

# Triple Role Overload: Working, Parenting, and Navigating Public Benefits

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## Abstract

Much has been written about work–family conflict for professional women, while little attention has focused on poor working mothers. Stuck in low-wage jobs, millions of working mothers rely on public benefits to supplement poverty wages. This article looks at the ways in which work–family–welfare conflict affected mothers’ ability to maintain a stable family and work life. Using interview data and focus group data collected in Colorado, Georgia, and Massachusetts, the article uncovers the intersecting demands these mothers face and the ways in which they are ill-equipped to deal with these demands. The qualitative data are mothers’ voices as they discuss the demands of parenting and work, as well as the regulations of public programs. In contrast to middle and upper-income mothers who may purchase forms of help to ease work–family tensions, poor mothers rely on government programs to offset insufficient earnings. Our findings suggest these government programs may exacerbate work–family conflict for poor mothers.

## Keywords

poverty, family, qualitative, inequality, gender

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Work–family conflict has been studied and reported on extensively for middle-class and professional women as their participation in the workforce has continued to rise since the 1960s (Hennessy, 2015). Overall, 72.3% of women with children under the age of 18 participated in the labor force in 2019 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Despite the large numbers of working mothers across the income spectrum, the majority of literature about work–family conflict focuses on middle and upper-income, dual-earner families. At the same time, the poorest mothers, previously eligible for income support through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), are now forced to take any job available to comply with rigid welfare rules and are without the resources to pay for help at home. This article highlights the ways in which poor mothers often suffer extreme consequences when the responsibilities of work and home conflict and have fewer resources at their disposal to mitigate these crises.

In reality, large numbers of employed mothers in the United States hover just above or below the poverty line and routinely deal with this extreme version of work–family–welfare conflict. In fact, roughly 40% of families in the United States have female breadwinners, but two-thirds of those women are single mothers, who are disproportionately poor and black and Hispanic (Glynn, 2019). More research is needed to explore the ways low-income mothers struggle to provide for their children while working and receiving various forms of public assistance (Acs et al., 2005; Dodson, 2013; Elliott et al., 2015; Hennessy, 2015; Verduzco-Baker, 2017). This article offers an important contribution to literature about work–family conflict by adding the lived experience of poor mothers.

## **Literature Review**

Scholarship using the term “work–family conflict” most often focuses on the persistence of the gendered division of labor in the home, lack of family-friendly accommodations in the workplace, and strategies of professional women to meet responsibilities at home and work (Blair-Loy, 2009; Garey, 1999; Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Hays, 1998). One such strategy is to employ outside support in the home, hiring domestic workers to do housework, organizational, and child care tasks (Blair-Loy, 2009; Garey, 1999). Low-income mothers are without the financial resources to hire this kind of outside help. In fact, many are employed in positions as home health aides and child care workers, roles which higher income people rely upon to manage their busy lives. Yet work–family conflicts faced by these low-wage workers garner significantly less attention.

While professional women generally gain public respect for stepping back from work to spend time with children (Blair-Loy, 2009; Garey, 1999; Hennessy, 2015; Williams & Boushey, 2010), for low-income, mostly single mothers prioritizing children is viewed as problematic. The societal expectation is that poor people should be committed to work to pull themselves up and out of poverty, and the care of children does not qualify as work (Hays, 2004; Hennessy, 2015; Williams & Boushey, 2010). Children's care needs are often viewed as obstacles that block low-income mothers from full-time employment (Freeman, 2017; Press et al., 2008). As such, low-income mothers who prioritize their children may encounter trouble at work. Often when they are late for work or change schedules, low-income mothers are dismissed as lazy or disorganized while they are actually struggling to meet the demands of work and children (Dodson, 2013; Hennessy, 2015). Similarly, poor mothers are often viewed as irresponsible when they choose to take on less work or rely on public assistance to accommodate their families (Acs et al., 2005; Dodson, 2007; Hancock, 2004; Hennessy, 2015; Mink, 1998). Verduzco-Baker (2017) found that low-income mothers work just as hard and employ different parenting logic than middle-class mothers to protect their children from the conditions of poverty.

### *Work–Care–Welfare Intersecting Demands for Low-income Mothers*

Low-income mothers are much more likely than those in the middle class to be single. In fact, 90% of recipients of cash assistance are single mothers, and children living with single mothers are roughly six times more likely to be impoverished than those living in two-parent families (Olson & Banyard, 1993; United States Census Bureau, 2017). In addition, the kinds of jobs that low-income women have available to them often offer no paid leave or flexibility, which is necessary for parents to be available for emergencies and routine appointments with health care providers and teachers during business hours (Hennessy, 2015; Madill, 2017). According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, around 30% of professional workers now have access to some paid parental leave, while the percentage of full-time low-wage workers with paid leave hovers around 4% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Similarly, only roughly 30% of workers in the lowest 10% of wages have access to paid sick leave compared to more than 90% of workers in the top 10% of wages (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

The necessity for poor women to rely on public assistance to supplement insufficient earnings introduces other forces into their work–family conflicts,

both cultural and material. Here, we use the term welfare and/or public assistance to refer to means-tested government assistance including cash assistance, food assistance, public housing, and child care vouchers. Many low-income mothers struggle to navigate a maze of appointments and paperwork to apply for and maintain various forms of public assistance (Hays, 2004; Pearson, 2007). Research shows that many low-income parents also face a “cliff effect” when they receive even a small increase in wages or other income, and as a result, lose one or more of the benefits they need (Albelda & Carr, 2016; Cauthen, 2006; Dinan et al., 2007).

