

**Keeping Jobs and Raising Families  
in Low-Income America:**

***IT JUST DOESN'T WORK***



***A Report of the Across the Boundaries Project***

Conducted by  
The Radcliffe Public Policy Center and  
9to5 National Association of Working Women



# Keeping Jobs and Raising Families in Low-Income America: It Just Doesn't Work

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Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study  
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9to5 is one of the leading working women's advocacy organizations in the United States. Through research, publications, and grassroots activism, 9to5 has established a track record in advocating for more effective workplace options directly relevant to working-class women.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2000, the Public Policy Center at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study and 9to5 National Association of Working Women launched the *Across the Boundaries* project, a two-year, multi-tiered study of the work and family conflicts that confront low-income working parents, usually mothers. The fieldwork took place in the cities of Milwaukee, Denver, and Boston, where researchers gathered abundant qualitative data from parents working in low-wage jobs, teachers and child care providers working in low-income neighborhoods, and employers who hire and supervise entry-level employees. Over the course of 18 months, researchers met with nearly 350 people in interviews and focus groups conducted in homes, workplaces, schools, churches, and community centers. Complementing other national research on work and welfare trends, this report synthesizes diverse narratives of American lives, accounts that offer intimate portraits of the nation's economic "bottom third," where millions work and raise their families. (The bottom third is a term used to describe households whose annual income is under 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold.)

To varying degrees, all working parents confront considerable challenges as they strive to pursue their careers and advance in their chosen fields while nurturing healthy and satisfying family relationships. But for families in the bottom third of the economy, economic pressures and lack of resources intensify the ordinary challenges associated with maintaining a job and raising a family, elevating these struggles to the level of a daily crisis. These families are more likely to have a family member with special needs and less likely to have needed flexibility on the job or to be able to afford substitute care. The results can be disastrous for both families and for employers.

### Key Findings

There are four major policy-oriented findings discussed in this report. First, most respondents in all three subject groups (low-wage parents, employers, teachers and child care providers) expressed the opinion that "It's just not working," identifying an entrenched mismatch between the imperatives of raising families and keeping jobs in low-income America and describing intractable conflicts at the most basic level between the safety, survival, and education of children and their parents' ability to keep any kind of employment.

Second, the majority of all three groups of respondents agreed that current strategies for caring for children in low-income families are fragile, fluid, and patchwork, and that the upheaval associated with

this patchwork approach destroys many employment efforts. Nearly half of all parents in this research reported that they experienced some kind of job sanction, including terminations, lost wages, denied promotions, and written and verbal warnings as a result of trying to meet family needs.

Third, respondents expressed concern that inadequate parental time and attention—which is a concern for all children in our society—may be especially detrimental to children in low-income families because their parents cannot afford to buy substitute care. Furthermore, children in low-income families have a well-documented higher prevalence of chronic health issues and special learning needs (in this study, more than two-thirds of the parents reported they have at least one child with either a chronic health issue or a special learning need). Children confronting the challenge of a chronic illness or a learning disability require significantly more time and attention from parents and other adults than do children without such challenges in order to stay healthy, do well in school, and manage the obstacles associated with living in poverty if they are to grow up into stable and contributing citizens, workers, and parents. The parents in this study, however, are often unable to devote this time without jeopardizing their ability to support their families.

Finally, working parents and employers agreed that work schedule flexibility reduces the conflict between jobs and family life, particularly by helping parents attend to their children's health and educational needs. However, many employers do not regard such flexibility to be an option for low-wage workers in today's workplace culture. Equally important, many parents reported that flexibility alone would not be enough to enable them to reconcile keeping a low-wage job with raising a family. In addition, many families reported that workplace flexibility translated to being allowed to bring children to work, sometimes regularly, though often not officially.

Beyond these policy-relevant findings, this report paints a holistic picture of daily life in low-income America, describing respondents' day-to-day feelings: their enthusiasm for their jobs, their hopes for economic advancement, and their concerns—and, in some cases, despair—about unstable family care situations, job demands, housing instability, lonely children, and troubled adolescents.

Above all else, researchers were impressed by how frequently the three groups of respondents stood on common ground. Encouragingly, on numerous issues employers, parents, and teachers and child care providers expressed a shared interest in the development of alternative strategies to promote families, jobs, and communities.

## Policy Implications

The report details a number of policy initiatives on the part of employers and public policymakers that would help increase family and employment stability. Like families everywhere, low-income families need three inter-connected basics: time, not just to care for family emergencies but time to be a family, to enjoy and nurture each other, to be involved in their children's educations and in their communities; sufficient income to support their families and to afford time off from work; and access to quality care-giving resources for the times they cannot care for family members themselves.

Policies recommended include giving workers more control over their schedules and time off when needed for family illness, school activities, and relaxation. A prohibition against mandatory overtime and the right to some paid sick leave and vacation time should fall among minimum labor standards. Public policy should also include expansion of the Family and Medical Leave Act to cover more people and more care-giving situations and to provide a source of income during leave. In order to allow reduced schedules for those with greater care-giving responsibilities, part-time work must receive equal hourly rates and at least pro-rated benefits, and be covered by unemployment insurance. Policies governing Temporary Assistance to Needy Families must allow reduced work hours for those with a family member who has special health or educational needs with no effect on access to benefits over a lifetime.

Government can help develop model employer policies by directing tax and other public dollars to reward workplaces that meet the family-friendly policies listed here. Built into any such incentive programs should be the provision that dollars go directly to worker benefits. While the supply of child care needs to be increased, including during nonstandard shifts, public funds should especially be directed toward development of family-supporting jobs where people live and at hours that benefit child well-being.

The *Across the Boundaries* researchers hope that the study's findings will illuminate the effects of post-welfare policies on the social stability of the economic bottom third of the nation and challenge the notion that low-wage work sustains a family. This study goes beyond the usual discussion of welfare reform—which typically has focused on welfare rates, employment, and changes in absolute poverty—to raise questions about the health of family life, the feasibility of low-wage workers' career and economic advancement, and the impact of low-wage work patterns on children. This report is presented with the intention of integrating the projects' findings into national work and family discussions, so that the particular needs of this third of our nation's families will be central to all future work and family policies and initiatives.

# INTRODUCTION

## Keeping Jobs and Raising Families in Low-Income America

Today, most American families, particularly those with children, face a tough challenge meeting work obligations and simultaneously caring for their families. As Americans exceed workers in all other industrialized nations in average hours spent on the job, time for family and community life has been eroded throughout American society.<sup>1</sup> However, a review of the expanding literature on work and family life reveals that the issues that define this field are largely based on middle-class family life. The harsh “time bind,”<sup>2</sup> the domestic labor balance of dual-earner couples,<sup>3</sup> the gender expectations that lead to “mommy-tracking,”<sup>4</sup> and the career “off-ramps” associated with marriage and childbearing<sup>5</sup> are terms describing work and family dynamics as they affect middle- and upper-income Americans. This same focus is reflected in emerging public and private programs and policies designed to address the tension between pursuing a career and taking care of a family. Such approaches to alleviating the work and family crunch as flexible work schedules, job sharing, and telecommuting are most likely to be available at larger firms and to higher-wage employees.<sup>6</sup> These benefits are usually unavailable to low-wage and entry-level workers who often work for smaller companies and/or in service-sector jobs; when they are available, low-wage workers are less likely to be able to take advantage of them.

The mainstream work and family discourse has presumed that a family has an income sufficient to provide its basic needs. But working parents of families in the bottom third of the economy do not earn a wage that allows their families to meet national self-sufficiency standards, which are regionally specific measures of incomes needed to ensure that minimal family needs are met.<sup>7</sup> (The “bottom third” is a term used to describe households whose annual incomes are under 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold. In 2001, the poverty threshold as determined by the Department of Health and Human Services is \$17,650 for a family of four in the 48 contiguous states.<sup>8</sup>)

To varying degrees, all working parents confront considerable challenges as they strive to pursue their professions and advance in their chosen fields while nurturing healthy and satisfying family relationships. For families in the bottom third of the economy, however, the challenge of maintaining a job and raising a family rises to the level of a daily crisis.

Considered in a historical context, it is not altogether surprising that lower-income families tend to be omitted from the mainstream work and family discourse. The discourse that surrounds the working

poor—a population disproportionately comprising single-mother families and families of color—is rooted in an entirely different policy arena. The status of poor Americans has been consistently examined through different ideological and political frameworks, focusing on single motherhood, lack of labor force participation, and dependence on public assistance. These socioeconomic issues could be analyzed through a work and family paradigm that recognizes the harsh effects of joblessness and living in poverty, but with the exception of the work of a few notable researchers,<sup>9</sup> this has not taken place. Instead, low-income family problems have most often been segregated into politicized discussions of irresponsible fertility, welfare reform, and getting low-income parents to go to work. For the most part, so it remains today.

Consequently, policy discussions of the work and family problems that low-income families confront have been embedded within highly politicized debates about welfare reform, the minimum wage, and tax credits and other “work supports” designed to increase the likelihood that low-wage-earning parents will enter and remain in the workforce. The major goals of national policies for poor Americans have been to reduce the number of families receiving welfare benefits and to move these parents into jobs, which are mostly entry-level. And there have indeed been recent well-publicized decreases in the national and child poverty rates. However, it should be remembered that once the income of a family of four exceeds \$17,650, the federal government no longer counts the family as poor—whether or not they can actually “make ends meet” on such a low income.

## The *Across the Boundaries* Project

This is a report of the *Across the Boundaries* project, a study of everyday life in low-income America. The project seeks to foster new ways of thinking about low-wage work, family care, and the economic imbalance that affects millions of families and their communities, and society as a whole.

The fieldwork took place in the cities of Milwaukee, Denver, and Boston, where researchers gathered abundant qualitative data from parents working in low-wage jobs, teachers and child-care providers working in low-income neighborhoods, and employers who hire and supervise entry-level employees. Over the course of 18 months, researchers met with hundreds of people in interviews and focus groups conducted in homes, workplaces, schools, churches, and community centers. Complementing other national research on work and welfare trends, this report synthesizes diverse narratives of average American lives—accounts that offer intimate portraits of the nation’s economic “bottom third,” where millions work and raise their families.

There are four major policy-oriented themes discussed in this report. First, most respondents in all three subject groups (low-wage parents, employers, teachers and child-care providers) expressed the opinion that “It’s just not working,” identifying an entrenched mismatch between the imperatives of raising families and keeping jobs in low-income America and describing intractable conflicts at the most basic level between the safety, survival, and education of children and their parents’ ability to keep any kind of employment.

