

## **Unequal Parenthoods: How Poverty Shapes the Experience of Parenthood**

Ann Meier, Department of Sociology and Minnesota Population Center  
Kelly Musick, Policy Analysis and Management and Cornell Population Center  
Sarah Flood, Minnesota Population Center

Parenthood expands one's world by creating new social networks, engaging parents in new institutions (e.g. schools) or in new ways (neighborhoods), and by deepening our investment in existing ties (Gallagher and Gerstel 2001). But, perhaps this world-expanding phenomenon is not experienced by all. New evidence suggests ways in which low-income parents' world is constricted *because* they are parents. According to Desmond (2016), housing options for those in poverty become more limited with children because landlords do not want the wear and tear and extra hassle they presume to be brought by children. Further, low income parents and their children spend more time indoors to avoid dangerous individuals and neighborhoods (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, Edin 2016). They deal with more bureaucracies and spend more time doing it (Levine 2003; Ray et al 2015). They may even retract from extended family – leaving demanding relationships of their families of origin. According to Desmond (2012; 2016), the rich web of extended family support documented in Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* does not describe the experience of contemporary parents in poverty. While middle- and upper-class parents enter new social circles and tote their children to and from opportunity expanding activities, parenting in poverty is increasingly characterized by two patterns: 1) confined solitude as parents try to protect their kids from danger and the demands of wayward extended kin; 2) submission to the demands of a range of powerful societal institutions like the state, schools, landlords, and employers that consume their time and attempt to shape or monitor their parenting practices.

### **Parenthood, Social Ties, and Poverty**

The literature on how parenthood changes social ties suggests that parents deepen ties with family members and neighbors, and they may weaken ties with (especially) non-parent friends (Gallagher and Gerstel 2001; Kalmijn 2012; Moore 1990; Munch 1997; Rözer et al. 2017). As children age, parents may generate ties through their children's school and through the non-school activities in which their children engage. To date, very little research explicitly examines how parenthood shapes social ties differently for those in and not in poverty. Existing research does, however, provide some hints about potential differences.

Rözer and colleagues (2017) find that parents who have children “early” relative to age norms, lose more friend ties and gain fewer neighbor ties than those who have children “on time” or “late.” A large body of research documents the association between early childbearing and poverty status (e.g. Penman-Aguilar et al. 2013). Thus, we might conclude that parents in poverty lose more ties. Cornwell and Warburton (2014) find that those who do shift work have fewer community ties, and shift work is most common in low-wage occupations (Saenz 2008), again supporting the idea that persons in poverty have fewer ties. DeLuca and colleagues' ethnographic work (2016) demonstrates how young people and their parents work to limit ties to those thought to be negative influences. Similarly, Desmond's work (2016) documents how poor parents shield their children from negative family and community ties, potentially cutting themselves off from these ties, as well.

## **Parenthood, Time Control and Poverty**

Levine (2013) discusses the distrust low-income mothers have with regard to their caseworkers, situating this distrust in the lack of respect they feel at the welfare office, often having to wait for extended periods of time past their appointment to meet with caseworkers. Likewise, Ray and colleagues (2015) use nationally representative data to document the significantly longer health clinic wait times experienced by those with a high school education or less, those unemployed, and racial and ethnic minorities compared to those with more education, those who are employed and non-minority populations.

In their book *Unequal Time*, Clawson and Gerstel (2014) document the spectrum of control over time that health care workers have based on the status of their occupations (from surgeons to EMTs and nursing assistants). Such class-based control of time may extend even further down the resource spectrum, rendering those in poverty with very little discretion in how they spend their time. Parents in poverty are additionally subject to the bureaucratic requirements of government benefits for their children as well as the time required of child-centered institutions like schools (for enrollment, parent-teacher conferences, etc).