At the same time, the dominant culture has long treated mothers who receive public assistance as irresponsible people and deficient parents (Dodson & Luttrell, 2011; McCormack, 2005). Specifically, poor single mothers of color who rely on public benefits have been portrayed as failing, even abusive parents (Collins, 2000; Elliott et al., 2015; Hays, 2004; Mink, 1998; Verduzco-Baker, 2017). Research shows low-income mothers may push back against these shameful stereotypes, highlighting the ways in which motherhood is the central component of their identity, as they strive to create and maintain their status as “good mothers” (Dodson & Luttrell, 2011; Edin & Kefalas, 2006; Freeman, 2017; McCormack, 2005). Mothers across race and class lines attempt to meet the ideal of intensive mothering in which children are prioritized above all else, requiring parents to sacrifice to meet children’s needs (Elliott et al., 2015; Hays, 1998; McCormack, 2005; Verduzco-Baker, 2017).

Levine’s (2013) research shows that many low-income mothers lack basic trust in their case workers, child care providers, supervisors, romantic partners, and even some family members. This lack of trust is informed by past negative experiences with abusive partners, unfair bosses, unreliable family members, child care workers who have let harm come to their children, and case workers who did not act in their best interest (Levine, 2013). This overall lack of trust further limits low-income mothers’ options of whom they may rely on for help navigating work–family conflicts. Pervasive distrust may contribute to their isolation, dealing with these conflicts without paid help or the ability to rely on others.

### *The Evolution of Racialized Government “Assistance”*

In the past, one way poor women could live up to the primacy of motherhood was to leave employment to tend to children’s immediate needs, relying on cash assistance provided through AFDC. This changed, however, as a result of the welfare reform movement of the late 1990s. The “reform” effort emphasized moving low-income mothers out of the home and into the

workforce, thus ending reliance on government benefits. Still, since the jobs these mothers are able to attain often do not pay a living wage and offer no opportunities for advancement, many poor mothers are forced to continue to rely on various types of public assistance while working.

The original intent of the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program was to support children of women who had been widowed. “In the 1930’s only white, middle-class widows were viewed as dependents, and only their care work was considered worthy of being supported” (Katz, 2019, p. 28). These women needed assistance from the government to replace the contribution of the male wage earner so they could stay at home to care for their children. As the program grew, it also came to be used by divorced and never married poor mothers, including racial minorities. In the 1950s, benefits were expanded to include social services as well as income support. At the same time, a rigorous and often racialized system of rules and regulations was developed to monitor the household management and child care of welfare recipients (Abramovitz, 2017; Katz, 2019) because these women could not be trusted to monitor themselves. The assumption that poor mothers are not able to regulate themselves in terms of proper behavior for workers and parents underlies the system designed to oversee their behavior in these areas (Katz, 2019; Levine, 2013). Over time, these rules and regulations have grown into bureaucratic systems of public benefit administration that may, in some cases, act as obstacles for families attempting to move out of poverty (Hays, 2004; Katz, 2019; Pearson, 2007).

Over time, this program also came to be demonized in the public forum, playing on stereotypes of lazy, uneducated, minority women supported by government dollars (Katz, 2019; McCormack, 2005; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001). This sentiment culminated in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) passed by President Clinton in 1996. The PRWORA replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), dispersing aid in the form of block grants to states. Although states varied widely implementing a range of new programs and policies in their distribution of TANF funds, there were several important overall changes. This new program capped lifetime cash benefits to a five-year period, required recipients to return to work, and restricted the classification of education as work, limiting educational opportunities for low-income mothers (Deprez et al., 2004; Hays, 2004; Katz, 2019; Pearson, 2007).

Many touted welfare reform as a success because caseloads dropped and increased numbers of low-income mothers entered the workforce. However, while welfare reform was supposed to ensure accessible child care, only 1 in 10 eligible children receives subsidized care (Madill, 2017). The jobs low-income mothers are able to attain continue to be low-paid

positions without benefits to support families, opportunities for advancement, and workplace flexibility (Dodson & Bravo, 2005; Chilman, 1991; Hennessy, 2015; Heymann, 2000; Shipler, 2005; Williams & Boushey, 2010). Further, these mothers are often without the education and skills to secure positions in the labor market that would allow them to move their families out of poverty (Dodson & Bravo, 2005; Chilman, 1991; Heymann, 2000; Shipler, 2005).

### *Working, Parenting . . . and Still Poor*

More qualitative and quantitative scholarship is needed to examine how poor mothers manage conflicting work, child care, and public benefit responsibilities, all of which are vital to the maintenance of their families. Their experience of employment and carework is dictated not only by cultural gendered expectations about mothers and workers but also by racialized stereotypes about poverty and public assistance. This article helps to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the ways in which the intersecting demands of work, care, and welfare overwhelm poor mothers, making them less likely to move out of poverty. These demands, combined with a culture of distrust (Levine, 2013), consume energy, emotion, and time, diminishing the likelihood these working mothers will join efforts to change work, family, and social welfare policies. Their voices are a critical omission since they have the largest stake in challenging the way that work is designed, living wages, the availability of safe, high quality child care, and the way that work supports are distributed. Including this population in public conversation and policy efforts about work–family conflict is essential moving forward, and this article represents part of this effort.

