



AP PHOTO/DINA GAVRISH

# The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict

The Poor, the Professionals, and the Missing Middle

---

Joan C. Williams Center for WorkLife Law, University of California, Hastings College of the Law

Heather Boushey Center for American Progress

January 2010



Center for American Progress



**WORK LIFE LAW**  
UC Hastings College of the Law

# The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict

## The Poor, the Professionals, and the Missing Middle

---

**Joan C. Williams** Center for WorkLife Law, University of California, Hastings College of the Law

**Heather Boushey** Center for American Progress

January 2010



# Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**
- 11 The poor**
- 32 The missing middle**
- 50 The professionals**
- 60 What all Americans need**
- 73 Conclusion**
- 74 Data and method appendix**
- 77 Endnotes**
- 85 About the authors**
- 86 Acknowledgements**

These are the three faces of work-family conflict in our country today. These are the families that need comprehensive work-family government policies that give them all the opportunity achieve the American Dream.

## The poor

Kim Braithwaite was making progress. She was working two jobs to support her two children, 9-year old Justina and 1-year-old Justin. But on October 12, 2003, she faced a dilemma: her babysitter was late. Kim would be tardy for her shift at McDonald's if she delayed and she worried that she would be fired. The sitter would arrive in a few minutes, Kim reasoned, and she left for work. The next she heard was from the police. Her children were found dead in her front room; her apartment had caught fire before the babysitter arrived. Kim was arrested for child neglect. Said a neighbor, "It's hard when a single mother has two or three kids and has to work a lot. But I never hear her kids crying, never see her yelling at them. She is a good mom."<sup>1</sup>

The bottom 30 percent of American families try to get by on a median annual income of \$19,000, earning less than \$35,000 dollars a year.<sup>2</sup> Their median income has fallen 29 percent since 1979 (in inflation-adjusted dollars). These families get few benefits from their employers to help manage work-life conflict and often hold jobs with inconsistent or unpredictable schedules that exacerbate these conflicts. Government policies to help these families are too-often inadequate and underfunded, yet conservatives point to the problems these families have in balancing work and family as proof of their "irresponsibility."



## The professionals

Sally Sears was a high-profile TV news anchor, a job she loved and continued for nine years after her son's birth. But then "[m]y five-day 50-hour week was becoming a 60-hour week." She felt she was missing her son's childhood, so she asked to reduce her hours to something more like traditional full time. Her employer said it was all or nothing. Very reluctantly, she quit. Ironically, the same all-or-nothing employer soon hired her... to report part time. But now she had no job security, no pension, no health insurance, and no chance for advancement. "It kills me that I'm not contributing to my 401(k) anymore," she told a reporter.<sup>3</sup>

The highest income families, who typically hold professional or managerial jobs, have a median annual income of \$148,000, earning above \$101,000 a year, with one in five earning above \$210,000, and one in ten earning above \$320,000. Their median income has increased 7 percent since 1979 (in inflation-adjusted dollars). Employers are most likely to offer paid leave and workplace flexibility to these workers, yet require long hours that make achieving a workable balance impossible for many. Conservatives and progressives alike fall for the false notion that women in these families who "opt out" of the workforce are voluntarily doing so for the sake of their kids.

## The missing middle

"Mike drives a cab and I work in a hospital, so we figured one of us could transfer to nights. We talked it over and decided it would be best if I was here during the day and he was here at night. He controls the kids, especially my son, better than I do. So now Mike works days and I work graveyard. I hate it, but it's the only answer; at least this way somebody's here all the time. I get home at 8:30 in the morning. The kids and Mike are gone. I clean up the house a little, do the shopping and the laundry and whatever, then I go to sleep for a couple of hours before the kids come home from school. Mike gets home at five, we eat, then he takes over for the night, and I go back to sleep for a couple of hours. I try to get up by 9:00 so we can have a little time together, but I'm so tired that I don't make it a lot of times. And by 10:00, he's sleeping because he has to be up by 6:00 in the morning. It's hard, very hard. There's no time to live or anything."<sup>4</sup>

Americans who are neither rich nor poor have a median annual income of \$64,000, earning between \$35,000 and about \$110,000 a year. Their median income has fallen 13 percent since 1979 (in inflation-adjusted dollars). These families too often are overlooked by government policies and academic studies. This report is designed to ensure policymakers understand the day-to-day challenges faced by this "missing" 50 percent of American workers, and the political benefits to be gained by attending to them, alongside the poor and the professionals.<sup>5</sup>





