

## **Child Care Constraints Among America's Families**

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While numerous studies have examined how child care usage is associated with maternal labor force attachment, less attention has been given to understanding the prevalence of child care constraints for a nationally representative sample of mothers. Using the 2004 Survey of Income and Program Participation, this study examines the extent to which employed and non-employed mothers report four types of child care constraints: restricted hours, change in child care provider, being placed on a waiting list for child care, as well as reporting any child care problems. Results suggest that the young, poor, and never-married experience more child care problems than their older, more economically advantaged, and married counterparts. Logistic regression results indicate that nonrelative child care usage by both employed and not employed mothers increase the odds of having child care problems, while usage of organized child care reduced the odds of reporting child care disruptions. The results of this study highlights the complexities of the child care and the struggles mothers face as they try to coordinate child care, work, and family.

### **Introduction and Background**

It is widely recognized that for many mothers it is nearly impossible to be employed and simultaneously care for young children. The influx of women into the labor market has increased the need for child care as the majority of parents with children under 5 have come to depend on substitute child care providers when mothers are at work (Overturf Johnson 2005). Recent research indicates that there are several factors associated with maternal labor force participation, including availability and affordability of child care (Han & Waldfogel 2001), usage of child care subsidies (Meyers, Heintze, & Wolf 2002), and type of and quality of child care (Lemke, Witte, Queralt, & Witt 2000).

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<sup>1</sup>This paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by Census Bureau Staff. It has undergone a more limited review than official Census Bureau publications. This report is released to inform interested parties of research and to encourage discussion.

Less attention, however, has been devoted to examining the prevalence of child care problems among working and non-working mothers. The unreliability of a child care arrangement is a significant issue for many mothers, especially for working mothers. Myers (1993) found that 59% of low-income mothers missed school or work due to child care problems. Press (1999) found among a sample of low-income mothers in Los Angeles that problems with child care significantly reduced the number of hours worked. Prior research also indicates that child care hours are often incompatible with the work schedules of working mothers (Presser 2003), which can lead to disruptions at work.

In addition to demands from work and home, the type of child care that mothers rely on can often lead to unanticipated disruptions. The quality, reliability, and availability of child care arrangements vary widely and much of the research on the relationship between the type of care and child care problems is mixed. Studies have found that care provided by a relative in a child's home was just as reliable as care provided in a child care center (Wolf and Sonenstein 1991). Other research suggests that child care provided by relatives may be supportive of mothers and provide an additional care option when other care arrangements fail (Henly and Lyons 2000). However, a family member's availability may change due to pregnancy, employment shifts or illness, making care by relatives a less reliable option than child care centers that have a larger staff and can remain open when one employee leaves or falls ill (Pungello and Durtz-Costes 1999).

While a small number of studies have explored the occurrence of various child care problems, there is little research on the prevalence of child care constraints for a national sample of mothers. In order to better understand how mothers manage work and

family demands, researchers and policy makers need a fuller understanding of the complexity and challenges associated with child care. In this paper, the type and occurrence of various types of problems associated with child care are explored using the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), a national household survey. While there are a multitude of problems that can be associated with child care, this study will focus on the following disruptions and constraints: reduced or restricted work and/or school hours because of the unavailability of child care; changes in child care because of the unavailability of a regular provider; and being on a wait list for child care. A composite measure is also created to examine how many mothers experience at least one of the child care problems listed above.

The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is used to describe the occurrence of selected child care problems by selected characteristics of mothers as well as by child care type. This paper begins by providing an overview of the data and then considers a number of the social, economic, and demographic factors to illustrate who is more likely to experience different types of child care problems. Lastly, logistic regression results are presented to determine the independent effects of socioeconomic status, household structure, type of child care, type of residence, race and Hispanic origin, and educational background on the likelihood of reporting hours related child care problems, as well as the report of any child care problems.

## Data and Methods

The data used in this analysis comes from the fourth interview (wave) of the 2004 panel of SIPP, collected in the spring of 2005 by the U.S. Census Bureau<sup>2</sup>. Respondents who were identified as the designated parent, usually the mothers, responded to questions about child care arrangements for up to ten children (younger than age 15) during their work and nonwork hours.<sup>3,4</sup> For the purposes of this study, the prevalence of child care problems among mothers (or female guardians) will be explored. The 2004 child care module includes an unweighted sample of 11,645 mothers, 7,852 of whom are employed and 3,793 of whom are not employed. Employed mothers include those with wage and salary jobs, including self-employment. Not employed mothers include mothers who are in school, not in school and looking for work, and mothers not in school and not in the labor force.