### **Methods**

We used a qualitative mixed-method sequential design for this research with a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Cohen & Manion, 2000; Morse, 2009). Specifically, we employed more than one method of data collection about the same social phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2012) and “data source triangulation,” gathering information from different sources across two studies, in this case, individuals and groups (Carter et al., 2014). Combining the data from two studies is a way to deepen and broaden our understanding of the intersecting effects of work, family care, and public programs in the lives of low-income single mothers (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

## Study Design

In this article, we draw from qualitative data sequentially gathered from two studies: the second focus group (FG) study built on the findings of the first interview study, using a qualitative triangulation approach. Qualitative method triangulation, combining different qualitative methods, has been increasingly recognized as a strategy to gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena (Lambert & Loisel, 2008; Morse, 2009; Patton, 1999). In-depth interviews (IDIs) and FGs tend to elicit different kinds of information both of which are valuable for a deeper understanding of low-income women's lives (Guest et al., 2017).

*Study one.* The first study was an IDI study conducted from 2009 to 2012 that included annual interviews with 37 low-income single mothers. Interviewees were all taking part in an anti-poverty program in Boston. Each year, one of the authors conducted an IDI with each of the low-income mothers in the program, using an open-ended interview guide about their current concerns, accomplishments, education, work, and the status of their children as well as other topics the participants considered important. Researchers received approval from the Institutional Review Board to conduct the interviews. All participants were interviewed annually after they took part in the program for a minimum of six months. Contact information for participants was turned over to the research staff; both research and program staff explained that participation in the interviews was voluntary. The research team explained the confidential nature of the interviews to participants and over time found that respondents gave detailed and opinionated responses. Staff from the anti-poverty program made it clear to the participants that members of the research team were independent observers and not program staff.

*Sample.* In all, 66 interviews were conducted with 37 unique participants. The participants were mothers who ranged in age from 26 to 55 and were raising between one and four children. Their children ranged in age from newborn to adult (with an average of 1.7 children per family). Mothers were required to have at least one dependent child living with them in order to participate in the anti-poverty program. The majority of participants lived in public housing developments in South Boston, though this was not a formal requirement. Participants were all recipients of at least one type of public assistance, including public housing, housing vouchers, child care subsidies, food or cash assistance. Data about the participants' racial/ethnic background was recorded as follows: 13 were White, 15 were Black or African-American, 8 were Hispanic/Latina, and 1 was Asian.

**Recruitment.** In order to recruit participants for the anti-poverty program, staff posted fliers in local community centers and in public housing buildings. In addition, mailings were sent out to local public housing residents and information sessions were held to introduce potential participants to the program. The research team did not participate in the recruitment process. Applicants were required to apply and attend at least one interview and information session before being accepted into the program. The program required that applicants have at least a high school education (or GED), be a single parent and head of household, live in stable housing, and be actively working to move out of poverty by attempting to attain education, training, skills or career opportunities.

**Study two.** The second study was a FG study, conducted by one of the authors, that took place in Boston, Atlanta, and Denver in 2015–2016 (the gap between the studies was due to lack of funding). The FG research was in collaboration with 9to5 (National Association of Working Women), a national nonprofit organization tasked with seeking justice for working women through advocacy and research. The research team included one of the authors and a co-investigator from the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The areas of inquiry, reflecting the themes which emerged in the IDI study, included experiences with work, children, and family care, and managing the requirements of public assistance programs. In the FG study, we used findings from the IDI study to further explore central themes and to pursue issues that participants had emphasized. One example of this was asking FG participants to describe their experiences navigating low-wage job demands, constraints of schedules, locations of subsidized child care programs, and local primary schools—issues that IDI participants had identified as generally overlooked, yet critical to managing daily life.

The major areas of the FG inquiry centered on experiences working in low-wage jobs, raising children, pursuing higher education, and managing public assistance regulations as these women sought ways to establish family stability. Importantly, we also asked for their critical perspectives on their circumstances and the challenges facing their families and communities. Thus, beyond specific responses about individual circumstances, participants shared views on matters that they regarded as systemic including racial and gender discrimination, unequal access to good education of children (particularly children of color), intergenerational economic inequities, and structural barriers to social mobility.

**Sample.** In all, we conducted 10 FGs that included 93 low-income mothers and 10 grandmothers who were parenting young children. The FG participants



ranged in age from early 20s to late 50s and included 74 Black or African-American, 12 Latinx, 9 Multiracial, 6 White, and 2 Native American women. Most of the participants currently (or had recently) worked in retail, food services, hospitality, security, transportation, homecare, and nursing home jobs. Children ranged in age from infancy to 18. The largest family included four children with the majority including one or two children.

*Recruitment.* Members of 9to5 field teams received training in human subjects' protection, and all team members became certified to conduct human research through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). Members of the research team contacted staff in community-based organizations in each of the cities to locate FG participants in schools, child care services, workforce centers, churches, and community centers. Flyers with information about the study and the research team were distributed to people using the community-based services or while dropping off/picking up children in neighborhood schools and afterschool programs. The flyer indicated location, date, and two-hour duration of the FG and that onsite child care, a meal, and a 25 dollar stipend would be provided to participants.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews in the IDI study were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the research team, which included both authors. All interviews were entered into a qualitative database and coded for themes using HyperRESEARCH software (ResearchWare, Inc., version 3.0.3). Staff interviews, observations, and field notations were used as triangulation verification of interview data gathered. Research codes were included, but were not limited to the following: negotiating parent-child needs, child care issues, mother-child connection, work-family conflict, work-welfare conflict, education parents, and education children. Researchers met frequently throughout the coding process and wrote memos about themes and developing analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The research team created a codebook of emerging themes, which were later used to develop subject areas to probe in the FG study.