In this paper we use data from the American Time Use Study to document differences between mothers by poverty status in terms of where, how and with whom they spend their time. In doing so, we assess with nationally representative data the recent, rich ethnographic accounts of family isolation, confinement, and a loss of control over time among parents in poverty. In what follows, we discuss our data, measures and methods, and we present descriptive differences in our sample that will be explored in greater depth for the PAA paper.

## **Data**

We use recent data from the American Time Use Survey's Eating and Health Module where data on poverty are included. This module was fielded in the 2006, 2007, and 2008 surveys and again in the 2014, 2015, and 2016 surveys. To avoid the recessionary period (officially December, 2007 – June, 2009), we pool cross-sectional samples from the ATUS surveys in 2006 and 2007 through November, and surveys conducted in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

The ATUS is a time diary, telephone interview study of a nationally representative sample of Americans ages 15 and older drawn from households in the Current Population Survey (CPS). ATUS respondents retrospectively report on their activities over a 24-hour period from 4:00 a.m. of the day before the interview until 4:00 a.m. the day of the interview, indicating the type of activity, and where, when, and with whom it occurred. Data are collected every day of the week, including holidays. 50% of diaries are about weekend days (25% each), and 50% are about weekdays (10% each day). All ATUS respondents were eligible for participation in the Eating and Health Module, and there was minimal nonresponse on these questions. Our preliminary analysis sample includes women ages 20-55 years old with children under 18 in the home ( $N = 11,365$  mothers). We restrict our analysis to mothers because a higher proportion of residential parents in poverty are single mothers.

## **Measures**

To assess poverty, we use indicators for whether respondents had less than or equal to 130% the poverty level, 130-185% the poverty level, or greater than 185% the poverty level for their

household size. Respondents are asked if their household income is greater or less than a given amount. This amount changes depending on when the interview was conducted because poverty thresholds are revised annually by the U.S. Census Bureau. The cutoff of 130% of the poverty level is used to indicate “*in poverty*” because this is the level at which households are eligible for many federal benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP). We compare these parents to those who are *near poverty* (130-185% poverty level) and those who are *not in poverty* (greater than 185% the poverty level).

We attempt to capture three dimensions of contemporary parenthood that we argue vary by poverty status: isolation versus contact; confinement versus engagement; and lack of time control versus possession of time control. The ATUS contain many measures that will allow us to go deeper than we have in this abstract to unpack these dimensions. For now, we present preliminary analyses with three broad indicators.

First, we assess *isolation versus contact* with a measure of how much time respondents spend alone, with household members, and with non-household members. The literature indicates that parents in poverty spend more time alone or with other household members and less time with non-household members. Second, we assess *confinement versus engagement* with a measure of how much time respondents spend at home versus away from home. The literature indicates that parents in poverty spend more time at home than those not in poverty. Third, we investigate the *lack of time control* with a measure of how much time respondents spend “waiting.” The literature suggests that parents in poverty have less control over their time and are required to submit to the time demands of others. Table 1, displays descriptive differences and t-test results comparing mean minutes of mothers’ time by poverty status.

Table 1. Average Time Use (Minutes per Day) for Mothers by Poverty Status, 2006-07, 2014-16 (N=19,134)

	<=130% Poverty (N=2,736)	130-185% Poverty (N=1,485)	>185% Poverty (N=7,144)
<b>Isolation</b>			
Alone	211.13	227.57	224.87
With Household Members	487.5 <sup>B</sup>	480.76	441.48 <sup>B</sup>
With Non-Household Members	115.97	119.1	122.8
<b>Confinement</b>			
At Home	505 <sup>B</sup>	467.23	434.74 <sup>B</sup>
Away From Home	285.94 <sup>B</sup>	325.83	361.61 <sup>B</sup>
<b>Constraints of Institutions</b>			
% Who Wait	0.2	0.18	0.16
Waiting	6.79	4.32	4.24
Waiting (conditional on participating)	34.1	24.27	26.59

**Notes:**

A=Significant difference (p<.05) in time use between <130% Poverty and 130-185% Poverty

B=Significant difference (p<.05) in time use between <130% Poverty and >185% Poverty

C=Significant difference (p<.05) in time use between 130-185% Poverty and >185% Poverty

Table 1 shows differences between those in poverty, those near poverty, and those not in poverty. In terms of our indicator of isolation, those in poverty spend more daily minutes with other household members than those who are not in poverty. However, we do not see significant differences in the time spent alone by poverty status.