# Introduction and summary

Work-family conflict is much higher in the United States than elsewhere in the developed world.<sup>6</sup> One reason is that Americans work longer hours than workers in most other developed countries, including Japan, where there is a word, *karoshi*, for “death by overwork.”<sup>7</sup> The typical American middle-income family put in an average of 11 more hours a week in 2006 than it did in 1979.<sup>8</sup>

Not only do American families work longer hours; they do so with fewer laws to support working families. Only the United States lacks paid maternity-leave laws among the 30 industrialized democracies in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.<sup>9</sup> The only family leave available to Americans is unpaid, limited to three months, and covers only about half the labor force.<sup>10</sup> Discrimination against workers with family responsibilities, illegal throughout Europe,<sup>11</sup> is forbidden only indirectly here. Americans also lack paid sick days, limits on mandatory overtime, the right to request work-time flexibility without retaliation, and proportional wages for part-time work. All exist elsewhere in the developed world.<sup>12</sup>

So it should come as no surprise that Americans report sharply higher levels of work-family conflict than do citizens of other industrialized countries.<sup>13</sup> Fully 90 percent of American mothers and 95 percent of American fathers report work-family conflict.<sup>14</sup> And yet our public policymakers in Congress continue to sit on their hands when it comes to enacting laws to help Americans reconcile their family responsibilities with those at work.

---

## Why the political impasse?

The United States today has the most family-hostile public policy in the developed world due to a long-standing political impasse. The only major piece of federal legislation designed to help Americans manage work and family life, the Family and Medical Leave Act, was passed in 1993, nearly two decades ago. In the interim—when Europeans implemented a comprehensive agenda of “work-family reconciliation”—not a single major federal initiative in the United States has won congressional approval. In the 110th and 111th congressional sessions, the Federal Employee Paid Parental Leave Act, which would provide four weeks of paid parental leave to federal employees, passed the House of Representatives—garnering support from 50 Republicans in the vote in the 110th Congress—but has not passed in the Senate.

Paid family leave legislation at the federal level remains absent despite years of effort. Childcare subsidies are limited to the poor and are sporadic even for those families, as we will further describe below. The only other relevant federal programs, tax credits for childcare and other dependents and the ability to use pretax earnings for dependent care, offer most families only a small annual subsidy that is not available for families who owe no taxes.

Why has widespread concern over work-family conflict failed to translate into political action? One reason is this: when American public policymakers and the media think about work-family conflict, they think mostly about Sally Sears, the professional TV anchor profiled in our opening pages. Public discussion of work-family conflict has focused largely on the “opt-out revolution” by professional mothers who leave the fast track in order to care for children.<sup>15</sup> Newspapers’ coverage of these “opt-out moms” typically projects a hagiographic image of women choosing selflessly to place their children’s needs before their own.

This picture contrasts sharply with coverage of a different group of opt-out moms. “Welfare-to-work” mothers also receive extensive media coverage, although these stories typically are not framed as stories of work-family conflict. Typically stories about these women revolve around the tug-of-war over whether poor mothers who are not employed are, or should be, cut off from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF program, which as of 2009 offers low-income, unemployed mothers an average of \$372 a month, with a lifetime cap on benefit receipt of five years or less.<sup>16</sup>

Neither portrait is accurate nor a recipe for building a strong coalition for changing public policy to address work-family conflict. Both professional women and welfare mothers are portrayed in these narratives as lacking sufficient personal or financial incentives to work outside the home. Thus, in this frame, the problem is viewed as not the lack of adequate public policies but rather the personal choices of a small set of mothers who are in families that do not look like most U.S. families. Politicians have actively used these narratives to reject moving forward on a work-family agenda.<sup>17</sup>

Lost in the shuffle between the professional mothers praised for staying at home, and poor mothers criticized for doing so, is a much broader group that Harvard University sociology professor Theda Skocpol aptly calls the “missing middle.” Skocpol finds “puzzling” that “our policy debates deal so little with the fate of working families of modest means, the people who put in long hours to earn a living and make a decent life while coping with rising pressures in their workplaces while trying to raise children in solo-parent or dual-worker families.”<sup>18</sup>

Information is strangely scarce about these embattled middle-income families—who are constantly struggling either to remain in the middle or to work their way into the lifestyles and livelihoods of the professionals. Relatively few policy studies or academic papers discuss the lives and work of Americans in the middle. One goal of this report is to take seriously Skocpol’s call to include the missing middle in progressive analysis and policy recommendations.