The FGs were transcribed verbatim at the time they were conducted. FG transcriptions, team observations, and staff interviews were also analyzed after each FG in team meetings as verification of the themes identified. All data were combined and analyzed in team meetings after the final FG. The FG research team met regularly to discuss the research process, emerging and unexpected findings, and the development of the major themes.

After the IGI and FG studies were both completed, the two authors came together to re-analyze the data from the mixed-method sequential studies. We

met to discuss the development of the themes from the interviews to the FGs. We employed a data triangulation approach both to seek verification of key themes identified as well as to incorporate multiple perspectives on key themes that emerged in both studies. We wrote memos about the development of themes through the triangulation of data and pursued themes until saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006).

## Findings

The mothers in our samples experienced intersecting demands in the areas of employment, parenting, and navigating public assistance. They reported high levels of caregiving responsibilities without the financial resources to help manage such demands, and many expressed frustration because they were unable to meet both work and care needs. In response to these conflicting demands, the mothers we spoke with employed strategies such as hiding children, staying in dead-end jobs, and frequently changing positions. Overall, their jobs lacked flexibility, opportunities for advancement, and benefits that would allow them to parent. As such, we uncovered multiple accounts of disjointed employment, leaving jobs, or being forced to leave jobs because employers did not accommodate the mothers' need to be there for their children. Many respondents also reported serious workplace discrimination against parents, women, and minorities. Due to the lack of continuous, sustainable employment, all the women in our sample had received some type of public assistance to meet the needs of their families. While intended to help low-income recipients meet their work and care responsibilities, our data revealed many of these programs were disruptive and undermining of efforts to move out of poverty, adding burdensome requirements and exacerbating role overload.

### *Disruptions in Care, Work, and Welfare*

For respondents, responsibilities in the areas of care, work, and public assistance were often conflicting and caused disruptions to their efforts to move out of poverty. While these responsibilities and disruptions are intertwined and constantly informing one another, the findings section is divided into these three areas for the purposes of clarity.

*Disruptions from care.* The majority of respondents in interviews and FGs made it clear that being “good mothers” was their priority, and they were trying to fulfill an intensive parenting ideal in which they were available to their children as much as possible (Elliott et al., 2015; McCormack, 2005; Miller 2018; Verduzco-Baker, 2017). As such, several of the women talked about

looking for jobs with “mother’s hours” while their children were young so they could be available to accompany kids to the bus stop, keep an eye on them after school, and help with homework. However, these jobs were often low-paying and difficult to find. Regina, a single mother of a 9-year-old son living in public housing in Boston explained in an interview, “What I am doing is trying to get a mother’s hours job for the morning while my son is in school. Then I could go to school at night.” Regina felt working toward a college degree was the only way to get a better job. Her extended family was able to care for her son in the evenings while she attended classes, but she said, “I want to be the one to get him off the bus and see what he has for homework and all of that.” In order to continue to receive housing and food assistance, Regina was required to work, but she was currently struggling to find a job with regular hours that would allow her to get home around 3 pm. Regina had left her previous job because the hours kept changing and did not allow her to be at home in the afternoon; her son had also started to have some learning difficulties at school and with friends during this time.

As sole parents often without help from a partner, several of the mothers here chose to take less demanding jobs while their children were young, which allowed for more flexible caregiving, though this typically meant less money and economic security for the family. At the time of her interview, Jamie was living in subsidized housing outside of Boston with her three children. She had left an entry-level position in the corporate world after a divorce because of increased demands at home. Now, she was working for her uncle because of the flexibility the job allowed. “It wasn’t corporate so there was no benefits . . . no sick days, no personal time, no benefits. Only got paid \$13 an hour. But had the benefit of the fact that it was family, so that if I needed I could bring my kid into work with me for a little bit. Or (leave) if I needed to pick her up.” Similarly, mothers in the Massachusetts FG raised concerns about being able to leave work to come into the classroom when needed or getting called in to talk to the principal. One mother in this FG reported, “I lost a job because of school breaks. You have to take a day off to talk to teachers.”

Several mothers said they felt disapproval from others about prioritizing care of their children over work. A mother of two in a Denver FG said she had to explain why she was searching for work during school hours. “I don’t like putting my kids in afterschool programs. I have to be there to do their homework. So trying to find a job during the hours they are in school is very hard . . . . Going out there in the workforce and trying to find that. That’s not accepted at all.” Many respondents were aware that for middle and upper-income families, this impulse to be there after school to spend time with children is lauded (Blair-Loy, 2009), whereas low-income single mothers

trying to achieve this ideal may be criticized and told that they should be focused on working to move out of poverty (Acs et al., 2005; Dodson, 2007; Hennessy, 2015; Mink, 1998).

While many respondents recognized that changing jobs or work schedules was necessary to meet the care needs of their children, this often left them trapped in low-wage positions without any potential for advancement. One mother in a Denver FG said, "I feel like right now I'm stuck with working part-time, which is good because I get more time with my kids. It's a blessing, but if I can't advance myself, how am I going to be self-sufficient ever?" Still, many respondents said that being present was the only way they could ensure the health and safety of their children. In both FGs and interviews, mothers talked about children being at risk when they were forced to choose between children and work. Several parents spoke of leaving young children on their own because they had to go to work early, stay late, or maintain "open schedules," reporting to work whenever they were called in by a supervisor. One mother in a Massachusetts FG said, "My daughter with autism, who's 11, has to be outside all by herself until the bus picks her up." This was not a safe arrangement in her view, however, the message was clear that she needed to bring home a paycheck, and she felt she would be unable to do this if she were to leave her job.

