

The new worry is that students working 20 or more hours per week are losing too much sleep, reducing their school performance, and risking health problems.

Are Teens in Low-Income and Welfare Families Working Too Much?

Robert I. Lerman

Social policies and a thriving economy are drawing large numbers of single parents into jobs, reducing their reliance on welfare, and raising their families' incomes. But how do single mothers' welfare receipt and work influence their children's employment? Can young people avoid working long hours once their family's income increases? Do older children have to give up outside employment in order to take care of younger children and do other work at home? Or might continuing pressure on young people to help support their families cause them to work too many hours and do worse in school? Finally, when low-income mothers work, do their children gain more access to job networks and opportunities to find jobs?

Young people from low-income families have traditionally worked to help support their families. Until a few years ago, the concern was whether enough jobs were accessible to low-income and minority youth. Policymakers viewed the work experience gained during high school and in summer jobs as a source for teaching discipline, ability to work in a team, and skills that would prove worthwhile in future careers. Indeed, during the 1970s, high joblessness rates among teenagers led the federal government to spend more than a billion dollars on the Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects, a demonstration aimed at ensuring part-time and summer jobs for high school students from poor families in selected cities.

Today, however, whether young people gain or lose from working while in

school is controversial. Most studies (Chaplin and Hannaway 1996; Ruhm 1998) find that taking a job as a student improves long-run career outcomes, though a few studies find no positive long-term impacts (Hotz et al. 1999). However, the new worry is that students working 20 or more hours per week are losing too much sleep, reducing their school performance, and risking health problems. A National Research Council panel has even proposed empowering the Department of Labor to restrict the number of hours that 16- and 17-year-olds can work during the school year.

This brief examines the work patterns of 16- to 17-year-old high school students and focuses on three key questions:

- Do teens in low-income families work as much or more than other teens? In particular, do teens in families leaving welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF) work more than teens in families on welfare?¹
- How do high school students' work patterns vary by race and gender?
- Is work by teenagers associated with negative school-related outcomes, especially among teens in low-income and welfare families?

The data come from the 1997 wave of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), a nationally representative survey that oversampled families with incomes

less than 200 percent of the poverty level and oversampled families in 13 states. Information is available on 2,630 high school students ages 16–17, including their employment, indicators of their school-related attitudes and behavior, and characteristics of their parents, including recent welfare histories.

Which Teens Work Moderate and Long Hours?

Poverty makes earning money an urgent priority and should stimulate young people to take jobs while in school to help meet basic needs. One would expect work among teens to be most extensive in families on welfare, since they are especially poor and since teen children's earnings are among the few income sources that do not reduce welfare benefits (Lerman 1986). On the other hand, teens in low-income families and in families on welfare have the least access to employment opportunities, especially jobs that are geographically convenient enough to allow combining part-time work and school. Moreover, youth from welfare families with no working adults generally lack both informal connections to jobs and employed parental role models.

Over 40 percent of the nation's 16- to 17-year-old high school students held jobs during the month before the NSAF interview, which took place during the school year (table 1).² About 25 percent of those holding jobs worked 20 hours or more per week. To determine the patterns by income and welfare groups, teens were classified into families below or above 200 percent of the poverty level and by whether their families were never on welfare, not currently on welfare but with prior welfare experience, or currently on welfare. Despite their more adequate family incomes, youth in moderate- and high-income families were more likely to work than youth in low-income families. Of teens in the neediest families—those currently on welfare—less than one in three (31 percent) worked; in contrast, nearly half (46 percent) of teens in families with incomes at least twice the poverty level held jobs. Youth in low-income families

never on welfare represented an intermediate group; their 35 percent employment rate fell between the low rates for teens of current or former welfare recipients and the high rates in moderate- or high-income families.

Teens in families that once received welfare but were no longer on assistance were most likely to work long hours, but least likely to work a modest number of hours. Nearly one in five teens in families that left welfare worked at least 20 hours per week in 1997; this rate was substantially higher than the proportion of teens in better-off families working long hours. In addition, virtually no youth in welfare families worked such long hours. Only in welfare-leaver families did most of the employed youth work long hours. Nearly 20 percent of these youth worked 20 or more hours, while only 9 percent worked fewer than 20 hours per week. The results do not mean that leaving welfare caused teenage children to take or to avoid jobs. Welfare leavers and welfare recipients are different in respects other than current welfare status. For example, families on welfare have considerably lower incomes and education levels than low-income families who have left welfare (Loprest and Zedlewski 1999).

