), which may produce negative maternal outcomes, particularly for mothers who lack robust social and financial supports, such as single or low-income mothers. Furthermore, child care – a critical work support for parents – may be a potential moderator in these associations. Unfortunately, center-based care and higher-quality child care may be difficult to access for low-income parents who work nonstandard hours or have unpredictable schedules (Zaslow, Crosby, & Smith, 2013). Furthermore, to the extent that parents and children are harmed by nonstandard work schedules and lack adequate work supports, this may lead to detrimental impacts on broader “economic prosperity and social cohesion” (Li et al., 2014). Evidence to these points would strengthen the case for potential policy intervention to improve work supports for these families. One such policy area, supporting access to quality, center-based child care for families working nonstandard hours, is explored in this dissertation, offering insight into opportunities and challenges for child care-based work support policies. The abstracts for the three papers in the dissertation are below.

**Paper 1 – Nonstandard work Schedules, maternal parenting stress, and the moderating role of child care**

Mothers who work nonstandard schedules may experience lower levels of well-being due to the strain these schedules place on the balance between work and family. Given the importance of social and financial family resources, these challenges may be particularly salient for certain populations of workers, such as low-income mothers, single mothers, and mothers with irregular schedules. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study are used to explore whether there is an association between nonstandard work schedules and maternal parenting stress. The study also examined variation in the strength of any association by: type of work schedule, mother’s relationship status, and family income; and whether the type of primary child care arrangement moderated any association between work schedules and parenting stress. Results do not suggest evidence of an association between work schedules and maternal parenting stress, evidence of variation by measures of interest, or moderation by primary child care arrangement.

## **Paper 2 – Searching for care at nontraditional times: Low-income mothers’ decision-making processes and the challenges of nonstandard work schedules**

Parents working nonstandard schedules often face a scarcity of child care options, rely on patchworks of care and multiple providers, and tend to rely more on informal care options. Low-wage work may further complicate child care decision-making processes for workers with nonstandard schedules. Drawing on interviews with 20 low-income mothers of young children in a large city in Texas, this study aims to better understand the social, economic, and structural factors behind child care decisions for low-income mothers working nonstandard schedules who have young children, taking into consideration the specific challenges or opportunities created by nonstandard work schedules. In particular, this study examines whether the role or importance of certain decision-making factors are different for mothers working irregular schedules or among those not living with a romantic partner as compared to other groups of mothers working nonstandard schedules. I find that mothers’ decision-making processes are often in line with the findings of past research and mothers prioritize finding a caregiver they trusted, cost, location, their work schedule, and a provider that provides opportunities for learning. Affordability and availability were major drivers in the type of care that mothers selected, particularly when considering care at nontraditional times. Mothers with irregular schedules and mothers without a partner often faced additional challenges in finding and securing care. A critical factor for both of these groups of mothers was whether or not they had an extensive support system of family and friends able to help manage child care during nontraditional hours.

## **Paper 3 – Center-based care at nontraditional times: Mothers’ perspectives, center availability, and policy options**

Prior research has identified a range of difficulties that low-income parents working nonstandard or unpredictable hours face related to child care, including affordability, accessibility, supply of care, and flexibility in relation to the demands of characteristics of their work. In response to these challenges, many scholars have cited the potential for improving child care policies, particularly around the supply and quality of care at nontraditional times. However, research into the existing supply, parental preferences, and potential policy prescriptions for care at nontraditional times is still new. This paper will explore three components of this topic. First, this paper uses data from the 2013/2014 – 2016/2017 Child Care Market Rate Surveys in Texas to explore the availability of licensed, center-based child care at nontraditional times for children preschool age and younger. Second, using data collected from in-depth interviews with 20 low-income mothers of young children in Austin, this paper will explore mothers’ beliefs and preferences about center-based care of young children at nontraditional times. Finally, this paper will explore existing and proposed policy solutions, including both child-care and employer-based solutions. By bridging information on supply, parental preferences, and policy proposals, this paper offers important insight for policy makers, researchers, and advocates interested in how to improve public policies related to child care at nontraditional times.

## **Research Contributions and Policy Implications**

As the demands of a 24/7 economy grow, parents working nonstandard schedules may see increasing challenges to balancing work and family. This dissertation adds to the existing body of literature by: (1) deepening our understanding of the link between nonstandard work schedules and parenting stress, especially among subgroups of mothers who may be more vulnerable; (2) exploring the role of child care as a work support for parents working nonstandard schedules; (3) deepening our understanding of the child care decision-making processes of low-income mothers working nonstandard schedules, including the accessibility of formal, center-based care; (4) identifying issues around the availability of licensed, center-based child care in Texas over time; and (5) highlighting potential policy proposals to address challenges associated with nonstandard work schedules and the accessibility of center-based care at nontraditional times.