Mothers who had safe and reliable child care available to them through family reported less stress about leaving their children in potentially unsafe situations. Regina said in her interview, "child care was not a problem because I had my family, which is huge, to watch him. They are very supportive and they always minded him." Mothers who did not have family available to offer reliable child care, often had to turn to the state for child care vouchers or subsidies, and the problems women reported with these programs were extensive. In both FGs and interviews, mothers complained about lengthy waiting lists for spots in subsidized daycare centers with one mother saying, "that waiting list is a trip" and another explaining, "My baby gotta go to daycare because I have to work." Even when they secured a voucher and spot in a child care center, many reported conditions in daycare centers that accepted public vouchers were often unsafe. Portia, a mother who participated in a Denver FG, explained she had to move her daughter out of her daycare because they did not even change the child's diapers during the day. She then complained to the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP), but they took no action. Since she was "afraid for her (daughter's) health," Portia pulled her child out of daycare. She subsequently lost her job because of lack of availability of other daycare spots, and at the time of the FG was being evicted for non-payment of rent.

Another common dilemma that parents faced was having to care for sick children. Jill, a single mother of a five-year-old son in Boston, said in her interview, “Another issue I have to think about now especially being single, I have to think about if he is sick, like sick days because I don’t have sick days at work.” Not only did the majority of interviewees and FG participants report lack of access to sick days at work, but many also claimed that employers were not flexible or understanding when their children were sick during work hours. One of the mothers in the Massachusetts FG who worked in the health care industry added her experience missing work when her children were sick. “My boss told me, ‘this is your job you need to be here.’ Well, I know my kids are my priority. Yeah, and I did get fired from that job too.” Mothers also mentioned being ill themselves—one, with pneumonia—and still going to work either to save their few sick days for kids or because they would lose earnings that they needed. According to another mother in the same Massachusetts FG, “I lost my job because my daughter was sick. *It’s not something you plan [Emphasis Added]* She woke up sick and had a fever. This was in fast food [work]. I wasn’t going to let someone say that I had to choose between my job and my child.” She called in to say that her daughter was sick, and then was fired but, as others in the group pointed out, would it have been better to leave a sick child and go handle customers’ food? Throughout both interviews and FGs, the overwhelming majority of mothers indicated they prioritized the care of their children above the responsibilities imposed by employers when the two conflicted.

*Disruptions from work.* While mothers in FGs and interviews described striving to “be there for their kids” while at work, their children were generally viewed as obstacles to their work performance by supervisors and others. Respondents reported being punished by their employers for not prioritizing their work responsibilities. One mother in a Denver FG said, “I am not the worker they want because I am a mother.” Many said their jobs expected “open availability” in terms of being called to come in, but this did not line up with the realities of child care. Another Denver respondent reported that she would be starting a new job soon but would have to tell them she’s only able to work five hours a day until her daughter gets off a waiting list for after-school care. “She’s on four waitlists. But I can’t leave a seven-year-old alone. I broke down this week.” In the same FG, a participant described the guilt she felt because her daughter was getting punished at school because her job was making her daughter chronically late for school. She said, “My (overnight) job was over at 7:30 a.m., but they’d need to be at school at 7:30 a.m., so I’d have to sneak out a little bit early. But then the school would give

my daughter detention for being late . . . She's not a bad kid. She's waiting at the door for me to go to school."

In more drastic cases, parents reported being fired for having to leave work to pick up/drop off children and for not being able to immediately change work hours. One mother in a Georgia FG said she was fired after having to take off from work when her child was ill and child care arrangements were disrupted. In fact, 60% of parents in the Georgia FGs said they had lost a job specifically due to problems with child care arrangements or lack of child care. Similar complaints were heard in the Denver FGs. One Denver mother stated, "I had to leave to pick up my kids from school because the person wasn't reliable and would forget. That's the reason why my boss started letting me go." For many, there was no recognition by work supervisors of their care responsibilities. In the same Denver FG, a mother described the cycle, "If my boss gives us extra minutes of work, then I'm late to pick-up. The late fee (at daycare) is the worst . . . if they (supervisors) are going to keep us in these jobs, then they need to understand that."

The mothers we spoke with indicated it was impossible to separate their home and work lives because the responsibilities were constantly overlapping. For instance, several said they felt judged by teachers and school administrators for not being present at their children's school because they had to work to bring home a paycheck. Mothers in a FG in Denver indicated that pressure from kids' school and daycare administrators "makes you feel like the shittiest parent alive," saying teachers and school officials blamed parents for any issues the children were having at school and at times seemed not to believe their "work excuses." Another mother in the FG said, "There is this weird catch-22. If you're busy and you're working, you can't be involved, but there's times when I'm here and I feel like there was a lot of like, 'We don't want you here.'"

Throughout the interviews and FGs, a theme of hiding children emerged as a strategy for getting and keeping a job. Many mothers said they were forced to hide their status as parents from employers in order to get hired. Fran, a single mother of two young children living in public housing in Boston said in her interview, "It's hard to get hired when you are a parent, but I need to get a job first to get a voucher for her to go to daycare." In an FG discussion in Georgia, participants said that discrimination against (poor) mothers is everywhere and that they had to "hide or lie about" being parents in workplace settings. Many respondents reported denying or not mentioning they had dependent children (particularly young ones) living at home during interactions with potential or current work supervisors. One mother said she would not even tell co-workers that she had a child. Another parent sitting at the table said she told her employer that her children were living with a

relative. One respondent explained to the FG that when she interviewed for a job, she fabricated child care arrangements because “you won’t get hired or you’ll get fired if they don’t like your child care.”