This report looks for the first time in a comprehensive way at work-life conflicts across all families, with the exception of the very wealthiest.<sup>19</sup> Through showing the three faces of work-family conflict, our analysis points toward how we can build a stronger coalition for policies to address work-family conflict. The support of the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Family Fund allowed us to break down the relevant data sets by income. Specifically:

- Low-income families, defined as the bottom one-third of families in terms of income
- Professional-managerial families, defined as families with incomes in the top 20 percent, in which at least one adult is a college graduate—13 percent of families in 2008
- Families in the remaining percent of incomes: the Missing Middle—53 percent of families in 2008.

Our data encompass the late 1970s (1977, 1978, and 1979) to the late 2000s (2006, 2007, and 2008), and includes only families with an adult between ages 25 and 54. For simplicity, we draw comparisons between “today” and “30 years ago,” although we are a few years off in each direction. We use data from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement and the Survey of Income and Program Participation to examine income, hours of work, and childcare usage and costs across families. Due to limitations of these surveys, we are not able to include an analysis of nonheterosexual families. All numbers without citation in the report are from our analysis. (Please see the Data and Methods Appendix for more on our data and methodology.)

Our analysis shows that while families across the spectrum face work-family conflict, they experience it differently, and the politics of resolving these work-life conflicts are defined by these differences. While these differences are very real, they mask the fact that no matter where Americans stand on the income spectrum, they need short-term and extended paid leave and new workplace flexibility rules, as well as high-quality, affordable childcare and freedom from discrimination based on family responsibilities.

In short, this report reveals the disconnect between Americans’ widespread concern over work-family conflict and their policymakers’ inability to pass legislation to address the issue. Understanding this disconnect first requires a portrait of why work-family conflict is so acute and widespread today. We detail the three distinct faces of work-family conflict in the United States in the main body of this report, and then outline a new template for policy analysis. To begin, we highlight the basic contours of our analysis.

---

## An American workplace perfectly designed for the workforce of 1960

In 1960, only 20 percent of mothers worked, and only 18.5 percent were unmarried.<sup>20</sup> Because the most common family was comprised of a male breadwinner and stay-at-home mother, employers were able to shape jobs around that ideal, with the expectation that the breadwinner was available for work anytime, anywhere, for as long as his employer needed

him. Even then, this model did not serve the small but significant share of families who did not fit this mold, yet the model stuck.

This model makes absolutely no sense today. Now, 70 percent of American children live in households where all adults are employed.<sup>21</sup> Nearly one in four Americans—more every year—are caring for elders.<sup>22</sup> Hospitals let patients out “quicker and sicker.” Yet employers still enshrine as ideal the breadwinner who is always available because his wife takes care of the children, the sick, the elderly—as well as dinner, pets, and the dry cleaning. For most Americans, this is not real life.

This explains why work-family conflict is so widespread. Today’s workplaces are (im)perfectly designed for the workforce ... of 1960. The mismatch between the workplace and the workforce delivers negative economic consequences for individual workers at all income levels, as well as for U.S. businesses and for our economy as a whole.

From a macroeconomic standpoint, the clearest cost of mismatch is that the United States loses a key engine of economic growth because our outdated workplaces push highly trained workers out of the workforce. The most obvious example is Sally Sears, who is emblematic of millions of professional women who are educated at tremendous—often public—expense, and who are then pushed out when high-powered careers demand 24/7 availability. This problem is exacerbated because “full time” in these careers typically involves 50 or more hours a week, while the career and income penalties for “part-time” work are dramatically higher in the United States than elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, professional women who need hours more like a traditional full-time job of 40 hours a week often find themselves “doing scut work at slave wages,” as one professional woman put it.<sup>24</sup> This systematic de-skilling of women who work part time—as one in five professional and middle-income mothers do, according to our data analysis—is a major macroeconomic cost of workforce-workplace mismatch. So is underemployment of low-income mothers, who face wage rates so low that it makes little economic sense for them to work; a lack of subsidies for childcare often leads to the perverse situation where a mother’s take home pay is less than childcare costs.