Second, the majority of all three groups of respondents agreed that current strategies for caring for children in low-income families are fragile, fluid, and patchwork, and that the upheaval associated with this patchwork approach destroys many employment efforts. Nearly half of all parents in this research reported that they experienced some kind of job sanction, including terminations, lost wages, denied promotions, and written and verbal warnings as a result of trying to meet family needs.

Third, respondents expressed concern that inadequate parental time and attention—which is a concern for all children in our society—may be especially detrimental to children in low-income families because their parents cannot afford to buy substitute care. Furthermore, children in low-income families have a well-documented higher prevalence of chronic health issues and special learning needs. (In this study, more than two-thirds of the parents reported they have at least one child with either a chronic health issue or a special learning need.) Children confronting the challenge of a chronic illness or a learning disability require significantly more time and attention from parents and other adults than do children without such challenges in order to stay healthy, do well in school, and manage the obstacles associated with living in poverty if they are to grow up into stable and contributing citizens, workers, and parents. The parents in this study, however, are often unable to devote this time without jeopardizing their ability to support their families.

Finally, working parents and employers agreed that work schedule flexibility reduces the conflict between jobs and family life, particularly by helping parents attend to their children’s health and educational needs. However, many employers do not regard such flexibility to be an option for low-wage workers in today’s workplace culture. Equally important, many parents reported that flexibility alone would not be enough to enable them to reconcile keeping a low-wage job with raising a family. In addition, many families reported that workplace flexibility translated to being allowed to bring children to work, sometimes regularly, though often not officially.

But beyond these policy-relevant findings, this report paints a holistic picture of daily life in low-

income America, describing respondents’ day-to-day feelings: their enthusiasm for their jobs, their hopes for economic advancement, and their concerns—and, in some cases, despair—about unstable family care situations, job demands, housing instability, lonely children, and troubled adolescents.

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***The Across the Boundaries researchers hope that the study’s findings will challenge the notion that low-wage work sustains a family.***

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Above all else, researchers were impressed and encouraged by how frequently the three groups of respondents stood on common ground. On several occasions, employers, parents, and teachers and child-care providers expressed a shared interest in the development of alternative strategies to promote families, jobs, and communities.

The *Across the Boundaries* researchers hope that the study’s findings will illuminate the effects of post-welfare policies on the social stability of the economic bottom third of the nation and challenge the notion that low-wage work sustains a family. This study goes beyond the usual discussion of welfare reform—which typically has focused on welfare rates, employment, and changes in absolute poverty—to raise questions about the health of family life, the feasibility of low-wage workers’ career and economic advancement, and the impact of low-wage work patterns on children. This report is presented with the intention of integrating the projects’ findings into national work and family discussions, so that the particular needs of this third of our nation’s families will be central to all future work and family policies and initiatives.

## PROJECT METHODOLOGY

### Background and Goals

The *Across the Boundaries* project is a two-year, multi-tiered research project conducted jointly by the Public Policy Center at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study and 9to5 National Association of Working Women (9to5). Both the Radcliffe Institute and 9to5 have significant experience bringing policy makers, researchers, and activists together to share their respective knowledge and to work jointly on policy questions relevant to workers across the income strata.

The project began as an outgrowth of discussions between these organizations about the plight of working poor women and their families in the national context of welfare reform. In 1996 sweeping legislation was passed by the United States Congress that

changed the nature and extent of cash assistance provided to low-income parents, which disproportionately affected single mothers. As a part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) was replaced with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF). Among other notable reforms, PRWORA placed a lifetime five-year limit on the receipt of benefits, changed the name of the program to reflect the temporary nature of the benefits, devolved administrative responsibility to the states, required that recipients demonstrate some work effort, and emphasized that the program's intent is to subsidize work transitions only.

Since the passage of that legislation, dramatic drops in welfare caseloads, increased labor force participation, and recent small wage gains for working poor parents have received considerable publicity.<sup>10</sup> But their own previous research, as well as other studies, suggested to the researchers at Radcliffe and 9to5 that existing analyses offered only limited information about the multiple family and social impacts buried in this transformation. A singular focus on the national trends of welfare caseload reduction and lower unemployment rates could entirely obscure the real effects on mothers, on the workplaces where they spend so much of their time, and on the futures of their children. As a result, the two organizations shared a strong interest in exploring the following questions:

- How does the structure of work in low-wage jobs facilitate, constrain, or otherwise shape the ability of families to fully realize their economic, care-giving, and community responsibilities?
- How do parents working low-wage jobs experience and try to manage the tensions between meeting the demands of low-wage jobs and engaging in socially expected and personally meaningful involvement in their children's lives, their families, and their communities?
- What are the major challenges and recommendations for change voiced by workers, employers who have sought creative workplace responses, and community informants (school teachers, child care and youth workers, health care providers)?

The project was designed to go beyond a study that would simply outline the boundaries of the work and family dilemmas of low-income parents by conducting research that would identify strategies used by some of the country's lowest-wage workers as they sought to meet the often rigid demands of the labor market and simultaneously meet the needs of families on poverty wages. The researchers hope that the

study's results will be used to develop useful ways of supporting low-income working parents in their efforts to sustain meaningful lives in the face of welfare reform. As a result, they also sought to design a study that would identify which, if any, institutional policies and practices in the workplace and in the community have improved the ability of low-wage working parents—usually women—to integrate their work, family, and community roles.

The project team was particularly interested in delineating what they termed the “crossroad,” where work, family, and community both intersect and fragment for low-wage parents. This crossroad is:

- where parents experience and try to manage the tensions between meeting the demands of low-wage jobs and engaging in socially expected and personally meaningful involvement in their children's lives, families, and communities;
- where employers and supervisors are quietly developing strategies (that they do not necessarily publicize) to help their low-wage workers maintain continuous employment; and
- where teachers, school administrators, and child development workers are working with low-income parents to help them sustain meaningful involvement in their children's educations while maintaining employment.

## Methodology and Demographics

The *Across the Boundaries* project gathered information principally from low-income working parents (mostly women), and secondarily, from employers in industries that employ low-wage workers and from key community informants (mostly teachers, child-care workers, and local social service providers who work principally with children from low-income families). More than 342 people took part in the study by participating in either in-depth interviews or focus groups held in one of the three major study sites: Boston, Milwaukee, and Denver. These study sites were chosen because they:

- represent different phases in welfare reform efforts (Wisconsin was in the first wave of reform legislation; Massachusetts in the second wave; and Colorado's efforts were not implemented until after PRWORA);
- represent a diverse range of living and working conditions within which to examine these issues and compare variations; and
- both organizations (Radcliffe and 9to5) have significant networks in each site enabling quick access to study participants.

Exploring the tensions caused by competing, multiple roles for low-income parents requires the collection of rich, qualitative data. For this reason, the research methodology included the use of contextual data from the three cities in the study as well as theme-gathering focus groups, intensive one-on-one interviews, and interpretive focus groups with respondents from all three groups. Each component of the research design is described in greater detail in Appendix A. Relevant demographic information about study participants is provided in Appendix B.

## Research Findings

### Keeping Families Well and Keeping Jobs

This section of the report describes issues that all three groups of respondents identified as overlapping and interconnected forces in the everyday lives of poor Americans. The study focused in particular on the intersection of family and work life where wages, work schedules, job changes, social support systems, child care issues, children's schooling needs, family health issues, and parents' capabilities interact to determine the daily lives and the futures of these families. From a public policy perspective, it is sometimes politically necessary and certainly easier to address separately such issues as child care, learning disabilities, health benefits, and wages when formulating supports, sanctions, and policies. But policies designed to promote family stability and employment are never isolated in their effects, regardless of how policy makers intend or envision them. The result may be social policies and programs that are chaotic or ineffective and that may conflict with each other or with existing policies. Low-income families have no choice but to respond to the daily demands as they arrive, as overlapping, simultaneous, and competing pulls. Thus, while these findings identify repeated themes, they are not presented as distinct issues. Rather they are presented with their complications, attachments and contradictions in accordance with how parents, teachers/child care providers, children and employers face and react to them every day.

With all employed Americans working an increasing number of hours, the availability of reliable non-parental care has become essential for most families in the United States. This is especially true for low-income working parents. While child care research has traditionally focused on preschool children, recent work has also begun to look at the needs of school-age children, preteens, and adolescents, who still require consistent adult care and supervision.<sup>11</sup> A growing number of families also care for elderly, fragile, and ill family members.<sup>12</sup>

With no national family care policy, most care-taking is performed by family members or purchased

through expensive private services. Decades of research has documented that high-quality, market-based child care is very expensive. In the US today, child care costs vary considerably, but they are high everywhere. In 2000, the average annual full-time cost for a four-year-old in an urban area child care center ranged from \$3,640 in Arkansas (Conway/Springdale Counties) to \$8,121 in Massachusetts (Boston area). For an infant, the same costs were \$3,900 in Arkansas and \$12,978 in Massachusetts.<sup>13</sup> A recent study found that 40 percent of working poor families with children under 13 reported paying for formal child care. Among these families, the average cost of care was \$237 per month for kids under 5 and \$175 for kids ages 5 to 12. For these families, child care expenses represented almost 20 percent of their earnings.<sup>14</sup> Given that many low-income families make less than \$20,000 per year (in this study more than two-thirds of the working parents earned less than \$20,000), these child care costs are prohibitive. Precisely for this reason, welfare reform programs shifted significant federal funding from income supports to child care programs. But several years into the welfare reform experiment, it is clear that these efforts are not meeting the child care needs of low-income families.

In recent years, an estimated 12 to 15 percent of the nation's eligible children have been served by the Child Care and Development Fund, a federal block grant intended to support child care for low-income families.<sup>15</sup> Research suggests that relatives and friends are the most common sources of child care. These informal-care providers are most often grandparents, siblings, or friends whose assistance is likely to be more flexible as well as inexpensive.<sup>16</sup> Various studies of "kith and kin" child care suggest that such care—particularly that given by relatives—is based on kinship relationships and less on financial incentives, arguably a positive motivation.<sup>17</sup>

But a review of several studies concludes that, according to some measures, the quality of informal child care may be lower than regulated, formal care.<sup>18</sup> Other research suggests that many children are spending increasing time home alone and that low-income children are more likely to be spending this time in poorer and more dangerous neighborhoods.<sup>19</sup> And one post-welfare study of 872 families in Arizona who had left TANF reported that almost half of the parents with children under the age of five and 65 percent with children ages six to twelve had no child care, not even arrangements with relatives or neighbors.<sup>20</sup> Other research on the quality of child care reveals parental concerns about the care that low-income children under the age of five receive.<sup>21</sup> Some studies reveal care levels that are less than adequate.<sup>22</sup> Although a substantial amount of research has been undertaken on low-income children and on children in families that have left welfare, the current full-day

caretaking arrangements for most low-income children whose parents are in the labor force remains undocumented.