Mothers in the Massachusetts FGs reported similar conditions in terms of discrimination against parents at work. One mother summed it up, “There is parent discrimination going on. They know you have kids, they won’t hire you.” As such, these FG participants also said they concealed children’s existence from employers for as long as possible. Always hide your children, we heard parents advise one another across the FGs. A mother in a Massachusetts FG described her experience, applying for a job at a warehouse. She said she brought her baby with her because she had no place to leave him and did not want to miss out on the opportunity. She made it clear that she would arrange child care once employed, but she thinks the image of her holding a baby ended any chance of being hired.

Hiding the presence of children was recognized by interviewees and FG participants as a necessary condition to get or keep a job, and this hiding would often begin during pregnancy. They would hide being pregnant, explaining that “you will be fired” if the employer knows you are pregnant. One mother in a Denver FG reported losing her job when her baby was born early, and then as a result, losing her housing. She said,

After my first pregnancy, I lost my place . . . my water broke early . . . had to have an emergency C-section, so I couldn’t pay my rent and so I lost my place. I had to stay there for 70 days, and all the medicines they gave me I had to go out and sell them, so that once my baby does come home she’ll have somewhere to go.

When one of the facilitators in a Georgia FG raised the Pregnancy Discrimination Act and the fact that it is not legal to fire a woman because she is expecting, the participants responded that enforcement is non-existent in many workplaces.

Most of the positions held by interviewees and FG participants did not offer any maternity leave, making it difficult for women to juggle work and parenting in the period after birth without any financial support. Paula, a mother of three who worked as a community coordinator in the local school system where her children attended said, “Thank god I had my baby in the summer because I had to take maternity leave, but I didn’t get paid nothing during that time.” Since her position was funded through a grant, she was not part of the school union and her position was not eligible for benefits. Without leave or accommodations to ease the transition home and then back into the workplace after the birth of a child, many of the mothers reported extreme

stress. One mother in a Denver FG said, "I had just had a brand new baby and I was in the hospital stressed out. I was worried about everything. Crap that I couldn't fix. I ended up in the hospital with a 3-day-old baby, worried about how I'm going to pay the rent."

*Disruptions from welfare.* In order to manage conflicting work and family demands, poor mothers are routinely forced to rely on government interventions and programs, intended to provide temporary aid. Time and time again, interviewees and FG respondents reported that instead of simply providing help, these programs also caused stress and instability for their families. In fact, in a search of interview and FG transcripts, respondents only raised problems related to applying for or receiving public benefits. These issues kept emerging in all the FGs and the majority of interviews. At the heart of the discussion across interviews and FGs, we heard parents say, "You just go in a circle," and "You do the right thing and you lose everything," or "You try to move ahead and they push you right down." One mother in a Denver FG explained, "I have lost hope that these government programs are even trying to help us."

A common sentiment across interviews and FGs was that applying for and retaining public benefits was so time-consuming that it was like a full-time job. In fact, a participant in a Denver FG reported waiting in line for 10 hours just to submit paperwork to apply for her family to receive benefits. Similarly, Claudia, a single mother of a 12-year-old daughter in Boston, reported in her interview that she had to temporarily halt her job search after becoming homeless because securing subsidized housing required her full attention. She and her daughter had been forced to leave their apartment because the building had been sold and now were in the process of finding, applying for, and securing low-income housing. Claudia could not continue applying to jobs while they were homeless because she said, "I just spent most of my time filling out applications, trying to find housing." The stress to keep up with the requirements to maintain public benefits took an enormous toll on these families. "You just have to work really hard and like it's unnecessary—the stress that they put on you to keep it (public assistance)." Julie, an interviewee attending nursing school in Boston, had to track down and spend what amounted to hours convincing her professors after every class to sign off on study time that they did not witness in person so she would meet the requirements for her child care voucher. She reported,

What they don't get is that like for college the class will be three hours long, but the teacher will tell you, you need to do six hours altogether, literally they want you to sign in and be studying there for three hours during week but it's



not like with the teacher so it's hard to keep track of the hours . . . you are wasting my time by having above and beyond proved to you that I was doing my school work, like it's craziness.

Several participants spoke about the process of applying and re-certifying their benefit applications as not only time-consuming but also demoralizing when they were trying so hard to end their reliance on public assistance. One mother in a Denver FG said, "I don't like taking the paperwork to have my employer sign the TANF form that I actually work there. The work verification is very demeaning and embarrassing. It automatically puts you at a different level with your employer."

Even when mothers had done everything right in terms of completing and submitting the required paperwork and following program guidelines to receive public benefits, they said to expect to be blamed for paperwork errors and other mistakes. A mother in a Denver FG said, "You fill out every paper. You fill out every form. You jumped through every hoop and then it's somehow your fault?" In fact, the mothers in this FG advised one another about submitting forms to receive public benefits to "always keep a copy, never give them the original," because paperwork frequently gets lost and recipients have the most at stake to lose. Julie reported in her interview that she had to retain a legal aid attorney because her daughter's child care voucher had been revoked when she was about to start school due to a processing error. In this case, she had kept proof through copies and emails of all the required paperwork, but the voucher was reinstated only after the legal aid attorney became involved. Not having resources for legal counsel and knowledge of the rules and regulations of programs put many respondents at a disadvantage in trying to use public benefit systems. Parents in Massachusetts FGs and interviews talked about how applying for housing, for example, would often spark a rigorous inquiry into the extended family. A recently evicted mother, whose brother had allowed her family to double up with them until she was approved to stay in a shelter, described how someone "knocked on his door" to look into his home to determine if his sister's homelessness was legitimate. In the end, his aid to his homeless sister and her children became grounds for denying her public assistance.