*The Economist* offers a sober assessment of the macroeconomic consequences of the resulting loss of women’s human capital. The magazine warns that many women “are still excluded from paid work; many do not make best use of their skills. Greater participation by women in the labor market could help offset the effect of an ageing, shrinking population and hence support growth.”<sup>25</sup>

Designing workplaces around the old fashioned breadwinner-homemaker household has microeconomic consequences as well. Individual employers may think, in good faith, that they need to work employees longer and longer hours in order to remain competitive. But that conclusion reflects confusion between the inevitable costs of doing business and the costs associated with a specific, and outdated, business model.

Extensive research documents that the mismatch between work and life today leads to very high and very expensive levels of absenteeism and attrition as well as to decreases in productivity.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the “business case for workplace flexibility” is extensively documented at the microeconomic level. We will limit ourselves to one example: A study of manual, customer service, clerical, cashiers, and sales positions found that employee turnover was 20 percent in a single month, or 240 percent turnover a year.<sup>27</sup>

That’s no way to run a business. Replacing these workers is extremely costly, given that replacing workers earning less than \$75,000 costs 20 percent of their annual salary.<sup>28</sup> Research suggests that the turnover rate for employees who lack the flexibility they need is twice that of those who have it.<sup>29</sup>

These costs remain largely unnoticed because they are seen as inevitable costs of doing business. They aren’t, of course. Both macroeconomic and microeconomic analyses demonstrate that policymakers need not fear that work-family policy initiatives will undermine American businesses, or America’s competitive position in the world economy. In fact, reconciling work and family would enhance America’s competitive global position—which is why Europeans have focused so much energy on this issue.

If the United States continues on its present course, it will face a united Europe that has made great strides toward providing family-support laws and institutions—and less developed countries where work-family conflict for professional-managerial and often even middle-income families is muted by the availability of extremely cheap domestic labor.<sup>30</sup> To ensure the United States provides quality care for the next generation of workers, while at the same time utilizing effectively the human capital of its mothers, fathers, and all caregivers, we need to get serious about work-family public policy.

---

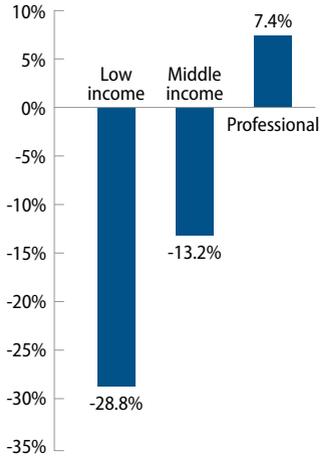
## Why three faces?

The typical American workplace today is so deeply out of sync with today’s workforce because of dramatic changes over the past few decades in incomes, working hours, and patterns of family care. The result is widespread work-family conflicts, but in ways that play out differently among the poor, the professionals, and the missing middle.

First of all, incomes have diverged. In 1960, men with steady jobs could deliver the basics of a middle-class life—the house, the car, the washing machine—with only intermittent part-time work by their wives.<sup>31</sup> That’s over. After the first oil embargo in 1973, the income of high-school-educated men plummeted, leaving many fewer Americans able to sustain stable access to the American dream. Yet better-educated workers experienced explosive earnings growth in the 1990s. Today, the gap between middle-income earners and high earners is much wider than it was in 1979.<sup>32</sup> (See Figure 1)

**FIGURE 1**  
**The growing income divide**

Percent change in inflation-adjusted family income, 1979 to 2008, by income



Source: Heather Boushey and Jeff Chapman's analysis of Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, Trent Alexander, Donna Leicach, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 2.0. [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor], 2009.