### *Patchwork Child Care*

The difficulties of meeting the care needs of children, particularly those with such special care needs as asthma, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and learning disabilities, emerged as a major theme among all the groups of respondents in this inquiry. Many parents and teachers emphasized that pre-teens and adolescents need as much supervision and attention after school as do young children, though for different reasons.

Overall, parents spoke from their own immediate circumstances about the difficulties they face finding good care for their children. Teachers and child care providers offered intimate observations about children and families, many of whom they have known over an extended period. Employers, many of whom are parents, reported that they are able to understand, and even identify with, some of the conflicts that their employees face. But, at the same time, they often spoke of a “bottom line” and of the business liabilities that children’s needs for care and attention during working hours create. Additionally, the fact that a large number of children have special care needs was identified by both parents and employers as particularly threatening to parents’ employment continuity and thus to their economic stability.

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### ***Parents described child care not so much as a routine, but as an orchestra, a complicated ever-changing array of age-specific arrangements.***

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The effort required to care for and monitor a child while holding a job is considerable, especially if one cannot purchase routine, daily, full-time care. For the parents in this study, that kind of child care is largely unknown and unobtainable. They described child care not so much as a routine, but as an orchestra, a complicated ever-changing array of age-specific arrangements. From their descriptions, it clearly emerged—despite all their efforts, the complexity of their plans, and the number of people they call upon for help—that many families do not have child care arrangements that cover their entire working and commuting day. Above all else, the high cost of child care is what leads many parents to create fragmented patchworks of less expensive informal arrangements. It is precisely these informal arrangements, as other research has shown, that often tend to break down, causing parents to miss more work and to be late more often.<sup>23</sup>

Some strategies reported by parents include relying on grandmothers, who might be stopping by one or two mornings to baby-sit; sending a child to a youth club one afternoon; or working two evenings in order to be able to stay home with a child two afternoons a week. On other days, the same family might rely on the oldest child (in some cases this older child is younger than 10) to watch a younger child for two evenings each week. A child as young as seven might be alone for almost an hour each morning before walking solo to the corner to catch a bus for school.

An earlier study conducted in Boston provided the example of a single father who leaves his two children at his mother’s apartment while he works a night shift. His mother, who has severe diabetes and can’t even walk down her front steps, wakes the children shortly before their father arrives at 2 a.m. They aren’t asleep again until he gets them home—a 30-minute drive—about an hour later. He seldom sees them in the morning, and their teachers have told him that his children sometimes fall asleep in class.<sup>24</sup>

Most parents interviewed for this project called their child care arrangements acceptable, a finding that corroborates other recent research.<sup>25</sup> However, the in-depth interviews told a different story. Problems with child care are the most common cause of conflicts and anxiety for parents at work and often result in some kind of work sanction being taken against the parent. Furthermore, looking closely at the detailed interviews, researchers often found gaps in much of the daily child care. Equally compelling, for many families no two weekdays were described as having exactly the same child care routine. In addition, researchers found that even when parents stated they were satisfied with their child care, most went on to describe ongoing problems and to report their anxieties about their children’s safety and care. In fact, few low-income parents seem to have experienced or to expect a child care schedule that is routine and secure, such as those described by the employers with children.

Slightly more than half (52 percent) of the parents interviewed have no regular access to a car. Therefore, in addition to expense, proximity is a major factor in making child care and work arrangements. For parents whose children’s schools or child care providers are located far from their workplaces, the difficulty of reaching their child should an emergency arise is a major concern; several parents cited this as a reason for seeking a different, more conveniently situated job. Finally, parents’ degree of trust, or lack of trust, in their child care providers emerged as a deep and abiding concern, which sometimes contradicted their statements of satisfaction with their child care situations.

Many of these mothers expressed explicit distrust of public child care and/or child care not provid-

ed by their own relatives. This distrust comes from their own experiences, visits to “voucher” family day-care centers, or stories that they have heard about overcrowded or neglectful child care centers or family day care to which the state refers low-income families. Several mothers in a focus group discussion expressed deep suspicion about all group care and about child care provided by “the state” in particular. Describing her experiences with a state-funded service, one Boston mother said, “I just had to change... the lady there, she wasn’t watching him too well... One of the kids scratched him [her baby] in the face.” A Denver parent said she does not trust the publicly available care and confided, “I am really, really in a bind, but... I don’t trust anybody with my son. Nobody. If I don’t know you, then you can’t watch my son.” And a Milwaukee mother expressed her own desperation, “I almost had to put up a sign in the local high school... I had to go to that extent.” But, she said, she was “searching for someone who is trustworthy. You should be picky.”

The respondents who seem to have the most successful arrangements are those who co-parent with a spouse or partner, or who have several close-kin relatives (most often grandparents) who provide extensive, flexible, and trustworthy child care. Researchers noted, however, that several mothers recounted stories about neglectful or casual care provided by relatives in cases where the caregivers felt they had an obligation—but no real desire—to watch their relatives’ children.

Like the low-income parents in this study, respondents in the employer group who are parents often also use multiple child care arrangements, a finding that has been reported in other research.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, similar percentages of the employers rely on family, on friends, and on institutional care, and just as many complained about the costs of child care. But employers’ child care arrangements are much more stable than those of the low-income mothers they employ. They have greater financial resources to devote to paying for care, and they experience far fewer gaps in care, with most reporting that their child care arrangements cover approximately a nine-hour workday.

Some employers reported that they are able to take advantage of more flexible work arrangements. For example, one employer in Denver, whose housecleaning service employs 40 workers, described a routine that he and his employed wife have for their two children. It includes after-school clubs, soccer practice (he takes off one afternoon each week to coach), riding lessons one afternoon, and another after-school program to promote academic progress. He and his wife are able to arrange their work schedules to attend every parent-teacher meeting. He repeatedly expressed sympathy for his employees, 80 percent of whom are

parents and many of whom are single mothers. Though he offers flexible work schedules, he refers to the wages as “poverty level,” and he knows this precludes employees from most market-based child care services.

In a focus group discussion, an employer who supervises office workers and is also the mother of a young child expressed her own conflicted feelings about putting pressure on mothers who face child care conflicts. She admitted that when she “thinks about it in terms of being a mother,” she found it extremely difficult to penalize another mother who did not come to work for three days because of her baby’s fever. She would never leave her own baby “that sick.” But, she said, “when I think about it as a boss...” she admitted, as did other employers in this study, that she has fired mothers for staying home with sick children.

All respondents who are parents (in all three groups) reported that they share the belief that participating in children’s schools and educational activities is an important part of parenting. Some employers and teachers were openly critical of parents who “don’t focus enough on education” as demonstrated, they said, by parental absence from school events. But it is clear from the focus group discussions that few of the low-wage parents who work full time are able to attend. Some reported that they work part time specifically so that they can be more available to their children.

The complexity of patchwork child care frustrated everyone. Teachers, of course, have a close-up view of the impact of these arrangements. They generally discussed child care in terms of “appropriate care” and attention, particularly focusing on school readiness for pre-school children and on academic success for children already in school. A fifth-grade teacher from Boston argued that inconsistent care contributes to instability in children’s daily lives and to a lack of preparedness for learning. “The kids... they come back and say ‘I left my book here or there,’” the teacher explained. “And that can be five different places.” The families of her students are generally poor, with parents who work as cooks and janitors. She described a direct connection between the organization of children’s lives and their parents’ employment. “They don’t see much of their parents. A lot of these people could only get jobs at night...” so “kids come in without signed permission slips, or homework [done]” and are unprepared for school.

In a group discussion, teachers in Milwaukee focused on the impact of parental involvement in children’s daily lives—or lack of it—on students’ academic progress. A second-grade teacher remarked that in recent years parental participation at her school has “dwindled down to where it hardly exists,” whereas “a few years ago, it was huge.” A colleague remarked that

parental attendance at evening events has decreased, and that it is hard for teachers to adjust their parent-teacher time to parents' non-traditional work schedules. A third teacher said that, while 80 percent of all parents in her school attend the parent-teacher conferences, they hardly ever attend the more entertaining events, such as concerts and plays. Other than a required meeting after the first report card is distributed, she said, "Pretty much the only contact they have is negative, when their child has done something wrong," and they thus have no choice about attending a meeting at the school.

This focus group of teachers considered how this situation only widens the schism between parents and school staff. One bilingual teacher pointed out that, "For some [parents], their own education is not high... they may not speak English that well." A teacher in Boston remarked that field trips present an economic burden on some families and they, "have to plan four weeks in advance to pay \$2.50" for their child's participation. While she tries to include them as chaperones so they might enjoy the event with their children, these parents will seldom be able to take time off from work or adjust their schedules, options more likely to be available to parents with higher-wage, higher-status jobs. In a focus group in Denver, one parent described the core of parents who always attend the field trips and school parties, and who help with the annual school play as "more middle-class." When she was finally able to attend one event, she said, "I felt like I was not even a part of her [daughter's] school."

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***While most respondents considered children's care and well-being a major national issue, they don't see how parents can obtain quality child care earning the wages they now receive.***

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One Boston mother told researchers that she left a job she liked because, "It was taking this toll on my son... I couldn't take one day off to go on a field trip with him... I wasn't there for him." A mother in Milwaukee told researchers that the reason she keeps her current job is that it gives her "some flexibility to be with my children. That's the only reason why I am still there." Her wage at the time she was interviewed was \$7.50 per hour.

Employers reported that the unreliability and complexity of their entry-level employees' child care arrangements can be a significant impediment to conducting business. On any given day, workers might arrive late because of a transportation problem—often in getting a child to her or his destination—or will call

in sick at the last minute because of a child's illness, or simply fail to report to work and afterwards explain they had a child care emergency. Some of the employers acknowledged how difficult it can be to balance family needs with work demands. Another spoke for many, however, when he said that "these people don't seem to know how to be organized" in their child care arrangements. But whether an employer blamed unreliable child care arrangements on a parent's lack of options or lack of organizational skills, they all agreed that employees' child care issues pose an ongoing problem for employers. One employer in a focus group in Denver remarked, "It's like everything is shaky.... The car doesn't work in the winter, the buses are late. The kids are sick, first one, then the other.... It becomes a real problem for us."