Other ways the administration of public benefits kept respondents trapped in poverty were through the "cliff effect" and limiting their pursuit of higher education while receiving assistance. The cliff effect occurs when benefit recipients start to earn more at work and then lose benefits such that their family becomes disadvantaged in the aggregate (Cauthen, 2006; Dinan et al., 2007). One mother in a Denver FG stated, "They reduced my food stamps and took away my TANF (cash assistance), so now I have to show how much I'm

paying in rent because my rent went up as well. They said it was because I was earning that much, but it was only for a month.” Often, because these parents had fluctuating schedules, their benefits would be adjusted to the level of a higher monthly paycheck, only to have their hours cut the next month. After experiencing punitive effects when trying to make positive changes, many reported losing faith in the system of public assistance. Meghan, a single mother of one son living in public housing in Boston, expressed in her interview that she no longer believed the system of public benefits was designed to help mothers move their families out of poverty. She said, “It doesn’t matter if you’re not making it, it doesn’t matter if you can’t save up for a house, or if you are living in poverty all your life as long as you’re working; that’s all they care about.” Because respondents knew they would not be able to move out of poverty working in low-wage jobs, many expressed the goal of going back to school. In fact, all of the interviewees indicated they were currently pursuing or planned to pursue some type of remedial, college, master’s or work training. However, they were also aware they would likely lose access to the public benefits if they were to become full-time students (Katz, 2019). One such FG respondent explained to the group,

My twins were little, they were barely a year. So I went back to full, full-time, and I was a student worker for \$10 an hour, 10 hours a week. I relied heavily on work supports, but when I was signing up for CCCAP (child care assistance program in Colorado), I was never told if you’re going to school full-time then there is a two-year cap, they never even mentioned it . . . . Its the continual message: We don’t want you to be self-sufficient. We don’t want you to have a better job because then you can’t rely on us, can’t be enslaved by us, to this system.

Similarly, many mothers said they were not told by case workers about rules and regulations like work requirements when attending school until it was too late for them to adjust their plans, leaving them feeling they had been set up to fail.

In addition to the difficulty of applying for and retaining public benefits, many of the programs and case workers were not set to accommodate recipients parenting responsibilities, despite the programs being designed with the goal of providing support to mothers and children. Meghan said in her interview, “I am working and at school during the week, so if I have to go to a meeting on the weekend, I’m going to have him (son) with me.” In Colorado, FG participants complained that children were not allowed to attend any of the meetings where attendance was required to retain public benefits, and there was no effort to provide a babysitter. Several mothers also said the

meetings were not scheduled close to where they lived, which posed a problem for those without access to transportation. One mother in a Denver FG described her struggle to meet the requirements of multiple benefit programs. She said, “When I first tried to sign up for TANF (cash assistance) they told me I had to go to a mandatory class. Well, I have my classes at CCE (Child Care Education to receive subsidized child care) that I have to go to today, so I told them I’m not going to make your class. And they were like, ‘Well, you have to make the class or you won’t get TANF.’” In this case, the offices administering cash assistance and child care were presenting conflicting requirements to the same recipient presumably due to a lack of communication with each other and with the families they were serving.

## Discussion

By combining in-depth, over-time interview data with multi-city FG data, we offer an examination of the major concerns and critical views of low-income mothers confronting the complex demands of work, family, and social program regulations (Guest et al., 2017; Lambert & Loiselle, 2008; Morse, 2009; Patton, 1999). It is significant that in different individual and group conversations with poor mothers spanning across the United States over a period from 2009–2016, similar themes emerged related to the conflicting demands of work and family, and the undermining nature of public benefit programs designed to mitigate this conflict. Our qualitative study adds women’s voices to research exploring the extreme consequences faced by mothers who cannot afford the supports wealthier families rely on to mitigate work–family conflict (Hennessy, 2015; Williams & Boushey, 2010).

This article also examines the impact of the third institutional force that is uniquely faced by low-income mothers. Poor single mothers, disproportionately black and Hispanic women, earning poverty wages, must turn to public assistance programs to supplement their income (Hays, 2004; Hennessy, 2015). When they do, an additional set of demands and scrutiny enters their lives, which are already overloaded with work and care responsibilities (Hays, 2004; Levine, 2013; Pearson, 2007). This intersection of low-wage work, family carework and welfare regulations, which impacts millions of working women in the United States, has been largely ignored in work and family scholarship. In our view, this population is overlooked because they continue to be viewed, not as working women but as “welfare mothers” who have historically been stereotyped as lazy, uneducated, and often delinquent parents (Dodson, 2007; Hays, 2004; McCormack, 2005; Mink, 1998; Verduzco-Baker, 2017).

### *Work–Family–Welfare Conflict*

For decades, the public narrative about poor mothers has been rooted in the assumption that these mothers are not to be trusted and must be strictly regulated to move into the workplace and become “self-sufficient” (Dodson, 2007; Hays, 2004; Katz, 2019; Pearson, 2007). Recent efforts to attach more stringent work requirements to the receipt of food aid and public health care reflect the ongoing assumption that low-income women seek public aid to avoid working (Hays, 2004; McCormack, 2005; Mink, 1998; Reiley, 2019). Yet for millions of working mothers, eligibility for such aid is based solely on how little they earn. Low wages are concentrated in jobs that are disproportionately filled by single mothers and women of color. Such low wages necessitate seeking assistance and thus submitting to regulations that disrupt work and family life.