The SIPP is well suited for this study because it collects economic and demographic data on households, detailed child care information, and information on various child care constraints; including work and/or school hours lost to problems with child care, changes made in child care, and being on a wait list for child care. Unlike other surveys and studies that have examined child care constraints, SIPP is a nationally representative survey and provides the rare opportunity to examine the prevalence of child care problems among American families. Although SIPP offers a wealth of economic and demographic data, the survey lacks detail about the range and depth of child care issues that mothers face. Nonetheless, the analyses presented here are intended

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<sup>2</sup> For information on the statistical accuracy of the data please see [www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/technical.html](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/technical.html)

<sup>3</sup> For information on the child care topical module see [www.sipp.census.gov/sipptop-mod/2004w4tm.pdf](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipptop-mod/2004w4tm.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> In married-couple families, the mother is the designated parent. If the mother is not available to be interviewed, a proxy response from the father is acceptable. In single-parent families, the resident parent is the designated parent. If neither parent is living in the household, the guardian is the designated parent.

to provide a demographic profile of mothers who experience selected child care problems and factors that are related to likelihood of experiencing child care problems versus experiencing no problems with child care.

***Dependent Variables: Child Care Related Problems***

Four types of child care related constraints or problems are examined in the current study. These outcome measures are derived from the following SIPP questions:

**1) Restricted work or school hours because of child care.**

Are problems in obtaining child care preventing you from working/working more hours or going to school/going to school more hours?

“Restricted Hours” was coded one if the mother indicated that child care interfered with her ability to work, work and/or go to school more hours, and was coded zero otherwise. Mothers were not asked to indicate which of their current child care arrangements restricted their hours, but if child care problems in general led to constrained hours.

**2) Changes in child care due to the unavailability of a provider.**

Thinking now about the arrangements used last MONTH, were any changes made in the child care arrangements used for the (n) youngest child at that time, even for less than a day, because his or her usual child care provider was not available?

For each child, the designated parent was asked to indicate if any arrangement for that child led to an unexpected change. “Change in Care” is coded one if the mother had to make a change in her child care arrangement(s) for at least one child in the last month and coded zero otherwise. Therefore, this measure indicates if the mother ever had to make a change in care due the unavailability of a provider, but not the frequency.

**3) On a waiting listing for a child care arrangement.**

Are you currently on a waiting list for a child care arrangement for the (n) youngest child?

For each child, the designated parent was asked to indicate if the child was on a waiting list for a child care arrangement. If a mother indicated that she was on a waiting list for a child care arrangement for at least one child, “Wait List” was coded one and coded zero otherwise.

**4) Any child care problems**

Reported at least one child care problem.

“Any Child Care Problems” is a combination of the three previously mentioned measures. If a mother answered *yes* to any of child care related problems, then “Any Child Care Problems” was coded one, to indicate that the mother reported at least one child care problem. A value of zero indicates that the mother did not report any child care related problems.

***Methods***

The analysis proceeds by first presenting descriptive statistics to illustrate who experiences child care problems. Next, data are provided to determine if the child care problems outlined in this study vary by the type of child care. Lastly, because demographic and economic characteristics of mothers may influence who experience various child care problems, logistic regression is used to determine the independent effects of these characteristics on the odds of having restricted work and/or school hours as well as the odds of having any child care problems (restricted hours, change in child care, or being on a wait list for care).

## **Results**

### ***Child Care Problems***

The vast majority of mothers do not report having problems with their child care in terms of restricted hours, being on a wait list, or having to make a change in child care. Only 4 percent of mothers reported that their work hours were in some way restricted by their child care (Table 1). Four percent reported that they made a change in their child care because their regular provider was unavailable, while just 2 percent of mothers reported that they were on a waiting list for child care. Overall, 9 percent of mothers had a least one child care related problem<sup>5</sup>.