In one Boston-based focus group conducted late in the summer of 2001, parents began the session by expressing explosive anger at news that many had just received in the mail. In order to more efficiently use school buses in Boston, a cluster of schools announced that when school opened in three weeks the school day would start one hour later, at 9 a.m. rather than 8 a.m. Parents who already had been leaving their children alone for about 30 minutes each morning so that they could arrive in time for jobs that started at 8 a.m. would now have to quit or leave their children alone for more than an hour and half and wonder, as one parent put it, "Did that child ever get to school?" Employers in all three cities expressed some disgust with the way that public schools institute schedule changes, schools closings, professional days (when teachers are in training) and shortened days for other activities. Despite employers' common criticism that parents do not have tightly organized child care plans, or good child care "contingency plans," as one security guard supervisor put it, most employers were also critical of school departments' apparent lack of regard for parents' work schedules. Researchers noted that several teachers and child care providers spoke to these issues as well, but reversed culpability, faulting employers' lack of regard for family obligations and disinterest in how this can affect children's overall advancement, particularly in the case of poor children. A Boston after-school teacher commented on the effect this is having on the preparation of the future workforce. "They ought to remember," she said, "they are going to be hiring these kids in about eight years."

Parents and employers discussed another problematic aspect of patchwork child care. Researchers found that many mothers were trying to orchestrate the arrangements from afar, calling from work to check and recheck how the daily version of child care was working out. Parents admitted that this meant making and receiving phone calls during working hours; some described sneaking into offices to find a

phone. One employer in Milwaukee remarked with some amusement that she “really didn’t expect there to be much work done” at the office that she supervised between 3 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. when parents made calls to babysitters, after-school programs, neighbors and relatives, to find out if children had arrived safely. Of course, as several employers from all three sites complained, when these fragile arrangements fall apart, workers may be forced to leave work abruptly or fail to show up at all—both happen far too often, according to both parents and employers.

Some parents said in focus groups that they rely heavily on an older sibling (usually a daughter) to take care of a smaller child. Predictably, conflicts arise when the older siblings, often in middle school or high school, want to participate in after-school activities and sports or to get jobs of their own. A school bus driver and hall monitor in Denver described children whose afternoons are unsupervised while their parents work. Numerous children, she reported, “would talk about how they were supposed to go here or there (after school) but they wouldn’t go,” and no one would really know. She reports talking with young children and encouraging them to cooperate with their mothers’ after-school plans but, “some were just using it as a chance to hang out where they shouldn’t and some... were trying to get their mom fired, you know, so she could be home with them.”

This comment illustrates another aspect of the child care dilemma noted by all three groups of respondents: the need for parents to spend more time monitoring their children’s non-school lives. The concern arises not only because parental or adult support is important for routine homework completion and school success, but because adult supervision is also seen as critical for general discipline and overall social development. The different respondents observed that growing children and adolescents—who must make choices about their relationships, peers, and activities—need interested and firm adults who help them “stay on the right path.” However, a simple review of work schedules revealed that some parents in the study are unable to spend more than a few waking hours each day with their children and many others might make it home in the evenings but after long days and long bus rides home have “just enough to make dinner and crawl into bed,” as one Boston parent explained.

Even though work schedules are so obviously a major cause of parental absence, in interviews and focus groups some employers and teachers spoke more often of “dysfunctional families” rather than work and family conflicts. A teacher in Milwaukee remarked with some derision that, “You can always tell the kids that are not getting proper supervision at home.... It shows in how they act up in class.” She spoke of this

as a parental choice, even though she herself had just remarked that parents’ work schedules often hinder their parenting.

Slightly more than half of the low-wage parents said they have some time to assist their children with homework, but, overall, researchers found that mothers’ absences from their children’s lives was a topic of considerable discussion and a chronic source of anxiety for mothers. All three groups considered children’s well-being to be associated with maternal/paternal presence or, in lieu of parents, the presence of another responsible and caring adult. Child development experts agree with these parents. They argue that the quality of children’s care and the opportunity to spend time building attachments to their parents is critical to their lifelong well-being.<sup>27</sup> While most respondents from all three groups said they consider children’s care and well-being a major national issue, they do not see how parents can obtain quality child care earning the wages they now receive, a view that experts confirm.<sup>28</sup>

### *When Children Need Special Care*

The *Across the Boundaries* project took special notice of the health and learning status of the children of low-income working parents in this study in an effort to capture the complexity of care demands that these parents face. Other research has established a higher prevalence of certain health problems among low-income children and this research certainly reflects those findings as well.<sup>29</sup>

At the time of this research, the low-income working parents in this study had a total of 237 children. Of these children, the parents interviewed currently had direct-care responsibility for 187 children, four percent of whom were 18 or older but still living at home. (Most of the other 50 children had grown up and moved out by the time of the interviews, although some were now living with fathers or other relatives or in foster care. All parents in the study had primary responsibility for at least one child at the time of the interviews and focus groups.) Of those 187 children, 23 percent have diagnosed asthma, 11 percent are being treated for attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and 18 percent have a diagnosed learning disability. Additionally, children had other ongoing health issues such as lead paint poisoning (3 percent) and emotional problems, such as depression (14 percent). Twenty-five percent have experienced conflicts at school and seven percent have been emotionally withdrawn. It is important to note that not all chronic illnesses are disabling; as many as 30 percent of all children are estimated to have some chronic health condition.<sup>30</sup> However, the caretaking demands, time, and stress associated with children’s illnesses, as well as the overall higher prevalence of illness, can present

major challenges for families with limited resources. In addition, the quantity and quality of attention received by children who are challenged by physical or emotional illnesses or learning disabilities will have life-long effects on them. Recent research has shown that primary caregivers are the individuals with the greatest impact on determining outcomes, both at school and in medical institutions, and that they bear the major responsibility for marshaling the government resources that ill or disabled children depend upon.<sup>31</sup>

Raising children with chronic health or learning problems is especially demanding of adult time and patience and often requires ongoing specialized medical attention and educational intervention. Research has shown how physically and emotionally demanding caring for a baby or child with developmental delays or disabilities can be on a caretaker, particularly a mother.<sup>32</sup> Usually such health conditions require more visits to doctors and other health and education professionals, such as respiratory therapists, physical therapists, and reading specialists.<sup>33</sup> The typical wait in a crowded pediatric office can be lengthy. When that wait is combined with a trip to the doctor's office made via public transportation, a doctor's office visit can easily represent a lost day of work for a parent. Depending on the season and the severity of the illness, this can happen as often as several times a month.

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***Parents of children with special needs were particularly likely to feel they are constantly being pulled in two different directions and that, at both ends, the need is critical.***

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From the pediatrician's perspective, vigilant care is mandatory for a child's well-being, especially a chronically ill child. In another study, a pediatrician who provides asthma education to parents in a Boston elementary school told parents, "You can't just go about business as usual when you have a child with asthma. It is simple. This child needs more time, more care, and sometimes you won't be able to do much else." As he spoke, parents in the group glanced at each other shaking their heads. Later he remarked, "I just don't think they get it... this is serious, you know. We have pediatric deaths from asthma these days." But a parent confided later, "It's not that we don't get how serious this is, but he doesn't know what we have to do everyday just to be sure they have food and a roof. I mean, that's a health problem too, right?"<sup>34</sup>

An *Across the Boundaries* participant from Wisconsin was informed she cannot use her own sick time to care for her kids when they are sick. Although

her daughter's asthma causes problems, particularly in the winter, she was told, "No kid gets sick that much." The woman told researchers she stayed home with her daughter, "whether they liked it or not." But she was reprimanded for using sick time rather than vacation time.

Each health problem has its own rhythm, demands, and complexity, according to parents and teachers. Children with a diagnosed learning disability need more support to learn and, depending on their state's regulations, have special educational plans that include ongoing meetings with parents. Special education teachers, after testing children to ascertain the root of their learning problems, will also arrange for a social work home visit, request that parents complete assessment forms on the child's developmental and medical history, summon parents to meetings to discuss the child, and expect parents to attend follow-up meetings over the course of the school year. School officials can become frustrated when parents do not participate actively in this process, sometimes assuming that, as one educator in Denver put it, parents are "just not that interested in how this kid is going to progress." But other teachers expressed more sympathy for working parents whose places of employment will not allow time off for these activities. And many parents remarked that they simply cannot attend meetings at school unless they are scheduled in the evening, after 6 p.m., long after teachers and staff have gone home. Some employers admitted they were skeptical that parents actually had school business to attend to. Even when it is indisputable that a parent needs to attend a school meeting, some employers are less than accommodating. One employer with a temp agency in Boston said repeatedly, "We are not running a social program here.... Those are not our issues."

Children with ADHD are particularly in need of dependable routines, patterns, and caretaking that they may rely upon as they learn to build more focus and self-control.<sup>35</sup> When these children experience problems, stress, and unanticipated changes in their routines, it can easily become a problem for their caretakers and, consequently, a work issue for the child's parent. As mothers with children who have special needs report, the adults in charge of their children when they are at work, including teachers, child care providers, school nurses, babysitters, and after-school providers are very likely to call and call again. A young mother of a child with ADHD in Denver reported, "I get at least three calls a week." She suggested that her jobs last about as long as her supervisors can tolerate the interruptions.

Children with asthma tend to experience episodic events, some children more frequently than others, touched off by seasonal and environmental stimuli, exercise, or stress.<sup>36</sup> A child may go for weeks without an incident that requires contacting parents,

or, with bronchial dilation equipment on hand, may be attended to by school or child care staff. Yet other children have frequent events and some require emergency intervention. Earlier research in Boston revealed that in one school (kindergarten through eighth grade) most children's health insurance covered only one breathing assistance device.<sup>37</sup> Parents were reluctant to have a young child carry it (many had been lost) when so many asthma attacks took place at home, in the evening. At that school, despite a well-trained staff, some children would need emergency assistance and would have no equipment on hand, necessitating emergency room care and, subsequently, parental absence from work.

Most teachers and child care workers consider parental availability essential to support all children in managing change in their lives. But children with special health, learning, or emotional needs present an even greater challenge. Children with chronic disorders, some of whom take medications that require periodic adjustments, are much more sensitive to change.<sup>38</sup> Teachers, child care providers, nurses, and after-school teachers in focus groups and interviews admitted that they are sometimes risking a mother's job by calling repeatedly when she is at work. "But if this child is acting out and distracting all the other children... or the kid is wheezing and his eyes are bulging, I call. I call again and again," said one frustrated Milwaukee school teacher. Parents of children with special needs were particularly likely to feel they are constantly being pulled in two different directions and that, at both ends, the need is critical.