Overall, low-income youth were less likely to have a job while in high school. Apparently, the greater pressure on low-income youth to earn income was outweighed by other factors, such as their disadvantage in finding work, lower motivation, and less encouragement to work from their parents.

Parental education played a significant role in encouraging moderate-intensity work while discouraging long hours. Note in table 1 that teens whose parents had a B.A. or higher were more likely than other teens to work, but less likely to work 20 or more hours per week. In contrast, teens with parents who did not complete high school had lower-than-average rates of employment but higher-than-average rates of jobs lasting 20 or more hours. Educational differences among parents may have accounted for some of the work differences by income and welfare status. Teens in welfare families have parents

The greater pressure on low-income youth to earn income was outweighed by other factors, such as their disadvantage in finding work, lower motivation, and less parental encouragement to work.

TABLE 1. Employment Status of 16- and 17-Year-Old High School Students by Family Income and Structure, Gender, Race, and Hispanic Origin, 1997

	Not Working (%)	Working Less Than 20 Hours per Week (%)	Working 20 or More Hours per Week (%)
Total	58.4	29.9	11.7
Family Income			
Above 200% Federal Poverty Level	53.9	33.6	12.5
Below 200%, Never Welfare	64.9	26.6	8.5
Below 200%, Welfare Leaver	71.3	9.4	19.2
Below 200%, Current Welfare	69.3	28.9	1.8
Family Structure			
Two-Parent	56.1	33.1	10.8
Blended	54.8	27.6	17.6
Single-Parent	63.2	25.5	11.3
No Parent	64.9	32.7	2.4
Parent Education Level			
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	55.3	36.0	8.7
High School/GED Only	59.0	29.4	11.6
Less Than High School	66.6	14.9	18.5
Parent Employment Status			
Employed	56.7	32.1	11.2
Not Employed	65.1	21.4	13.5
Gender			
Male	54.7	30.2	15.1
Female	62.3	29.6	8.1
Race/Ethnicity			
White (Non-Hispanic)			
Male	49.9	37.0	13.1
Female	46.7	37.9	15.4
	53.6	36.0	10.5
Black (Non-Hispanic)			
Male	75.9	12.5	11.6
Female	75.4	4.0	20.6
	76.4	19.8	3.9
Hispanic			
Male	76.2	16.7	7.1
Female	69.9	18.7	11.4
	82.0	14.9	3.1

Source: Author's tabulations on data from the Urban Institute's National Survey of America's Families, 1997.

Note: Chi-square tests involved two-way comparisons to determine the statistical significance of differences between 200 percent of federal poverty level and other income categories, two-parent families and other family categories, less than high school and other education categories, employed vs. nonemployed parents, males vs. females, white non-Hispanics and other races/ethnicities, and males vs. females within each race/ethnicity category. All differences were significant at the 10 percent level.

with comparatively low levels of education, while parents of moderate-income teens have comparatively higher levels of education.

Work Patterns by Race and Gender

Hours worked per week varied sharply by gender, while the overall employment rates varied significantly by race. While about 30 percent of girls and boys worked fewer than 20 hours per week, boys were almost twice as likely as girls (15 percent vs. 8 percent) to work 20 or more hours. The gap was especially wide among black youth, with 21 percent of black males but only 4 percent of black females working 20 or more hours. The racial/ethnic differentials surfaced most in jobs requiring fewer than 20 hours per week. Overall, nearly half of white teens held at least some job, a rate about twice as high as employment rates among Hispanic and black teens. However, for work involving 20 or more hours per week, the racial/ethnic gap was modest—13 percent among whites, 12 percent among blacks, and 7 percent among Hispanics. Hispanic girls showed the least involvement in paid employment; only 18 percent worked at all in the market. In contrast, 53 percent of white males and 46 percent of white females held jobs.