Our data show that professional-managerial incomes have climbed 7 percent since 1979, while families in the middle saw their incomes fall 13 percent over the same period—and low-income families saw their incomes plummet by 29 percent. As a result, other analysis shows that families headed by high school dropouts worked 12 percent more but earned 8 percent less in real dollars in the 15 years after 1973. Families headed by high school graduates did better, but they, too, lost ground. They worked 16 percent more but earned only 4 percent more. In sharp contrast, families headed by college grads rocketed ahead. Their earnings increased by 30 percent.<sup>33</sup>

Median incomes (incomes in the middle of each earnings group) also diverged sharply over the past 30 years. (See Table 1) In 1979, families in the three groups earned median incomes of \$27,000, \$74,000, and \$138,000, respectively, in 2008 dollars. By 2008, those three income levels stood at \$19,000, \$64,000, and \$148,000, respectively. Such sharply diverging incomes transformed the American family. Falling incomes for the middle occurred even as wives increased their labor force participation. But, even with the added earnings of wives, families struggled to afford childcare and elder care costs.

**TABLE 1**  
**Diverging classes**

Median family income by income, 1979 and 2008, 2008 dollars

	Low income	Middle income	Professional
1979	\$26,709	\$74,244	\$137,547
2008	\$19,011	\$64,465	\$147,742

Source: Heather Boushey and Jeff Chapman's analysis of Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, Trent Alexander, Donna Leicach, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 2.0. [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor], 2009.

## Changing work hours

Work hours over the past 30 years changed most dramatically for mothers, although once again patterns vary by family income. Married middle-income and professional-managerial mothers joined the workforce in large numbers. As shown in Table 2, a little more than one-third, or 35 percent, were at home full time 30 years ago. Today, only 20 percent of professional married mothers and 23 percent of middle-income married mothers are at home full time.

This trend comes as no surprise. Far more surprising is the news about low-income mothers. First, they are more likely than other mothers to be out of the labor force today, even if they are unmarried. Over one-quarter, or 27 percent, of poor single mothers are out of the labor force today compared to 4 percent of single mothers in the middle and 2 percent among professionals. Second, married low-income mothers are slightly more likely today

**TABLE 2**  
**Women in the workforce**

Stay-at-home married mothers, by family income, in the late 1970s and the late 2000s

	Low income	Middle income	Professional
1977–1979	55%	35%	35%
2006–2008	60%	23%	20%

Source: Heather Boushey and Jeff Chapman’s analysis of Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, Trent Alexander, Donna Leicach, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 2.0. [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor], 2009.

than 30 years ago to be at home full time. Today, 60 percent of married low-income mothers are out of the labor force compared to 55 percent in 1979.

That low-income, married mothers are now less likely to be employed outside the home is, in part, simply an artifact of putting families into groups by income. Families without a working wife are by definition likely to have less income than families with more earners. With working motherhood now so widespread, families that do not have a working mother are more likely than in the past to fall into a lower income grouping. Many mothers who stay home full time do so not out of a preference for caring for their own children, but due to public policy design: a lack of child care subsidies means that the costs of care would eat up most, if not all, of their earnings. Further, inflexible workplaces with unpredictable schedules make accessing quality and affordable childcare nearly impossible.<sup>34</sup>

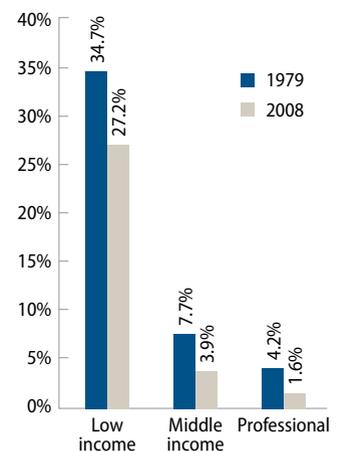
Work-family conflict is prevalent today not only because of the movement of mothers into the workforce but also due to an increase in long working hours, defined as 50 or more hours a week. Today, as 30 years ago, long hours are most common among professional-managerial men, 38 percent of whom now work 50 or more hours a week. Men in the middle are next most likely to work long hours: 23 percent do—up from 21 percent 30 years ago. Once again, the trend reverses among low-income families, with 16 percent of men working long hours 30 years ago compared to 9 percent today. (See Table 3)

Women are much less likely to work long hours, although today 14 percent of professional-managerial women do so. The exception, astonishingly, is single mothers: 32 percent of professional-managerial single mothers work 50 or more hours, as do 12 percent of mothers in the middle. Less than 4 percent of low-income single mothers work long hours, but they are more likely to put in these hours at more than one job, adding extra transportation hours onto their workdays.