## Work: Wages, Attitudes, Job Schedules

### *Wages and Income*

The 97 families of the parent sample in this study overall had a higher hourly wage distribution than those in other research that has examined the status of families who have left welfare.<sup>39</sup> Because half of the low-income parents participating in this project had

either left welfare three or more years earlier or had never received welfare, their income potential is likely to be higher than those who left or lost welfare benefits more recently. Additionally, the median education level of the parents in this study is higher than the median education level for welfare recipients nationally over the last decade. Consequently, they are more employable and are more likely to have reached a higher hourly wage level. (This variable was analyzed based upon all jobs worked. Thus  $n = 110$  because some parents have worked more than one job at a time.) About 40 percent of these parents were making more than \$10 per hour, a wage distribution more similar to other studies whose samples have combined both welfare leavers and low-wage workers who had not received welfare.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the parents' relatively high hourly wage rate, the distribution of annual incomes for low-income families in this study was lower than might be expected. The annual incomes for these families at the time they were interviewed are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 below. Once the size of each family was factored in, most of these families' incomes fell well below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold, which was the maximum income level for the poor families in this study.

Researchers observed two trends that may explain why these low-wage working parents, most of whom are single mothers, have a relatively high hourly wage and still have such low annual incomes. The first is that a high proportion, almost 40 percent, of these parents work less than full time (defined here as 37.5 hours per week). The second is that this group has a high incidence of "churning" or job changing. Both trends would reduce the annual total of hours worked and would consequently reduce annual incomes even when hourly wages are comparatively high.

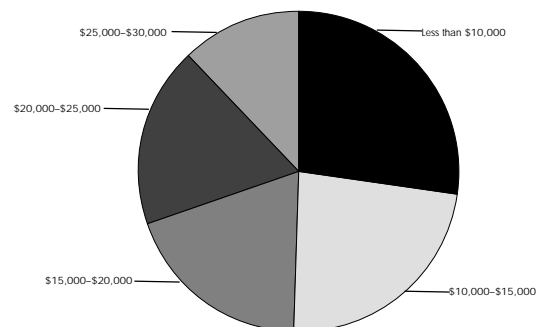
### *Kinds of Employment*

Similar to findings from other research on post-welfare and low-wage work, the most prevalent workplace settings for the low-wage working parents in this study

**Table 1: Annual Family Incomes**

Less than \$10,000:	27%
\$10,000 to \$15,000:	23%
\$15,000 to \$20,000:	19%
\$20,000 to \$25,000:	18%
\$25,000 to \$30,000:	12%

**Figure 1: Annual Family Incomes**



were, in order, personal services, clerical, retail, and light manufacturing. Typical jobs included administrative assistant, data entry clerk, day-care teacher, factory or light manufacturing worker, fast-food server, and home health aide.

In focus group discussions and interviews, parents spoke about the circumstances of leaving or losing jobs, and about work opportunities they were seeking. Often, they said, they are attracted to the possibility of a new job because it seems to have a more child-friendly work schedule, or because of its closer proximity to their homes or their children's schools or child care centers, or because they have learned from their networks that a supervisor is reportedly considerate and flexible. Child-care workers, more often than teachers, are likely to be aware of job changes among parents and are sometimes a source of information, passing good job tips on from one parent to another. Child care itself is a notoriously low-wage occupation with a very high turnover rate. One child care provider in Denver, speaking to a researcher after the focus group, told of a colleague at her day-care center who had recently left the job, through a tip from a parent, to take a better-paying job working in a dog kennel. "We pay worse than they do," she said.

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***Some employers acknowledged that entry-level work is largely without a "real future."***

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Teachers are likely to hear of parents' job changes from children, usually as an expression of the child's anxiety about the change. An after-school teacher in Boston said that children are often nervous when their parents start new jobs, which often requires adjusting to a new work schedule. "They are afraid that their parents are off at some strange new place, maybe far away, or won't be home on time," she explained. Children can adjust to a new routine pretty quickly, she said, but if the changes keep coming, they begin to "display ongoing vigilance" about their parent's location that distracts from school and homework. More frustrating to teachers and school administrators are the difficulties they face as they try to keep track of where parents are during the day. In an earlier study, an administrative director at an elementary school in Boston remarked that she guessed that as many as half her "emergency call" cards were obsolete halfway through the school year as parents changed jobs and residences.<sup>41</sup>

***Parents' Attitudes toward Work***

Echoing the findings of most research on post-welfare employment (and working people in general), the majority of the working parents in this study reported

that they like having a job. They like "having that paycheck" and they like working with other adults. Interestingly, several mothers said their jobs can be "stress relievers," giving them time away from the often harder-to-alleviate needs of their families. Those parents who described their workplace environments as flexible and friendly were the most likely to speak positively about their jobs and to look forward to going to work. In addition, as reported in other qualitative research, parents discussed maintaining a job and meeting the demands of a regular work schedule as behaviors that are "good models" that they hope their children will observe and emulate.<sup>42</sup> As one mother of three in Denver said, describing her family's industriousness, "There is no hanging around in our family... we're up and out."

Despite their generally positive attitude toward employment, however, most mothers reported that their jobs fail to provide even minimal economic security. Nor do they envision that the current job market—which has worsened since this research was completed—will offer them any real chances to advance economically or socially. Recent research indicates that this view is largely accurate. Low-skilled workers' incomes have typically increased between four percent and six percent annually, which is a similar rate to the recent yearly income gains for better-skilled, higher-paid workers.<sup>43</sup> However, because their salaries are so small to begin with, these percentage increases translate into very small real increases in income.<sup>44</sup> For example, a parent working full time at a typical wage of \$7.00 or \$8.00 per hour who receives an annual raise of four percent to six percent will see her annual income rise only \$600 to \$1,000, resulting in negligible improvement in her family's economic circumstances over time.

Reflecting on her own lack of economic advancement, one working parent in Milwaukee said, "There is no light at the end of this tunnel... It just goes on and on." Several parents discussed the necessity of getting more education if they ever hope to earn a living wage, but they wonder how they could fit more into their already-overcrowded lives. A young mother in Denver explained, "I started to take classes in the late afternoons," after her 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. job, "but... I had to cut back my hours to get there on time, and then I couldn't pay my babysitter." Consequently, she was forced to drop out of a computer training program that would presumably have improved her chances of finding better employment and stabilizing her children's lives.

Parents acknowledged that employer thoughtfulness and flexibility, and friendly co-workers attract them to particular jobs. However, in the end, said one parent in Boston, "Money is the problem." Another mother from Boston told of leaving a job that she liked for one that paid somewhat better, even though

it meant seeing her son less. "I work and all but I am not paying my bills, my credit is going bad," she said. "There's no catching up, no chance to advance myself."

Other parents, however, seem to make the opposite choice, cutting back their work hours or changing jobs because they consider the cost of working more hours to be greater than the wage gain. There has been some national research that supports this rationale, showing that the first 20 hours per week of employment offer a much greater economic boost to a family than do additional hours, particularly at higher wages, because of costs associated with more work, such as child care, and because, in some cases, the increase in income will be more than offset by a loss of eligibility for such benefits as food stamps, Medicaid, and public housing.<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, these parents' employers had fairly similar perspectives. In focus groups, some employers acknowledged that entry-level work is largely without a "real future." When asked if the jobs they offer will "lead to something more, offer a ladder upward," most employers said that, unless employees receive more education and/or learn more "marketable skills," people working in entry-level positions have no "career ladders" to climb. While good work histories can help workers find new jobs, without more education or better skills, these new jobs are unlikely to improve their economic status. One employer reflected ruefully, "I suppose the only way to do better is leave [my place of employment] and try to get something better... But really, even if you're a good worker and all... without more school they aren't going anywhere." An employer who runs a housecleaning service admitted he sought non-English speaking workers precisely because there are so few other work options that offer them a better wage and because immigrant workers tend to expect fewer raises.

A supervisor for a Milwaukee-based company in the health-care field reported that her company pays for coursework to train nurses' aides to become nurses. She acknowledged an aide would indeed have a "hell of a time" doing his or her job, taking care of children, and attending and passing all the courses. But, she said, a few of her employees have used this program and become nurses, significantly improving their economic status. She reflected that it took extraordinary determination and "kids that don't get sick too much," but some just keep at it. Among all the employers in focus groups (n = 31), this woman's firm offers a unique employment opportunity, and other employers who heard of it during the focus group praised it. One supervisor of a temporary employment agency reflected that if he could offer computer classes as part of his company's employee benefits program, he would have much more success "placing people in jobs." He continued, "They would have more skills to offer, and those skills would go with them."

Respondents frequently discussed the attitudes of employers toward low-wage workers and of low-wage workers toward their bosses and jobs. Most employers who have daily contact with their employees expressed the attitude that most parents work hard and that they have many obstacles to maintaining a job routine, given their lack of resources and the demands of raising children. "I don't think I could do it" was a common refrain heard during employer focus groups. In addition, most of the low-wage working parents in the study said that, at some point in their employment histories, they had worked for a supervisor who demonstrated sensitivity and flexibility toward their work and family conflicts, even helping to accommodate their workers' needs in ways that might make their own job more difficult. Clearly, some of these parents and employers had developed creative ways to address parents' conflicts between work and family. For example, some employers allow workers to bring children to work; some offer employees rides to work; others lend their employees money or co-sign their car loans; others provide check-cashing services.

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***Some employers attempt to treat the workplace as a source of support beyond the wage relationship.***

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Although it was not unusual to hear expressions of sympathy for their workers' plights, several employers described their low-wage employees as disorganized, or unable to coordinate their children's lives properly. Cars that break down, unreliable public transportation, lack of contingency child care, and workers' social and emotional problems frustrate supervisors. Some employers were harsh. One Boston employer said, "These women shouldn't have a child if they can't afford to." She was particularly critical of mothers who ask for time off work to care for sick children, arguing that when her husband is ill she does not expect special flexibility. Some supervisors suggested that "these people" have complicated relationships and home lives that cause disruption of work routines, even though they may have previously expressed admiration for the tenacity many low-wage parents display.

One Milwaukee employer, however, suggested in a focus group that everyone has complicated home lives, which most people hide from their employers if they can. When she was in a violent relationship years before, she told the group, her own supervisor reached out to her and offered company support. She moved and took over another regional office of that business, which, she believed, saved her life. Consequently, she explained, "I don't turn my back on people and say 'Well, this is a job, I am not going to get

involved with any of that,' or... 'I'll just get rid of her' ...because I know a lot of times it's not your fault you're in trouble."