### **Child Care Problems by Mothers' Selected Characteristics**

Table 2 illustrates variations in child care problems among mothers by selected characteristics such as marital status, mother's age, education, the number and age of the children, employment status, and poverty level.

There appears to be some differences in the report of various child care problems by marital status. Never married mothers were more likely to report restriction work and/or school hours compared with married mothers (7 percent compared to 3 percent). Never married mothers were also more likely to report having at least one child care problem compared to married mothers (12 percent versus 8 percent).

Eight percent of mothers 15-24 years old reported work or school hours restrictions compared with 3 percent of mothers age 35 or older. Younger mothers were

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<sup>5</sup> The estimates in this paper are based on responses from a sample of the population and may differ from the actual values because of sampling variability or other factors. As a result, apparent difference between estimates for two or more groups may not be statistically significant. All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing and are significant at the 90-percent confidence level unless otherwise noted.

also more likely to report being on a waiting list than older mothers (4 percent versus 1 percent) and more likely to report any child care problems when compared to older mothers (14 percent versus 6 percent).

Five percent of mothers without a high school degree reported work or school restrictions compared with 3 percent of mothers with a college degree. However, mothers with a college degree or higher were more likely to make a change in their child care compared with mothers with less than a high school degree (5 percent versus 2 percent).

The number and age of the child(ren) lead to differences in reported child care problems. Compared with mothers with one child, mothers with three or more children were more likely to report work or school hours restrictions (6 percent and 3 percent, respectively) and were more likely to experience at least one child care problem (11 percent and 7 percent respectively). Regardless of the type of child care problem, mothers with older children (5 to 14 years old) were less likely to report such problems when compared with mothers with only younger children (0 to 4 years old). Younger children often require more attention and mothers with children across the two age groups may find it more difficult to balance family and child care needs. Among all mothers, those living below the poverty level had a higher incidence of reporting child care problems (11 percent ) than did women at or above the poverty level (8 percent).

The occurrence of child care problems also varied by the employment status of the mothers. Employed mothers (5 percent) were more likely than not employed mothers (2 percent) to make a change in child care because their usual provider was unavailable. On the other hand, not employed mothers were more likely to report problems restricting



their ability to work or go to school (5 percent) compared with employed mothers (4 percent).

Often the time of day that mothers work can lead to child care constraints. Mothers who regularly worked the day shift were less likely to experience hours related child care problems (3 percent) compared to mothers who regularly worked the evening or night shift (5 percent). Similar percentages of mothers who either worked the day shift (5 percent), evening/night shift (4 percent), or some other shift<sup>6</sup> (5 percent), reported a change in care because their regular provider was unavailable. Mothers who worked some other shift were more likely to report the occurrence of any child care problems (12 percent) compared to mothers who worked a day shift (9 percent) or mothers who worked an evening or night shift (9 percent).

Summarizing, the young, poor, and never-married appear to experience more child care problems than their older, more economically advantaged, and married counterparts.

### **Child Care Problems by Type of Child Care Arrangement**

Does the type of child care arrangement used by mothers lead to child care problems and if so, what type of problems? Table 3 presents data for the four child care problem measures by the type of child care for all mothers, as well as by employment status. Overall, between 3 and 6 percent of mothers reported restricted work/school hours problems because of child care. Table 3 shows that care provided by a nonrelative lead to high or higher proportions of women with any child care problems. Six percent of mothers who used a nonrelative reported restriction on work and/or school hours, 9

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<sup>6</sup> Some other shift includes split or rotating shifts.

percent reported they had to make a change in care, 4 percent reported being on a waiting list, and 16 percent reported that they had at least one child care problem.

Employed mothers who used some form of organized child care were more likely to report they had to make a change in their child care compared with not employed mothers who used the same form of care (9 percent and 5 percent respectively). Five percent of employed mothers who used organized care also reported restricted hours problems and 3 percent reported they were on a waiting list. Eight percent of not employed mothers who used organized care reported restricted hours problems and 4 percent were on a waiting list. This is not statistically different than the estimates reported for employed mothers.