What our data analysis shows is what scholars call the “time divide.”<sup>35</sup> In the United States today, many higher earners fervently want fewer hours,<sup>36</sup> while many low-wage workers can find only part-time work, or none at all, and want longer hours, consistent and predictable schedules, and benefits.<sup>37</sup>

**FIGURE 2**  
**Single mothers staying at home**

Nonemployed single mothers, by income, 1979 and 2008



Source: Heather Boushey and Jeff Chapman’s analysis of Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, Trent Alexander, Donna Leicach, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 2.0. [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor], 2009.

**TABLE 3**  
**Men working more, or less**

Men working 50 or more hours per week, late 1970s and late 2000s

	Low income	Middle income	Professional
Late 1970s	16%	21%	34%
Late 2000s	9%	23%	38%

Source: Heather Boushey and Jeff Chapman's analysis of Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, Trent Alexander, Donna Leicach, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 2.0. [Machine-readable database] (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor], 2009).

---

## Changing patterns of family care

In 1960, only 20 percent of mothers worked, husbands supported married women, and there were relatively few families headed by a single mother.<sup>38</sup> But over the past 30 years, patterns of family caregiving diverged sharply by family income.

A key divergence concerns single motherhood. Two-thirds, or 66 percent, of low-income families with children are headed by single parents today, compared to a little under half, or 47 percent, in 1979. In sharp contrast, 81 percent of families in the middle, and 96 percent of professional-managerial families with children are headed by married parents. That represents a just over 10 percentage point drop among middle-income families, as 93 percent of families with children were headed by a married couple in 1979, but only a 2 percentage point decline among professional-managerial families.

Predictably, childcare also varies across family income levels. (See Figure 3) The most common form of care in low- and middle-income families is by relatives other than the parents themselves. Roughly one-third of each group—34 percent and 30 percent, respectively—relies on relatives as their primary kind of childcare. Only about one-quarter, or 24 percent, of professional-managerial families rely on relatives. Instead, these higher-income families are more likely to rely on child-care centers—37 percent do—as do roughly 30 percent of families with low- and middle-income families.

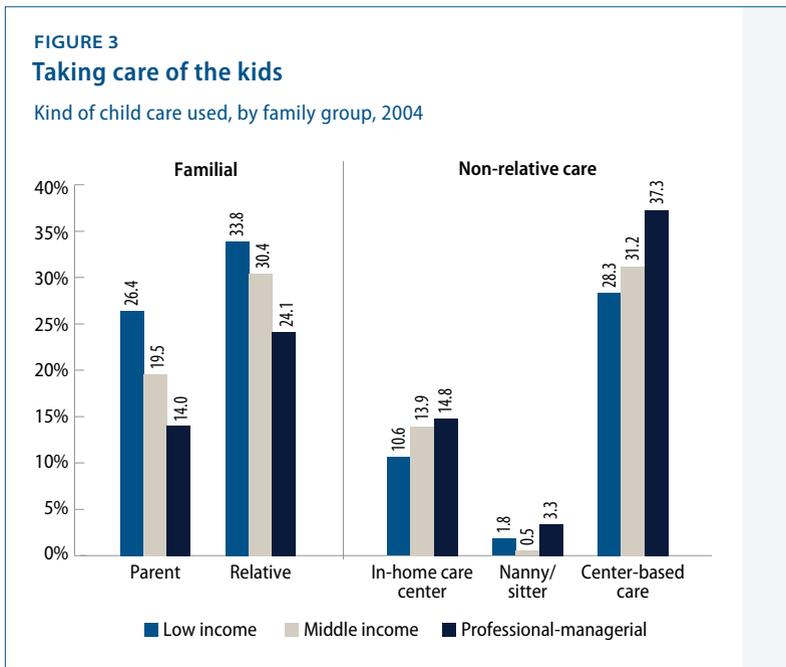
Perhaps most surprising, low-income families are more likely than other kinds of families to rely on the moms and dads themselves for childcare, 26 percent, compared to 20 percent of middle-income families and 14 percent of professional families. Less than 4 percent of families in all three groups rely on sitters or nannies.

A final factor that affects work-family conflict is childcare costs. Unlike Europeans, many of whom have access to high-quality, neighborhood-based childcare at subsidized rates, Americans at all levels struggle to find high-quality childcare—and struggle even more to pay for it. According to our analysis, in March 2009 dollars, low-income families pay around \$2,300 a year per child for childcare for children under age 6—about 14 percent of their income. Families in the middle average \$3,500 a year—6 percent to 9 percent of their

income. Professional families pay about \$4,800 a year—3 percent to 7 percent of their income.