This employer's remarks illustrated an observation that parents expressed repeatedly in their comments. It seemed to low-income parents that employers who have experienced some kind of real hardship, who are busy parents or single parents, or who have a child with a chronic illness tend to be much more flexible.

Some employers attempt to treat the workplace as a source of support beyond the wage relationship. A supervisor at a Milwaukee printing facility described how he bent the rules from time to time. "I'm willing to work with them if there's a problem, give them an excused day," he said. "I might refer them to [human resources] for child care referrals." If a worker needs to leave early even when the site is really busy, this supervisor tries to accommodate "if I know it's really important to them." In return, he says, the employees are willing to come in early or stay late the next day. "You get it back," he explained.

A supervisor at a security company in Boston described his personal efforts to provide some flexibility, often without the knowledge of his superior. "I try to work it out if someone is late because she needs to meet with a teacher or another needs overtime," he said. He lamented the lack of understanding on the part of top management. "My boss doesn't want me to be compassionate," he said. "It's a man thing. You have to be there, and if you're a woman, then you just have to adjust to being in a man's environment." In this supervisor's view, "you can't grow your business if people are leaving you" because they aren't getting the flexibility they need.

A supervisor for a cable television company in Denver observed that many supervisors "don't present a very flexible picture when dealing with low-wage workers. It's a 'my way or the highway' mentality." He urged the use of tax credits and other policies to encourage family-friendly policies. "Give the government the ability to reward companies that do offer [these policies]," he said. "Get people doing it, give them a little incentive. Others will see it and may do it, too."

Although most employers admitted that workers face intractable conflicts keeping their jobs and meeting their families' needs, respondents reported that the use of sanctions is common. Nearly half of the parents in the study reported that they had experienced some kind of sanction, including terminations, lost wages, denied promotions, and written and verbal warnings as a result of trying to meet family needs. For example, a mother in Boston, who works as a security guard for \$7.00 per hour, was called in to her 10-year-old son's school after he became involved in a fight.

(It is essential, teachers told researchers, that parents be available to help school officials respond to such incidents.) She told her supervisor she would miss a day's work, but her absence resulted in a suspension and the loss of a week's pay. A young mother in Denver explained how she lost a job she was very glad to have after her child's bout of chicken pox consumed more than three sick days. "It was the rule," she said. "They told me, 'no exceptions.'" There were several employers in this study, however, who clearly stated that they would bend or break such rules.

The idea that supervisors should be concerned with workers' lives beyond a simple "bottom-line" exchange was the single most controversial topic among employers in each of the focus group discussions in all three cities. Although employers shared many concerns, frustrations, and strategies, whenever someone suggested that employers need to take into account the needs of workers and their families, some heartily agreed, while others were ambivalent, and a few rejected this opinion out-of-hand. Of all the issues employers raised and discussed, only this one caused acrimony in the focus groups.

Employer concern and flexibility is also clearly a criterion many parents consider when looking for a job or deciding whether to stay in a current job. In one large parent focus group in Boston several women described their jobs at a security guard company. They said the previous supervisor "turned the other way" when parents brought children to work with them in the evening. The children ate dinner with their mothers, did their homework, and some even curled up in blankets to sleep. However, a new manager had taken over the week before the focus group took place. The day that he declared "no kids on these premises," respondents reported, the entire evening shift quit. One woman, a grandmother who took her four-year-old grandchild to the job, remarked that the former boss, "was no prince but he knew... This was like a job benefit... Why else would you take that little money?"

The issue of prejudice, both racial and "prejudice about us single mothers," as one mother in Milwaukee put it, was another criterion in seeking work. This issue was not specifically discussed in the same way that job benefits or child care issues were, but it was characterized in conversations as an inevitable bias that low-wage parents of color and/or single mothers who had been receiving welfare frequently confront. Parents described employers and a few public school teachers who, they said, made racist comments or comments revealing "prejudiced attitudes" about single mothers. More common were accounts of what parents considered preferential treatment in hiring and promotions.

### *Juggling, Flipping Jobs, and Scraping By*

All three sets of respondents returned repeatedly to the issue of job turnover and its impacts. Family and child care needs were most frequently cited as the reasons parents left jobs and the reason that most parents worked less than full time. As explained in the earlier section, unreliable child care is one source of parent's reluctance to work full time, and the high prevalence of families with children who have some kind of special-care need intensifies the need for parental availability. For many parents, full-time (as opposed to part-time) work would only be worthwhile if their incomes increased substantially. Because of the consequent opportunity costs associated with leaving needy children for longer periods, higher child care costs, and the loss of some forms of public assistance, full-time work is not always the best choice.<sup>46</sup>

Job turnover rates (which combine quitings, firings, layoffs, and job disappearance), vary but can be as high as 40 percent annually among lower-wage workers in the post-welfare era, and are particularly high for women and workers of color.<sup>47</sup> *Across the Boundaries* researchers found that many parents had only recently begun new jobs and that many were considering leaving their current jobs, usually because of family and scheduling reasons. Essentially, they told researchers, few jobs offer adequate reasons to stay. When jobs pay low wages and offer few benefits, and when job longevity does not provide significant improvement nor long-term career ladders, these working parents see no reason to sacrifice short-term family needs to maintain employment. In addition, some recent research on job turnover patterns among low-skilled workers suggests that those who voluntarily leave one low-wage job for another may not lose much in the process and some will even realize some wage improvement.<sup>48</sup>

The low economic status of these 97 families was reflected in numerous ways in the material conditions of everyday family life. Of the whole sample, at the time they were surveyed, only two percent of these parents owned their homes, while two percent were homeless. Just over half (52 percent) had regular access to a car (this did not necessarily mean ownership), and 53 percent were receiving some form of public assistance, such as Medicaid, food stamps, or subsidized child care, at the time of the interview. Additionally, 37 percent of the sample of low-income families sought donated food at some time last year. But beyond these statistics, researchers investigated the day-to-day impact of low wages and low-wage work on general family well-being. Most parents described ongoing tension between fulfilling the basic demands of their jobs, meeting the basic needs of their children and, in some cases, other family members, and living on these annual incomes. As a parent

in Boston put it, "No. It's not making ends meet at all. I'm robbing Peter, promising Pam, and dodging Paul. 'I'll get to you next week.' Oops, I forgot about you. You're going to have to wait.' So, no, it's not making ends meet at all."

In a focus group in Milwaukee, mothers spoke about the chronic anxiety that they and their children live with every day. These mothers said that their children ask about the possibility of becoming homeless, about whether they will have enough to eat, whether they might get some new sneakers this year. Parents told of children who won't tell their teachers that their homework wasn't completed because the lights had been turned off, or of older siblings who tell teachers they are sick so they can take care of younger siblings who are sick and thus prevent their mothers from losing wages or even their jobs. Parents disliked the dishonesty that seems to accompany poor family life but, said a young mother in Denver, "They feel shame, you know. They don't want to go telling that they haven't enough food, or clothes, or what have you."

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***All the parents emphasize the importance of education and employment. But these lessons can be difficult to communicate when children see that their parents work so hard but remain poor.***

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One employer in Denver said that one day an employee, a mother of a young child, called in to say she would miss work that day because her child was sick. This employer was not convinced the child was ill and probed for more information. The young mother then broke down over the phone and explained that she had no money and no diapers to leave with her baby at the child care center. This had happened in the past, she said, and this time she knew her baby's caretakers would not accept the child without the diapers. Her employer bought some diapers and delivered them to the child care center, enabling the child's mother to go to work. The employer explained, "Unless I had that kind of relationship with her, so that she would trust me to tell what is really going on, I would have just been angry and assumed she was screwing up." The employer admitted she would probably have held this incident against the mother, a step toward dismissal. She described how her thinking changed when she learned more about her employee's situation. "It makes a mother feel bad," she said, "to get turned away from your child care center... in front of other parents. And all because of a damned diaper." But she also understood that the child care facility was underfunded. "It's not like they can support the extras either," she contin-

ued. The solution? The employers who listened to this story all agreed that parents should have enough money to buy diapers or whatever they needed to be able to work. But they were reluctant to assign responsibility for ensuring that this basic need was met, clearly worried whatever solutions might be offered would affect their own economic interests.

Some parents who participated in the interpretive focus groups acknowledged that their own ongoing economic hardships—even though they have jobs—affect their children’s attitudes about work. All the parents who discussed their children’s futures said that they emphasize the importance of education and employment. But many also admitted how challenging such lessons can be to communicate when their children see that their parents work so hard but remain poor; in some cases these families are just as poor as they were before their mothers joined the labor market. Describing how her children perceive her job, one mother in Denver said, “I’m not moving up in society... like a person should be. It’s just a dead end.” Teachers too, consider the lessons of some parental employment to be largely negative. A second-grade teacher in Boston said that some children in her class openly admit trying to sabotage their mothers’ efforts to keep a job because their mothers are not there when they arrive home after school, are never able to participate in school activities, and, when they are home, are often too tired to pay much attention to their young children. While parents, children, and those who observe them closely recognized how the chronic hardship of poorly paying jobs diminishes the effectiveness of work ethic lessons, still most parents reported that they want to work. And many children, according to their parents, are proud of parental employment, or at least prefer it to depending on welfare.

Child-care workers were particularly acute observers of the impact of low incomes on working parents and families, because, while they observe their students and their families, some also live the part. The single most common way to keep child care for low-income families “affordable” is to keep the cost of labor low, and this means that child care workers in the United States largely fall into the category of the working poor.<sup>49</sup> Most of the child care workers who participated in this study are themselves low-wage-earning parents who change jobs fairly often and often cannot afford to place their own children in the very child care centers where they work. Also disturbing, several child care workers mentioned (after the open discussion) that they would not enroll a child in the center where they work because of understaffing.

A group of child care workers at a publicly subsidized center in Denver discussed the struggles that confront the parents of the children in their care. A senior staff person described a typical morning. “I

watch them come hurrying over... telling that little baby, ‘Hurry up, you got to run, I’ll be late again,’ or ‘You don’t want mommy to get fired, do you?’ ...I try to meet them, you know, pick the baby up, and say, ‘Let’s wave bye-bye to mommy.’” She continued, “These same parents are... struggling to pay their monthly bills... They are behind a lot, and we got to get paid, too.” Describing the economics of child care, she explained that a fee of \$150 per week for a 10-hour day works out to only “three dollars an hour [per child] for all we do.” But, she added quietly, “I couldn’t have afforded it when mine were young, not even close now on the money I make.”