For not employed mothers, care provided by the father as well as care provided by nonrelatives indicate relatively high levels of child care problems. Specifically, 22 percent of not employed mothers who used their child's father as a child care arrangements reported problems; the majority involved the dependability of the father as a child care provider. Nine percent of not employed mothers who reported that the father provided child care reported restricted work/schools hours and 13 percent reported that they experienced problems with dependability as child care providers. About 20 percent of not employed mothers using nonrelatives had reported at least one type of child care problem. Among employed mothers 15 percent reported problems if they used nonrelatives as providers.

## **Multivariate Analyses**

To better understand what demographic and economic factors contribute to the prevalence of child care problems among mothers, a series of logistic regression models are presented. Regression results are shown for two of the dependent variables (restricted hours and any child care problems). Results are shown for all, employed, and not employed mothers. Below is a detailed description of the variables used in the logistic regression models.

### ***Independent Variables***

**Socioeconomic Characteristics.** Three variables are used to measure various socioeconomic factors: work status and employment shift, household income, and poverty status. A set of seven dummy variables are used to measure whether the mother was employed fulltime or part-time and what time of day she regularly worked. A *day shift* is defined as a shift where at least half the hours worked fell between 8:00 am and 4:00pm. An *evening or night shift* is defined as a shift where at least half of the hours worked fell between 4:00pm and midnight or between midnight and 8:00am. Mothers who worked some *other shift*, had schedules that changed periodically from days to nights or were self-employed<sup>7</sup>.

Household income is measured as the natural log of the total family monthly income. A set of dummy variables are used to measure the family's poverty status: households with a family income at 100 –199 percent or 200+ percent of the poverty

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<sup>7</sup> Not employed mothers included mothers only in school, mothers not in school and looking for work, and mothers not in school and not in the labor force.

level, and households where the poverty level could not be determined are coded as having missing poverty status<sup>8</sup>.

**Household Structure.** Three measures are included to account for the household structure. Marital status is coded as 1 if the mother is currently married and coded as 0 if never married, divorced, separated or widowed. To account for the number of children under 15 in the household, a set of dummy variables were created to indicate if the mother had one child, two children, or three or more children. To determine the age make up of the children in the mother's household a set of dummy variables are used to measure if the mother had a least one child age 0 to 4, or had a least one child age 5 to 14, or had at least one child from both age groups.

**Type of child care arrangement.** To capture child care usage, seven types of child care are measured. The SIPP child care topical module includes extensive child care data for up to 10 children under age 15. For each arrangement for each child, respondents were asked to identify the care taker(s), the hours in care, and where the care took place. This information is used to construct six measures of child care to indicate if the mother had any children in any of the following arrangements: care provided by the mother, care by fathers, care by relatives (grandparents, siblings and other relatives) care by nonrelatives (family day care homes, baby-sitter, nanny in either the child's home or the provider's home), care by organized child care facilities (day care center, nursery, and Head Start), and care by other types of care (enrichment activities such as lessons or sports activities, and before/after school care). Each measure is coded as a dichotomous variable where 1 indicates the corresponding form of care was used by at least one child and 0 indicates

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<sup>8</sup> This represents a small number of women. Missing data could occur when people were not in the survey for the entire 4 month period prior to the interview data.

this corresponding was not used at all. A seventh child care measure is used to determine if the mother did not use any of the arrangements listed above for at least one child. If the mother used none of the arrangements listed above, then the variable was coded as a 1. Lastly, readers should note that the seven child care measures are not mutually exclusive because mothers may use have used multiple arrangements.

**Type of Residence.** One measure is used to account for the geographic context.

Metropolitan status is based on a set of dummy variables indicating central city, suburban or non-metropolitan residence.

**Control variables.** Controls are used to account for race/ethnicity as follows: black, non-Hispanic; white, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; and other non-Hispanic. Other variables are included to measure the mother's age and educational attainment.

### ***Results***

Table 4 presents the characteristics related to the odds having a child care problem that interfered with the mothers' ability to work, work additional hours, or attend school for all mothers, employed mothers, and not employed mothers.<sup>9</sup> The first column presents the results for all mothers. Controlling for other factors in the model, women who are employed at fulltime jobs during the day report fewer work hour problems. Compared with mothers with only one child, mothers with two children and mothers with three or more children are more likely to report hours related child care problems. Additionally, the odds of having work and/or school hours problems related to child care

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<sup>9</sup> Ratios under 1.0 or over 1.0 indicate that a mother is less likely or more likely to report a child care problem, respectively, than the reference category, which is indicated by an R.

are higher for mothers with only preschool age children than for mothers with only gradeschool age children.