Our data adds to the research that shows low-income parents often spend an exorbitant amount of time dealing with complex rules and regulations, paperwork, and meetings to attain and retain public benefits (Hays, 2004; Pearson, 2007). These “administrative burdens” have been examined as particularly onerous for low-wage mothers who need assistance to meet children’s basic needs (Herd & Moynihan, 2019). This policymaking at the street level not only overburdens low-wage parents but is also often ideologically driven, particularly against poor people, leading to experiences of disrespect and shaming when seeking assistance (Levine, 2013; Pearson, 2007). Pearson (2007) found that case workers in Georgia discouraged welfare recipients from pursuing educational opportunities, because of their sole focus on getting them to “work first.” Levine (2013) found that many low-income women learn to distrust case workers, because of negative experiences when case workers did not act in the benefit recipients’ best interest. Across interviews and FGs, we heard from mothers who said case workers were only concerned with making sure they were working regardless of the impact on their families. According to respondents, there was nowhere to turn for support to help them navigate the conflicting demands of family, public benefits, and jobs.

### *Working Toward Solutions Together*

Our findings highlight the need for a streamlining of policies within and across each state and public benefit program and resolving conflicting requirements that are burdensome for poor families. We found that programs providing child care, food assistance, and income aids often had contradictory rules, were applied differently from one office to another, and demanded time-consuming application and maintenance work. These programs also

lacked necessary supports for parents like providing child care during mandatory meetings. As such, the data here support the expansion of two-generation programs that focus on providing coordinated and individualized services to poor families, working with adults and children together (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014). Since our sample draws from several states, it is difficult to offer potential solutions for specific public benefit programs. Still, the data illustrate how the disruptive impact of varied and changeable public assistance rules, combined with the legacy of the welfare system, impedes the stability and mobility of poor families (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Hays, 2004; Hennessy, 2015; Mink, 1998).

Furthermore, our data point to flexibility as critical to accommodate the needs of low-income mothers. In cases where schools, employers, caseworkers, and non-profit programs offered these mothers flexible accommodation, they were often able to satisfy both work and care obligations. This may mean providing an option for after-hours parent-teacher conferences or an early or late drop-off or pick-up from school. Such accommodation on the part of school officials may also help to create an atmosphere of understanding about the needs of low-income parents and address concerns raised by mothers in this study about school officials and teachers blaming them when kids have problems in school and not believing that parents' lack of availability is related to work commitments. In the workplace, when supervisors offer workers the flexibility to move around schedules to meet the needs of the family, employees may be able to retain their employment and become more dedicated to their employers (Dodson & Luttrell, 2011). For those low-income mothers pursuing higher education, it is necessary to reduce the number of required work activities (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Katz, 2019). It is also important to educate the staff and case workers administering public benefits not only about the potential long-term benefits of higher education for this population (Pearson, 2007) but also about the rules and regulations related to public benefits and education in their state/locality. Several of the mothers in this study reported problems working with case workers to retain benefits while attending school. If case workers could assist benefit recipients in this way, such interactions may begin to build trust between recipients and case workers and allow for a more productive relationship (Levine, 2013).

Overall, we recommend changes in the following three policy areas. These recommendations emerged from our data as areas that could reduce the harm poor families experience navigating work and care at the bottom of the labor market. Above all, the United States should join other advanced economies in investing in universal child care that matches the working lives of employed parents, including low-wage mothers. Our study found it is often very difficult to locate and secure convenient, affordable, quality child care where mothers

trust their children will be safe (Levine 2013). Thus, creative and varied care options, including options for children with special needs, should fit the lives of parents who have non-traditional, irregular, and unpredictable schedules. Another theme that echoed through this research was the need for access to education or skills-building programs to exit the dead-end labor market. Whether through supported access to higher education or apprenticeship programs, parents stuck in low-wage jobs should be provided with opportunities for advancement. The third short-term change that would have an important impact would be setting a minimum income standard. This could be achieved through a combination of wages, tax credits, subsidies, and services for families. These three foci would provide low-income mother-headed families with greater immediate stability and opportunities to move out of poverty employment. Advances in these policy areas would also reduce the embedded biases that low-income families continue to face, despite being employed.

If future policy efforts seek to intentionally open the door to poor women, they must also contend with the predominant narrative about welfare mothers. Low-income mothers, including those interviewed here, will have to come out of hiding and trust that they will be supported and not punished for prioritizing parenting (Levine, 2013). A theme across interviews and FGs was the strategy of hiding children and/or pregnancy to get by at work. Professional women too have described the need to appear unencumbered to ascend in their fields (Blair-Loy, 2009; Williams & Boushey, 2010). Yet, low-income mothers, particularly black and Hispanic women, have long understood that their fertility is not only an impediment to moving up—it is also viewed as evidence of irresponsibility, echoing welfare stigma (Hays, 2004; McCormack, 2005; Mink, 1998). In order to expand advocacy and leadership for working mothers' rights and benefits, members of vulnerable populations will have to be convinced it is safe not only to reveal their status as parents but also that their need for accommodations will be treated as worthy (Williams & Boushey, 2010). Much more research and scholarly attention is needed to deepen our recognition and understanding of the widespread experience of work–family conflict for mothers who continue to need public assistance.

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