Work by Teenagers and School-Related Outcomes

The National Research Council (NRC) panel on the Health and Safety Implications of Child Labor (1998) cited research showing that most teens hold jobs that are disconnected with what is taught in school, teach few skills required for advancement, and offer little meaningful interaction with adults. Some studies show a correlation between long-duration work and low educational aspirations and low educational attainment, while other evidence indicates that well-structured work-based programs sometimes improved grades and encouraged postsecondary education. Because most studies depended on nonexperimental methods, the direction of causation is unclear. Do long hours at

work worsen school outcomes or do teens with little interest in school choose to work long hours?

The NSAF findings offer additional evidence on whether modest or long hours at work are associated with undesirable school behaviors, especially among low-income youth. The survey reports on a range of school behaviors and concerns from the perspective of adults in the family most knowledgeable about the teenagers. Some responses were to questions about whether students do poorly in school, care about doing well in school, only do schoolwork when forced to do so, do enough schoolwork to get by, and always do homework; a composite school engagement variable was drawn from these responses. Other questions related to skipping school, expulsion or suspension from school, and adult statements about whether they worried about keeping their child out of trouble with pregnancy, drugs, or crime. (The text of the questions appears in an appendix available on request.) While the analysis does not show causation, the results offer information about work and school behavior patterns.

The tabulations in table 2 reveal at most a weak connection between long hours and negative school behaviors. Teens working long hours were more likely than other teens to have been suspended and to avoid homework. In addition, low engagement in school was modestly higher among those working long hours. However, working teens were *less likely* to have skipped school or to have extensive behavioral or emotional problems. The parents of teens working long hours reported that only 2 percent were doing poorly at school, a share lower than the 7 percent of teens not working at all.

These tabular results are interesting but do not control at all for other observable differences among teens that could influence their work hours as well as school outcomes. For example, once we take into account the fact that boys are both less likely to do homework and more likely to work long hours, some of the apparent connection between long hours and no homework disappears. Among girls, 63 percent of those working long

Boys were almost twice as likely as girls to work 20 or more hours.

TABLE 2. *Employment Status and School-Related Outcomes of 16- and 17-Year-Old High School Students, 1997*

Academic Performance	Not Working (%)	Working Less Than 20 Hours per Week (%)	Working 20 or More Hours per Week (%)
Low Engagement in School	29.0	24.2	33.2
Suspended or Expelled in Past 12 Months	16.6	8.1	22.2
High Behavioral or Emotional Problems	11.3	8.6	4.2
Parent Worries about Child	66.8	71.2	64.6
Times Skipped School in Past 12 Months			
Never	74.9	77.4	82.6
Once	6.5	10.7	4.7
Two or More	18.5	11.9	12.7
Always Does Homework			
All of the Time	50.4	55.3	41.5
Most of the Time	20.4	24.6	30.1
Some of the Time	25.8	17.8	21.1
None of the Time	3.5	2.2	7.3
Does Poorly at Schoolwork			
Often True	6.5	7.4	2.4
Sometimes True	29.4	29.5	34.9
Never True	64.0	63.1	62.7

Source: Author’s tabulations on data from the Urban Institute’s National Survey of America’s Families, 1997.

Note: Chi-square tests involved two-way comparisons to determine the statistical significance of differences between the school-related outcomes of youth who were not working and those in other employment categories. Most differences were significant at the 10 percent level. However, the difference between those not working and those working 20 hours or more was not significant for the “parent worries about child” outcome. In addition, the differences between those not working and those working less than 20 hours per week were not significant for either the “high behavioral or emotional problems” outcome or the “does poorly at schoolwork” outcome.

Girls working long hours were more likely to be engaged in school than girls not working or working fewer than 20 hours per week.

hours but only 54 percent of those not working at all always did their homework.

Among boys, the proportion doing homework all or most of the time was about the same—64 to 65 percent—among boys working 20 or more hours per week as among boys not working at all. The relationship between work hours and homework was uneven among former and current welfare recipients. Teens in families that left welfare were more likely to do homework most or all of the time if they were working 20 or more hours than if they were not working at all (88 percent vs. 49 percent); but doing homework all of the time was more common among teens in welfare-leaver families who were not working (32 vs. 16 percent).