The type of child care mothers use appears to influence the likelihood of reported work and/or school hours problems. Mothers who report that the other parent (usually the father of the child) provide care for their child or children are more likely to report restricted hours problems than those who do not use the other parent. Mothers who use some form of nonrelative care (family day care, baby sitter, etc.) are twice as likely to report restricted hours problems than those who do not use nonrelative care. Mothers who use other forms of child care such as sports or enrichment programs are also more likely to report restricted hours related problems than those who do not use an other form of child care. Lastly, older mothers were less likely to report work and/or school hours related child care problems than younger mothers and married mothers were less likely to report restricted hours than unmarried mothers.

The second column in Table 4 focuses on the odds of having restricted hours for employed mothers. Among employed mothers, mothers employed part-time, regardless of shift, are more likely to report restricted hours problems than those who have fulltime daytime shifts. Mothers who work a part-time night shift or a part-time other shift, are three times more likely to report restricted work and/or school hours because of issues related to child care. Certain child care arrangements affect the likelihood of experiencing hours related problems for employed mothers. Specifically, care provided by the other parent increases the likelihood of restricted work and/or school hours when compared to employed mothers who do not rely on the other parent for child care. Employed mothers who use some form of nonrelative care are twice as likely to reported restricted hours

than employed mothers who do not use nonrelative care. Also, employed mothers who use some other form of child care are more likely to have restricted work and/or school hours than those who do not. Lastly, employed mothers who are married are less likely to have restricted hours than never married employed mothers.

The analysis of restricted hours child care problems among not employed mothers (the third column) indicates that not employed mothers below the federal poverty level are more likely to report such problems compared with not employed mothers at or above the federal poverty level. For not employed mothers, having more than one child leads to a higher likelihood of restricted work and/or school problems. Not employed mothers with two children and not employed mothers with three or more children more likely to report hours related problems compared with mothers with only one child.

Table 5 predicts the odds of having at least one of the child care problems outlined in this study for all, employed and not employed mothers. Results indicate that among all mothers (column one), there are a number of socioeconomic characteristics that play a role in the likelihood of reporting at least one child care problem. Compared with mothers who are living in households at or above the federal poverty line, the odds of having at least one child care problem is greater for mothers below the federal poverty line. Compared with mothers with only one child, mothers with two children or three or more are more likely to report at least one child care problem. Similarly, compared with mothers with only a gradeschool age child, mothers with only a one preschool age child were more likely to report child care problems. In addition, older mothers are less likely to report at least one child care problem than younger mothers.

A number of child care arrangements have a strong relationship on the likelihood of reporting at least one child care problem. Mothers who rely on the other parent for child care are more likely to report at least one problem as those who do not provide their own care. Mothers who use relative care, nonrelative care as well as other forms of care are also more likely to report at least one child care problem. Interestingly, mothers who use some form of nonrelative care are three times as likely to report a child care related problem compared with the those who do not use any form of nonrelative care. In contrast, mothers who use some form of organized child care are much less likely to report child care related problems. Perhaps the staff sizes of child care facilities provide more flexibility in available hours and greater staff to prevent sudden closures or disruptions in services.

Among employed mothers (column two), mothers who work a mixed-rotation part-time shift are more likely to report at least one child care problems compared to mother who work fulltime dayshifts. Employed mothers with only a preschool age child are more likely to report at least one child care problem compared with mothers with only a gradeschool age child. All but two of the child care arrangements examined in this study influence the likelihood of reporting at least one child care problem among employed mothers. Employed mothers who receive child care from the other parent are more likely to report at least one child care problem compared with employed mothers do not rely on the other parent. Employed mothers who use relative care or some other form of care are more likely to report at least one child care problem than employed mothers who do not use relative care or some other form of care. Employed mothers who use nonrelative care are twice as likely to report at least one child care problem than those



who do not use nonrelative care. However, employed mothers who use organized child care are less likely to report at least one child care problem than those mothers who do not use organized care.