In terms of confinement, mothers in poverty spend significantly more time at home and less time away from home than do mothers who are not in poverty. Finally, we see no significant differences in the degree to which mothers must submit to the constraints of institutions as measured by waiting.

These are cross-sectional patterns, and therefore subject to a broad range of co-founders, like employment, that likely influence isolation, confinement, and constraint differently by poverty status. Further, the character of the time spent in different modes, like waiting, may vary across poverty status if, for example, mothers in poverty spend a good deal of “waiting” time at their caseworkers office while mothers not in poverty spend most of their “waiting” time at their child’s soccer practice. For the PAA paper, we intend to account for suspected co-founders and develop more nuanced measures to capture types of waiting that may be more or less volitional. Additionally, we will explore a range of different “others” one might spend time with (e.g. neighbors, co-workers, friends) currently grouped together in the “non-household members” category. Likewise, we will unpack the “away from home” category to better assess where time is spent differently by poverty status. With more nuance, we expect to reveal how motherhood in poverty is differently marked by time and place.

## References

Clawson, Dan and Naomi Gerstel. 2014. *Unequal Time: Gender, Class, and family in Employment Schedules*. NY, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Cornwell, Benjamin, and Elizabeth Warburton. 2014. “Work Schedules and Community Ties.” *Work and Occupations* 41:139-74.

DeLuca, Stefanie, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, Kathryn Edin. 2016. *Coming of Age in the Other America*.

Desmond, Matthew. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. NY: Crown Publishers.

Desmond, M. (2012). Disposable ties and the urban poor. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117, 1295–1335. doi:10.1086/663574

Gallagher, Sally K. and Naomi Gerstel. 2001. Connections and Constraints: The Effects of Children on Caregiving. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 63(1): 265-275.

Kalmijn, M. (2012). Longitudinal analyses of the effects of age, marriage, and parenthood on social contacts and support. *Advances in Life Course Research* 17(4): 177–190. doi:10.1016/j.alcr.2012.08.002.

Levine, Judith A. 2013. *Ain't No Trust: How Bosses, Boyfriends, and Bureaucrats Fail Low-Income Mothers and Why It Matters*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Munch, A., McPherson, J.M., and Smith-Lovin, L. (1997). Gender, children, and social contact: The effects of childrearing for men and women. *American Sociological Review* 62(4): 509–520. [doi:10.2307/2657423](https://doi.org/10.2307/2657423).

Penman-Aguilar, Ana, Marion Carter, M. Christine Snead, and Athena P. Kourtis. 2013. “Socioeconomic Disadvantage as a Social Determinant of Teen Childbearing in the U.S.” *Public Health Reports*. 128(Suppl 1): 5-22.

Ray, Kristin, Amalavoyal Chari, John Engberg, Marnie Bertolet, and Ateev Mehrotra. 2015. “Disparities in Time Spent Seeking Medical Care in the United States.” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 175(12): 1983-1986.

Rözer, Jesper J., Anne-Rigt Poortman, Gerald Mollenhorst. 2017. “The Timing of Parenthood and its Effects on Social Contact and Support.” *Demographic Research*. 36 (62): 1889-1916.

Rözer, J.J., Mollenhorst, G., and Poortman, A. (2016). Family and friends: Which types of personal relationships go together in a network? *Social Indicators Research* 127(2): 809–826. [doi:10.1007/s11205-015-0987-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-015-0987-5).

Saenz, Rogelio. 2008. *A Demographic Profile of U.S. Workers Around the Clock*. Population Reference Bureau.