One behavior in which working long hours is associated with a large negative outcome is the teenager having been

expelled or suspended during the prior year. Even in this case, there are no differences in suspension/expulsion rates among girls. Among boys, 23 percent of teens not working had a suspension or expulsion, a high rate but well below the 32 percent rate experienced by teens working at least 20 hours per week. In contrast to these extreme cases, only 12 percent of males working a moderate amount were suspended or expelled. As a whole, boys were much less engaged in schoolwork and activities than girls, with 36 percent of boys but only 20 percent of girls reported as having low engagement. Moreover, the relationship between work and low engagement differed sharply by gender. Girls working long hours were more likely to be engaged in school than girls not working or working fewer than 20 hours per week; in contrast, 43 percent of males

working long hours showed low engagement, as compared with 36 percent of males not working at all.

Turning to differences by income and welfare status, we find only a modest or no increase in the incidence of suspensions or expulsions with increased work hours for all groups except boys in low-income welfare-leaver families. Within this group, the small number of teens working 20 or more hours per week were much more likely to have faced an expulsion or suspension than others (69 percent vs. 25 percent). In the case of low engagement in school, we find no evidence among low-income youth (including those in current or former welfare families) that long work hours were associated with low school engagement.

School-Related Outcomes and Income/Welfare Status

While long work hours are associated with positive as well as negative school-related outcomes, the much more striking relationship is between school outcomes and income/welfare status independent of work. As table 3 shows, parents report that teens from low-income and welfare families do less homework, exhibit lower engagement in school, experience much higher rates of expulsions or suspensions, skip school more often, suffer more emotional problems, and show lower engagement in school. Low-income and welfare parents regard their teens as doing poorly at schoolwork far more often than do parents with incomes at least twice the poverty level. The accuracy of these parental reports is uncertain, since data on students' grades are not available.³

Conclusions

One concern about welfare reform was its potential to worsen youth outcomes by pushing students into jobs and harming their school performance. The evidence here suggests that such problems are unlikely to materialize. High school teens in families no longer on welfare do exhibit a greater tendency to work than those in families continuing on welfare. However, this is part of a general pattern in which

increased socioeconomic status is associated with increased market work by 16- to 17-year-olds. Higher family income, an absence of welfare experience, and high levels of education are all associated with the combination of schooling and employment.

More important, the findings reveal little if any negative associations between schooling-related outcomes and work, even work involving 20 or more hours per week. In fact, among the lowest-income families, high work intensity actually goes along with more school engagement and better schoolwork performance. At the same time, teens in families with incomes above 200 percent of the poverty level respond somewhat worse to long hours at the work site. Working 20 hours or more per week is associated with lower involvement in school-related activities.

Overall, the results are mixed for teens who work but are certainly not negative for low-income teens. Still, wide gaps exist among the school outcomes of teens from welfare families, from other low-income families, and from moderate- and high-income families. For example, over half of teens in welfare families exhibit low engagement in school, compared with 42 percent of teens in families formerly on welfare, 31 percent of teens in low-income nonwelfare families, and 24 percent of teens in moderate- to high-income families. These pessimistic schooling indicators represent a serious concern for the public and policymakers. Unengaged, unsuccessful teens in school are likely to become less productive future citizens, workers, and parents. Improvements in quality of instruction, relevance of course work, and approaches used to motivate students are likely to be essential for the future. The evidence in this paper indicates that a law prohibiting working 20 or more hours per week is unlikely to improve school outcomes for low-income teens. Instead, policies should focus on improving the linkages between schooling and careers through such promising strategies as career academy, internship, and apprenticeship programs (National Research Council 1998; Kemple and Snipes 2000).

The findings reveal little if any negative associations between school-related outcomes and work.