Finally, results in column three of Table 5 presents the likelihood of reporting at least one child care problem among not employed mothers. In contrast with employed mothers, where no relationship between poverty level and child care problems were found. Not employed mothers with a household income below the federal poverty line are more likely to report at least one child care problem compared with not employed mothers at or above the federal poverty level. The number of children and age of the child increases odds of reporting at least one child care problem. Not employed mothers with two children or three or more children are more likely to report at least child care problem compared with not employed mothers with only one child. Not employed mothers with a preschool age child are twice as likely to report at least one child care problem than mothers with only a gradeschool age child. Not employed mothers who use nonrelative child care providers are four times more likely to report at least one child care more than those who did not use this form of care. Similar to employed mothers, not employed mothers who use organized care are less likely to report at least one child care problem than mothers who did not use organized care. Similar to the previous models, not employed mothers who receive child care from the other parent their own child care are more likely to report at least one child care problem than mothers who do not use the other parent for child care.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The objective of the current study was to portray the types of child care constraints faced by American families and how these constraints vary by the mother's employment status and other social and demographic factors. Results indicate almost one of every ten mothers with children under 15 face some kind of child care problem, including restricted work and/or school hours, changes in care, and being on a wait list for care. A number of characteristics are associated with having a child care constraint, including marital status, the mother's age, education, poverty status, the number of children, the child's age, and the mother's employment status. Findings also indicate that some forms of child care are more associated with various child care problems. In general, the bivariate results indicate that nonrelative care lead to greater child care problems (regardless of the type of problem) compared with other forms of child care. Not employed mothers who used father care or cared for the child themselves faced more hours-related problems as well as any child care problems. Employed mothers had fewer hours-related problems associated with organized child care usage, but were more likely to report changes in their regular arrangement than not employed mothers who also used organized care.

The result of the logistic regressions provides insight into what social, economic, and demographic factors increase the likelihood of experiencing work or school hour related problems or experiencing any of the child care problems measured in the current study. Mothers with younger children were also more likely to report hours related problems as well as any child care problems. Younger children often require more attention than older children and may lead to more unanticipated child care disruptions.

Nonrelative child care proved to be associated with child care problems. Mothers who used some form of nonrelative care were twice as likely to report hours related problems and three times as likely to report at least one child care problem as mothers who did not use this type of arrangement. By contrast, organized care lead to fewer reports of any child care problems.

When the employment status of the mothers was controlled for, results indicated that compared with employed moms who worked fulltime day shifts, working a day, evening/night or some other part-time shift increases the odds reporting restrictions on hours worked. It's possible that these mothers reported problems because they are not would be working fulltime day shifts, and would like to do so. Various types of child care also influenced the likelihood of child care problems for employed mothers, with nonrelative usage having notable reports of problems. Among not employed mothers, poverty status and the number of children had a strong influence on restricted hours. The type of child care used by not employed mothers played a role in the likelihood of having any child care problems, especially nonrelative care. Not employed mothers who used nonrelative care were four times more likely to report any child care problems.

These results show that in addition to employment status, economic resources, and household structure, that the type of child care used by mothers is associated with child care problems. In particular, mothers (regardless of employment status) who use some form of nonrelative care are more likely to report child care problems. The reliability of nonrelative care givers may largely depend on their personal as well as professional motivation. Nonrelative care includes everyone from neighbors and friends to in home babysitters and family day care providers. Nonrelative child care providers

often vary in size and the next door neighbor who provides this service as a favor may be less likely to pursue a long-term professional obligation to care giving than providers in a family day care home, especially if they are providing child care to supplement their income between jobs (Henly & Lyons 2000). While this study did not examine whether unreliability is greater for low-income mothers who use nonrelative care, future research may want to examine prior research indicates that higher-income mothers child care networks are healthier and more reliable (Henly & Lyons 2000).

This study is subject to a number of limitations and points to the need for additional research on how mothers balance child care demands. The data presented here provide only a snapshot of child care related problems and says little about how problems associated with child care may change over time and possible long term consequences, such as job and income loss. Also the current study focused on any use of various types of child care and not the form of care that the mother used for the most number of hours. It could be that the form of care mothers rely on the most are also the same arrangements that cause the most problems. Future research should focus on the complex patchwork of child care arrangements mothers often use to fully understand how mothers balance the demands of work and family life.

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