The group said that many children are pulled out of a center and put into some kind of kin-care setting when parents can no longer keep up with their payments. Most expressed skepticism about these arrangements. They reasoned that, if there were good kin care to be had, most parents would go with that in the first place. An older child care worker expressed sincere worry about the children who are abruptly removed from child care centers when parents fall too far behind in their tuition payments. “They just don’t make enough money to afford it,” she said, “even as cheap as we try to make it.”

Good care, even when subsidized, is still too costly for many families. Of all low-income families in this study, 58 percent paid \$50 or less per week for their child care and another 22 percent paid between \$50 and \$100 per week. It is hardly surprising that the jobs available to them and the wages they earn have a profound impact on the quality and strength of the child care used by low-income working parents. Perhaps it is less predictable but no less true that the quality and reliability of those systems have a profound impact on a parent’s ability to hold a job—any job.

### *Take Your Children To Work (Almost Every) Day*

For most parents in this study, flexibility has a different meaning than it does in the mainstream work and family discourse. Flexibility in scheduling work has been put forward as good not only for workers and their families, but for employers because it can improve the hiring and retention of valuable employees. Generous maternity leave policy has been associated with higher employee retention following child-bearing.<sup>50</sup> Absenteeism does seem to be reduced by flexible scheduling, although it is less clear that turnover is reduced.<sup>51</sup> Current discussions about work design capture a broader idea of work and family integration. The availability of family-friendly policies, particularly when a workplace culture actually promotes their use, has been linked to positive workplace outcomes and attitudes; and recent research has focused on the effect of decision-making autonomy and greater employee control of work schedules.<sup>52</sup>

The 97 parents in this study, for the most part, do not expect to be able to adjust their work schedules or to in any way participate in creating work arrangements that would make their lives easier. With a few exceptions, for these workers adjusting work schedules means leaving a job and finding another one. The majority of the interviews and discussions about flexibility did not focus on institutionalized policies such as a family or medical leave. Parents who discussed workplace policies all assume that any such policies—if they are even aware of them—are not accessible to them, and that is often true.<sup>53</sup>

More intriguing, to many parents in this study, flexibility translates to whether or not their own particular boss will understand a family or health issue that might arise. Consequently, the attitudes and temperament of their supervisors was much more likely to be the substance of any discussion of work flexibility. Not surprisingly, in focus groups employers expressed explicit preference for precisely this kind of relationship, where workers' access to leave time, early release, or schedule adjustments is entirely at the discretion of the supervisor.

Perhaps one of this study's most intriguing findings was that the most common definition of flexibility at work was a mother's ability to bring a child or children to the workplace. Researchers were told of mothers bringing children to buildings where they work as security guards. In some cases, children of mothers who work in child care centers will be integrated into their mother's child care class or come by after their own school day ends to help out so that they are sometimes seen (informally) as an asset. Researchers listened to accounts of children working alongside mothers at community centers, copying documents or delivering files to colleagues in the office, of children sleeping while their mothers clean offices, of children sitting in fast food restaurants and donut shops or outside retail stores in malls.

In particular, researchers heard accounts of children riding around with parents who drove school buses, vans for people with special needs, and camp buses—one mother had two babies in car seats at the front of the camp bus she drove everyday. (Other research has also reported on bus-driving parents who brought their children to work.<sup>54</sup>) The study's principal investigator was driven to a focus group in Milwaukee by a cab driver whose son slept next to him at night before being dropped off after his mother's evening shift ended, unbeknownst to the cab company. One elder-care worker told us she brings her son to the house of her elderly patient without his knowledge; the four-year-old stays quietly downstairs watching television. Domestic workers, Salvation Army staff members, cleaners, custodians, and cooks quietly slip children into workplaces to avoid leaving them alone. Their supervisors either do not know this is taking

place, or they recognize it as a "benefit," a way to retain workers. As long as no formal exchange takes place, the practice is permitted. Almost all parents who bring their children to work, occasionally or routinely, consider this a generous and flexible practice on the part of their employers, one that influenced their decision to remain, as it did the security guards described earlier. Very few parents expressed opinions about whether the practice is good for their children. As one mother in Boston said, "She's with me or she's home alone."

### It's Just Not Working

To raise children and keep a job is all but impossible for low-income American parents under current conditions, according to the parents, employers, and teachers and community-service providers who participated in the *Across the Boundaries* study. While these participants represented a range of perspectives and held a variety of sometimes clashing opinions, they almost universally agreed that job schedules, lack of benefits (from employers and/or the state) and, especially, low wages, directly undermine the nurturing of children and threaten family stability—unless other resources are available. Facing this work and family dynamic as a single parent significantly intensifies the conflict.

For the higher-income participants in the study, the care services and daily work supports that they are able to purchase are taken for granted as essential elements in their strategies for maintaining healthy families and for participating in their communities and in their children's educations. Even participants with family-sustaining incomes, however, acknowledged that there have been times when it seemed almost impossible to "keep it all together." In this context, higher-income respondents (usually employers, but sometimes teachers or other community-service providers) reiterated that they "don't know how they do it," referring to low-income parents.

In other discussions, researchers learned from teachers that, indeed, low-income parents are not successfully managing the feat of keeping jobs and raising their families adequately. Their children, researchers were told, are too tired and unprepared to succeed in school. They are often sick or falling behind academically and developmentally, and are at risk for a myriad of future problems. In addition, employers told project researchers that these employees are too often tardy, have inadequate child care arrangements, don't have reliable transportation, have children and families with too many health or social challenges—all in all, they are unreliable employees. Some employers suggested that these parents should more consistently demonstrate "middle-class" values if they want to advance professionally. Most agreed, however, that without additional education, "getting ahead" is an unattainable goal for workers stuck in most of today's entry-level

jobs. Interestingly and ironically, some respondents acknowledged the paradox of their own critiques, that they could be amazed and even admiring of the tenacity of these working parents and still judge them harshly for their family and work instability.

Overall, low-income parents expressed a deep commitment to being employed and to encouraging their children to pursue their educations so that they will be able to obtain better jobs. But in their interview and focus group responses, their sense of purpose and their optimism was far outweighed by their concerns about and their frustrations with the contradictions inherent in their lives as workers and parents, their unease over their child care arrangements, their worries about their ability to pay their bills, their fears of ending up homeless, and their shared sense of futility about their lack of economic progress.

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***A failure to address the pressing needs of the families in the bottom third of our economy will have repercussions—not just for these families, but throughout our economy and our society.***

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Finally, participants in the *Across the Boundaries* project consistently voiced the belief that there is an overwhelming need for serious national and local leadership to address the intractable work and family conflicts that confront low-income working parents. This leadership, respondents said, must come especially from government and business, but also from organized labor, public schools, non-governmental organizations, and local business networks. A failure to address the pressing needs of the families in the bottom third of our economy, who are right now barely surviving despite valiant efforts, will have repercussions—not just for these families, respondents warned, but throughout our economy and our society.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Respondents in this study repeatedly told researchers that the work and family balance is not working for the working families stuck in the bottom third of the American economy. This project presents a challenge: What could be done to make it work?

As the *Across the Boundaries* research documents, families at the bottom third of our economy have complex and multi-layered needs. Like families everywhere, however, they need three inter-connected basics:

- time, not just to care for family emergencies but time to be a family, to enjoy and nurture each other, to be involved in their children's educations and in their communities;

- sufficient income to support their families and to afford to be able to take time off from work when necessary; and
- access to quality care-giving resources for those times they cannot care for family members themselves.

Even if extended child care services become more available, families will still always need time to be together. But getting more time isn't a satisfactory solution by itself if, by working less, parents jeopardize their families' economic security. They must earn sufficient income or have access to adequate income supports. Job retention helps increase earning power and meet employer needs. But in order to stay employed, workers need to know that their children are well cared for and that they can take time to be with them when necessary.

In each of these areas new private (employer-sponsored) and public policies must be created that will benefit low-income families and also help ease the work and family conflict for many other families as well.

### **Time**

#### ***Employer Policy***

Employers can help by instituting procedures that formalize the behaviors of the sensitive supervisors that parents in this study praised, policies that reduce the tension between work and family responsibilities and that allow time, not just for emergencies, but for general family and personal development as well. These policies include giving workers much more control over their schedules by instituting flexible start and end times, offering choices of shifts, allowing workers to use breaks to check on their families, and offering them time off that can be made up before or after to attend to school issues or routine medical needs. Workers also should be able to reduce their hours if necessary without penalty in wage rates or benefits, advancement, or treatment on the job.

When necessary, workers need to be able to take time off to care for minor as well as serious personal or family illness. Workers also need time for themselves. That means no mandatory overtime, and no requirement that vacation be used up and counted as family leave. Time off needs to be accessible for use within a reasonable period after beginning a new job.

In order for these policies to be meaningful, absence control efforts must minimize discipline for legitimate family-care needs. Policies should apply to all employees on a formal basis, rather than being dependent on manager discretion. And, last but not least, managers should be evaluated by their employers on how well they contribute to the work and life balance of the workers they manage.

## *Public Policy*

Government policy especially needs to recognize the extra time needs of those who care for family members with special needs. This means a change in TANF policy to allow reduced work hours for those who have a family member with special needs, with no effect on the worker's "clock" (the total amount of time someone may receive benefits over a lifetime). Pro-rated TANF benefits should be available to those whose incomes fall below a certain level and not limited to those who have no income at all.

A broader minimum standard is also needed in the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which right now excludes many low-wage workers. Policymakers need to end the minimum-hours-worked requirement in order to include part-time workers; change the tenure requirement to the job's probation period or three months, whichever comes first; and cover employers of 15 or more, as do other federal employment laws. In addition, reasons for taking FMLA leave should include routine school and medical activities and all activities and meetings considered essential by teachers and health professionals. And, given the realities of family life in the United States today, the definition of family under the law should be broadened to include other family members, such as siblings and same-sex partners. Finally, prohibiting mandatory overtime would be an important addition to minimum labor standards that the government should guarantee to all workers.

Government can help develop model employer policies by directing tax and other public dollars to reward workplaces that meet the family-friendly policies listed here. Built into any such incentive programs should be the provision that dollars go directly to worker benefits, rather than being absorbed into the business's general operating budget.

## **Money**

### *Employer Policy*

As these findings make clear, income is a work and family issue. In addition to decent wages, this means workers need access to affordable benefits and to some form of income during time off from work; they need sick leave and vacation time as well as family leave.

Employers can also help by providing equal pay rates and at least pro-rated benefits for part-time work. They can also supply education benefits and make sure employees have the flexibility to use them.