TABLE 3. Family Income and Academic Performance of 16- and 17-Year-Old High School Students, 1997

Percent of Students	1997 Welfare	Welfare	Never Welfare	Above 200% Poverty	All Incomes
Low Engagement in School	51.5	42.2	30.7	24.1	28.1
Suspended or Expelled in Past 12 Months	44.3	33.7	16.1	10.3	14.8
High Behavioral or Emotional Problems	27.0	23.8	14.4	5.0	9.6
Parent Worries about Child	51.5	58.3	36.1	26.9	32.2
Times Skipped School in Past 12 Months					
Never	59.6	58.7	72.5	81.7	76.6
Once	3.1	6.3	9.8	7.2	7.5
Two or More	37.4	35.1	17.7	11.2	15.9
Always Does Homework					
All of the Time	36.3	31.4	47.4	55.2	50.7
Most of the Time	24.9	27.3	23.4	21.9	22.8
Some of the Time	34.4	35.9	25.0	19.8	23.0
None of the Time	4.4	5.5	4.2	3.1	3.6
Does Poorly at Schoolwork					
Often True	15.2	11.8	10.4	3.7	6.3
Sometimes True	43.0	31.1	28.7	29.7	30.1
Never True	41.8	57.1	60.9	66.6	63.6

Source: Author's tabulations on data from the Urban Institute's National Survey of America's Families, 1997.

Note: Chi-square tests involved two-way comparisons to determine the statistical significance of differences between the school-related outcomes of youth living in families with incomes above 200 percent of the federal poverty line and those in the lower income categories. All values were significant at the 10 percent level.

Endnotes

1. This paper includes only those teenagers who are children of the family head and excludes teens who head their own welfare families.
2. The analysis includes only the NSAF cases drawn from interviews that took place in the spring of 1997, not during the summer.
3. Even biased reports do not necessarily invalidate the analysis. For example, if low-income and welfare parents have somewhat lower expectations about their teens, then the bias would lean toward understating differences among teens.

References

Chaplin, Duncan, and Jane Hannaway. 1996. "High School Enrollment: Meaningful Connections for At-Risk Youth." Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.

Hotz, V. Joseph, Lixin Xu, Marta Tienda, and Avner Ahituv. 1999. "Are There Returns to the Wages of Young Men from Working While in School?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. W7289. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Kemple, James J., and Jason C. Snipes. 2000. "Career Academies: Impact on Students' Engagement and Performance in High School." New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.

Lerman, Robert I. 1986. "Do Welfare Programs Affect the Schooling and Work Patterns of Young Black Men?" In *The Black Youth Employment Crisis*, edited by Richard B. Freeman and Harry J. Holzer (403-38). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Loprest, Pamela, and Sheila Zedlewski. 1999. "Current and Former Welfare Recipients: How Do They Differ?" Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. *Assessing the New Federalism* Discussion Paper No. 99-17.

National Research Council, Committee on the Health and Safety Implications of Child Labor. 1998. *Protecting Youth at Work: Health, Safety, and Development of Working Children and Adolescents in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Ruhm, Christopher J. 1998. "Is High School Employment Consumption or Investment?" *Journal of Labor Economics* 113 (1): 285-317.

About the Author



Robert I. Lerman is the director of the Labor and Social Policy Center at the Urban

Institute and a professor of economics at American University. Dr. Lerman's research deals with youth employment and training, welfare programs, fatherhood and family structure, and economic inequality. His recent articles examine the impact of post-1979 immigration on earnings and income inequality in the United States.



THE URBAN INSTITUTE

2100 M Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 8098
Mt. Airy, MD

Address Service Requested

For more information,
call Public Affairs:
(202) 261-5709
or visit our Web site,
<http://www.urban.org>.
To order additional copies
of this publication, call
(202) 261-5687
or visit our online bookstore,
<http://www.uiPress.org>.

This series is a product of *Assessing the New Federalism*, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Alan Weil is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

The project has received funding from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, The Commonwealth Fund, the Stuart Foundation, the Weingart Foundation, The Fund for New Jersey, The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation.

This series is dedicated to the memory of Steven D. Gold, who was codirector of *Assessing the New Federalism* until his death in August 1996.

This policy brief was prepared for the *Assessing the New Federalism* project. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its board, its sponsors, or other authors in the series.

The author thanks Alan Weil and Sheila Zedlewski for constructive suggestions and Stephanie Riegg for excellent research assistance and useful comments.

THE URBAN INSTITUTE

2100 M Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

Copyright © 2000

Phone: (202) 833-7200

Fax: (202) 467-5775

E-mail: pubs@ui.urban.org