Subsidies are available only for low-income families and are scarce and sporadic even for them. About 30 percent of low-income families using center-based care, and 16 percent using an in-home care center for a child under age 6, receive subsidies. The percentage of middle-income families receiving subsidies is negligible—about 3 percent for an in-home care center.

There are federal tax policies, however, that tend to benefit middle-income and professional-managerial families. The Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit benefits higher income workers and families because it is only available to families where parents—both parents if it is a married couple—have earnings or are in school. Low-income families often don't earn enough to benefit significantly from or even receive the tax credit. Flexible Spending Accounts for Dependent Care most often go to professional-managerial families because employers must set up these programs.<sup>39</sup> A real weakness of both policies is that neither controls for quality of care. Further, neither is large enough to provide significant help for most families.<sup>40</sup>



Source: Heather Boushey and Ben Zipperer's analysis of Center for Economic and Policy Research extracts of the Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2004 panel.

## The mismatched dynamics of work-family conflict

Our report makes it possible not just to understand how family income differences affect the experience of work-family conflict by the American people, but also to see how public policy negatively affects family life—and how enacting progressive family-friendly laws and regulations could improve life for Americans across the income spectrum. Effective political action to reform our workplace rules has been stymied by the great divide among the poor, the professionals, and the missing middle—each group has different types of jobs, handles childcare differently, and has different amounts of disposable income to help them manage work and family obligations.

Yet, from a policy standpoint, each group needs four basic kinds of supports and protections Americans now lack:

- Short-term and extended leaves from work, including paid time off for family and medical leave and paid sick days
- Workplace flexibility to allow families to plan their work lives and their family lives

- High-quality and affordable childcare so that breadwinners can concentrate on work at work, and
- Freedom from discrimination based on family responsibilities.

The last section of our report forges our analysis of work-life conflicts among the poor, professionals, and the missing middle into a new approach to work-family policy and politics designed to bridge the differences between these three income groups.

Specifically, we offer an understanding of work-family conflict that will help progressives to build a successful coalition to address the needs of all American families. This report is designed to persuade policymakers and the American people that sky-high levels of work-life conflict reflect not just a personal problem, but also a failure of public policy to provide for all Americans. As presented in the Center for American Progress’s “Our Working Nation,” the agenda includes:<sup>41</sup>

- Updating basic labor standards to account for the fact that most workers also have family responsibilities by establishing the right to paid sick days, instituting predictable and flexible workplace schedules, and ensuring that workers have access to paid family and medical leave
- Improving basic fairness in our workplace by ending discrimination against all workers, including pregnant women and caregivers
- Providing direct support to working families with childcare and elder care needs, and
- Improving our knowledge about family responsive workplace policies by collecting national data on work/life policies offered by employers and analyzing the effectiveness of existing state and local policies.

For this to happen, though, progressives need to build a strong coalition that can appeal to the poor, the professionals, and the missing middle with their different work-life conflicts.

Above all, progressives need to explain how the family-friendly policies Americans need to enable them both to care for and support their families are needed by American families at all income levels—even if their needs differ. In the pages that follow, we describe in detail what these differences are. We then show how smart, progressive policies backed by effective political coalition building can make these reforms happen.

---

### **About the Center for American Progress**

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

### **About the Center for WorkLife Law**

The Center for WorkLife Law is a research and advocacy organization that works with six sets of stakeholders—employers and their lawyers, employees and their lawyers, policymakers, and unions—to end family responsibilities discrimination and to fuel social and organizational change around work-life issues. The Center is part of the University of California, Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco.

---

## Center for American Progress



Center for American Progress  
1333 H Street, NW, 10th Floor  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: 202.682.1611 • Fax: 202.682.1867  
[www.americanprogress.org](http://www.americanprogress.org)

## WORK LIFE LAW

UC Hastings College of the Law

Center for WorkLife Law  
UC Hastings College of the Law  
200 McAllister Street  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
Tel: 415.565.4640 • Fax: 415.581.8848  
[www.worklifelaw.org](http://www.worklifelaw.org)