### *Public Policy*

What workers need most is a higher wage floor and the right to bargain collectively over pay and benefits.

However, sometimes a raise means the loss of access to needed income supports. In addition to supporting a higher minimum wage, living-wage efforts, and a fund for wage replacement during family leave, public policy change is needed in the areas of income supports. Specifically, workers need an increase in the funding level and eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit, food stamps, child care, and other such programs, with a sliding scale rather than absolute cutoffs. The public agencies that administer these benefits need to be open on a more family-friendly schedule.

The right to some paid sick leave and vacation time should fall among minimum labor standards. The unemployment insurance (UI) system also needs to be changed in most states to include part-time workers and those who turn down jobs for family-care reasons. In order for low-wage workers to benefit, UI calculations should include the latest quarter of earnings. Finally, TANF policies need to place more emphasis on education and training as a means of increasing long-term earning capacity.

## **Access to Resources**

### *Employer Policy*

Employers can help by providing information about care as well as access to affordable care. This could include subsidies, on-site care with sliding-scale fees, or access to sick child care (although some times, children just need their parents).

### *Public Policy*

We need to increase the supply of affordable, quality care in areas close to where people live. In addition, we must provide more training for "kith-and-kin" caretakers and make it easier for families to use public subsidies to pay these workers. Public support for child care means investing more funds in raising the quality of care and providing higher wages for child care workers.

Greater resources need to be allocated for school-age care programs, both for after school and for days that schools are not in session, and these programs should include homework and academic support so that children and parents may spend time at home together without hours of homework looming. School policies should be made more flexible, with alternatives devised for handling suspensions and illness if parent can't take time off from work. (For example, some schools have developed in-school supervision of suspended students.)

While the supply of child care needs to be increased, including during nonstandard shifts, public funds should especially be directed toward develop-

ment of family-supporting jobs close to where low-income families live and with schedules that recognize family-care responsibilities.

## CONCLUSION

None of these proposed policy changes alone will make the system work—the above list leaves out several key areas, including housing, transportation, and health care. But above all, the approach taken must address the whole family, and policies and services must fit together so that they work “on the ground” where parents every day attempt to reconcile the competing demands of work and family.

The *Across the Boundaries* research team wants to emphasize that, in order to make any of these proposals work, working parents must be part of the process of helping design their work and family lives and must be able to communicate and to be heard when the system is not working. Policymakers should establish work and family advisory groups with a genuine, not token, role in evaluating and recommending public policy.

Decision makers of all kinds must take into account the importance of family well-being for families at the bottom third as well as for higher-income families. Every policy should be evaluated by asking: How will this affect the health and well-being of children and the social stability of communities? Will this policy advance the goal of helping people to reach a level of genuine self-sufficiency?

We can make great strides at reducing job turnover and poverty for workers in the bottom third of the economy. When we do, employers and society will benefit as well by creating greater stability in the workforce, within families, and in the larger community.

# APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

All interviewees in the parents' group received a stipend of \$25 for participating in a focus group and \$50 for participating in an individual interview.

## Step 1: Analysis of Secondary Contextual Data

Contextual information on major demographic, employment, and social-safety-net variables was gathered to provide the basis for participant sampling in each of the three study sites. The purpose of gathering this information was to have some baseline data about each study site in order to develop a detailed sampling plan for the selection of the industries and child development institutions targeted to obtain the most appropriate populations of the study.

## Step 2: Local Theme-Gathering Focus Groups

Multiple focus groups were conducted in each of the study sites to further refine the interview guides to be used at the next phase of the study. The focus groups

were held separately for the three respondent groups (parents, employers, and teachers/child-care providers). Participants of these groups were asked to discuss the terms of the struggle between work, family, and community demands on parents and how employers and child development institutions experience those struggles. They were also asked to identify possible nascent collaborations between parents, employers, and schools/child-care centers that might mitigate the negative impacts of these struggles. All participants signed consent forms and each parent was paid \$25 for her or his participation.

## Step 3: Purposive Interviews

More than 200 interviews were conducted in our study sites using a standard interview guide. The guides were developed from the initial focus groups, and, to ensure even collection of data, field teams for each study site were trained together in Boston to administer each interview guide.

The interview guide for parents asked detailed questions about their personal and work history, the health and well-being of themselves and their families, their and their families' access to services, and their living conditions. Although the questions sought to

**Table A1: Overview of the Research Methodology**

<b>Step 1: Analysis of Secondary Contextual Data</b>	<b><u>Number of Participants</u></b>
Parents	N/A
Employers	N/A
Community Informants	N/A
<b>Step 2: Local Theme-Gathering Focus Groups</b>	
Parents	29
Employers	16
Community Informants	18
<b>Step 3: Purposive Interviews</b>	
Parents	97
Employers	60
Community Informants	45
<b>Step 4: Data Analysis</b>	
Parents	N/A
Employers	N/A
Community Informants	N/A
<b>Step 5: Interpretive Focus Groups</b>	
Parents	41
Employers	15
Community Informants	21

elicit a fairly comprehensive picture of their everyday lives, they focused on the extent to which the parents have been able to integrate work, family, and community roles and sought to identify barriers they have faced in trying to do so.

In their interviews, employers were asked about their personal and work histories, the health and well-being of their families, the companies that they work for, their supervision of entry-level employees, the challenges they see in retaining an entry-level workforce, and their strategies for meeting this challenge. Like the interviews with parents, the questions posed to employers were designed to elicit a comprehensive picture of the challenges they face in retaining entry-level workers, with a focus on workplace expectations and norms concerning work time—especially with regard to work flexibility and worker availability. In addition, because their own situations might conceivably affect the way they treat their employees, researchers sought information about employers' own work and family challenges.

Community informants (mostly teachers and child-care providers) were interviewed using a questionnaire that asked about their personal and work history, the health and well-being of the children that they work with, their knowledge of their students' family circumstances, and the strategies they have developed to promote their students' learning and development. In particular, informants were asked about parents' levels of engagement in their children's educations and the kinds of barriers families encounter that prevent meaningful engagement.

Participants were referred to researchers by welfare offices, welfare-to-work employment programs, and community-based organizations. Once parents had been selected for the study, efforts were made to "match" the parent with either an employer or a child's teacher/child-care provider or both. The goal was to "triangulate" the data to capture the complex and overlapping picture of work, family, and child-care/school needs and demands facing these families. The interviews were held at locations convenient to the participants, which often ran the gamut from churches to welfare offices, employment centers, social service agencies, and residences.

Immediately after each interview, interviewers completed interviewer summary sheets where they were asked to provide extensive comments about the interview. These summary sheets supplemented information obtained in the interview, and helped researchers identify emerging themes and findings from the vantage point of the interviewers.

All study participants were asked to complete a demographic profile sheet containing basic demographic information about themselves and to sign a consent form. In addition, parents interviewed were

paid \$50 for their participation in the study. A summary of selected characteristics of interviewees appears in Appendix B.

#### **Step 4: Data Analysis**

After trained interviewers completed the interviews, quantitative data from the interviews were input and analyzed using SPSS (a statistical program) and all other data were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti software (a qualitative theme coding database software). The SPSS analysis provided demographic data on participants, while the Atlas analysis allowed the research team to match themes, strategies, and best practices that emerged from the interviews with respondent demographic data.

#### **Step 5: Interpretive Focus Groups on the Data Gathered**

A second set of focus groups was conducted in each study site to help "interpret" and expand our understanding of the findings. This second set of focus groups allowed the research team to better understand the data's meaning by clarifying key findings with additional participants representing the three groups. These interpretive focus group participants had not participated in any other part of the study. As in the initial focus groups, the focus groups were held separately for the three groups (parents, employers, and key informants). All participants signed consent forms and parents were paid \$25 for their participation.

## APPENDIX B: SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

**Table B1: Selected Characteristics of Interviewed Low-Income Parents**

*Age Range of Parents:*

15-24:	16%
25-39:	60%
40+:	24%

*Sex of Parents:*

Female:	99%
Male:	1%

*Marital Status*

Single	96%
Married/remarried	4%

*Race/Ethnicity of Parents:*

African-American:	45%
Latino:	16%
Native American:	1%
White:	29%
Other:	9%

*Highest Educational Level:*

Less than High School:	11%
High School or GED:	38%
Tech School:	3%
Some College:	33%
College Degree:	16%

*Family Currently Receiving:*

Welfare:	55%
Food Stamps:	31%
Medicaid:	42%
Child-care Assistance:	8%
Donated Food:	37%

*Parents w/two or more jobs:* 16%

*Total Number of Hours Worked By Parents per week (all jobs included):*

Part-time (up to 25 Hours):	31%
Full-Time (up to 40 hours):	64%
Full-time + (more than 40 hours):	5%

*Annual Salary Range:*

\$5,000–\$10,000:	27%
\$11,000–\$15,000:	23%
\$16,000–\$20,000:	19%
\$21,000–\$25,000:	18%
\$26,000–\$30,000:	12%
Other:	1%

*Benefits via Employment:*

Health Insurance:	45%
Paid Sick Leave:	42%
Paid Vacation Leave:	48%
Retirement Plan:	35%

**Table B2: Selected Characteristics of Interviewed Employers**

*Gender of Employer Rep:*

Female: 63%  
Male: 37%

*Size of the Firm:*

<10 employees: 34%  
10 to 50: 37%  
51 to 100: 7%  
101 to 300: 19%  
301+: 3%

*Industry of the Firm:*

Manufacturing: 2%  
Retail/Personal Services: 47%  
Education/Health &  
Human Services: 42%  
Transportation/Construction: 7%  
Entertainment and Recreation: 2%

*Profit Status of the Firm:*

For profit: 66%  
Not-for-profit: 34%

*Hourly Wages of their Entry-Level Workers:*

0 to \$5.15/hr: 0%  
\$5.16 to \$7.50/hr: 31%  
\$7.51 to \$10.00/hr: 50%  
\$10.00+/hr: 19%

*Level of Turnover at their Workplaces:*

Low: 38%  
Moderate: 29%  
High: 33%

**Table B3: Selected Characteristics of Interviewed Community Informants**

*Gender of Community Informants:*

Female: 93%  
Male: 7%

*Primary Area of Work:*

Elementary/Middle/HS teacher: 43%  
Preschool Child-care Provider: 23%  
Social Worker: 2%  
After-school Provider: 9%  
Health care worker: 5%  
Other: 18%

*Institutional Setting of the Community Informant:*

School: 68%  
Health Clinic: 2%  
Community Based Org.: 9%  
Other: 21%

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