



Tag-Team Parenting

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About the Author

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Executive Summary

The traditional two-parent family, in which the mother stays home with the kids and everyone sits down together for dinner, is getting even rarer than is generally appreciated. The rise in single parent families and two-earner households has led to a situation where less than one-in-five families with children now have a full-time homemaker/caretaker. However, the likelihood that everyone sits down together for dinner is further reduced by the increase in the share of people working a “non-standard” schedule. These workers must be on the job outside of the typical nine-to-five, Monday-through-Friday workweek, which means that they are less likely to share hours at home together with their spouse and children.

Non-standard work schedules can make it difficult to find childcare, but it may also solve childcare problems for some families. Two-earner, married-couple families may choose to “tag-team” parent, where spouses work alternating schedules so that each parent can be home to care for the children while the other one is at work. While the decision to tag-team parent could be one of choice or necessity, the evidence in this paper suggests that it is driven primarily by necessity. The probability that couples work overlapping hours increases with income, supporting the view that couples with more income can effectively buy more time together by making other childcare arrangements for the hours when both are working. The same pattern holds for education levels, with more educated couples on average having work schedules that more closely coincide. Lower income families simply cannot afford to buy formal childcare and may not have other options available (e.g., care by friends or relatives).

This evidence is not conclusive; there could be factors other than income that lead lower income families to be more frequent tag-team parents. For example, they could place more value on parental care for their children as opposed to other childcare arrangements, and therefore may be willing to sacrifice time together with their spouse in order to keep their children out of childcare. Alternatively, it may be the case that workers with lower earnings and less education have fewer job options, and therefore are forced to work non-standard hours in order to get a job. The data in this report cannot conclusively determine the cause, but it is clear that working adults in families with lower incomes and less education are less likely to share non-work hours with their spouses than workers in families with higher income and more education. Black couples with children work similar numbers of hours compared to white couples, but are more likely to work those hours at different times, so that they have less overlap in their hours worked.

The key findings in this paper’s analysis of data on work schedules from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) are:

- Families in the bottom income quartile have an index for dissimilar work schedules that is twice as large as that for families in the top income quartile.
- Families that have a higher level of educational attainment are more likely to have similar schedules.
- White families are more likely to have similar schedules than Hispanic or mixed-race/ethnicity families.
- The older a family is, the more likely it is that the spouses have similar schedules.

Parents who work alternating schedules tend to use parental care as the primary type of childcare. Lower-income families are more likely to have alternating schedules, even after we account for their use of parental care and their statement that their schedule is structured to have “better childcare arrangements.” This implies that tag-team parenting is a strategy to address the high costs of childcare.

The most critical difference between lower- and higher-income families is that lower-income families have relatively high overlap indices, which means that the parents tend to be at work at different times. Higher-income families with children of any age do not. When high-income families tag-team parent, they do so by having one parent work fewer hours than the other rather than having both parents working similar hours on alternating schedules.

If policymakers want to get serious about supporting working families, they must recognize that promoting tag-team parenting may not be good for marriages or children. Parents need to work, but social policy should aim to ensure that working parents, and workers more generally, are able to balance work and family.

Tag-team parenting: Is it the solution or the problem?

Millions of American families struggle to balance their jobs and their family responsibilities. A generation ago, four out of every five families had two parents. Of these families, nearly half had a full-time homemaker/caretaker. Now, fewer families—70 percent—have two parents, and among those only about a quarter have a stay-at-home caretaker. The increasing number of single parents and two earner couples has created more demand for services during nonstandard hours because family members must do all of their shopping and business when they are not at work, which is typically on evenings and weekends. It has also created increased demand for safe, affordable, and enriching childcare services, both at traditional and non-traditional hours.

Having a quality job that allows parents to have time for each other and for their children is important for marital stability and family happiness. However, compared to the past, today’s families have more family members in the workforce, work longer hours, and are more likely to work outside of the traditional 9-to-5 weekday schedule (Presser 2003; Heymann 2000). Some families may choose to have spouses work alternating schedules so that the parents can each provide care for their children while the other is at work (Becker and Moen 1999). This “tag-team” parenting strategy is often employed by two-earner, married-couple families with children to cope with their work/family dilemmas. While this may limit spouses’ ability to spend time together and cause problems within the family (Hochschild 1997; Hochschild and Machung 2003; Grosswald 2004), this may solve other work/family challenges.

Tag-team parenting may be a common strategy in a family’s search for work/family balance. Research has found that just over half of all U.S. workers (54.4 percent) have a standard workweek, that is, at least half their regular hours fall between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday (Presser 2003). Those working nonstandard shifts appear more disadvantaged than workers with traditional schedules: they are more likely to be less educated and in low-wage service occupations than are those working standard shifts. Further, working nonstandard hours can pose significant scheduling difficulties for parents with respect to childcare and school hours, as well as for marital happiness and stability. Most childcare facilities offer care during standard hours and finding care for non-standard hours may not only be difficult, but this kind of care is also often more expensive

(Han 2004; Johnson and Meckstroth 1998; Sharetto 2005; Reese 1996). This may be why most people report that they work nonstandard hours because it is a job requirement, rather than because this is their first choice of schedules (Presser and Cox 1997; Presser 2003; Golden, 2001 #492; McCrate 2005).

However, non-standard schedules may be part of a strategy to achieve work/family balance in some families, specifically two-earner, married-couple families with children who work alternating schedules in order to tag-team parent. Families may choose to tag-team parent because even though both parents work, they want one parent to always be with the children and avoid “having” to put their children in daycare. These “anti-childcare” families may be “pro-work flexibility,” because they place a high premium on having jobs with sufficient flexibility to allow them to coordinate their schedules. However, some families may be pushed into tag-team parenting for a variety of reasons. The “odd hours” families may tag-team parent because their non-standard hours of work make it difficult, if not near impossible, to find quality childcare. Some—the “cost containment” families—may tag-team parent because the cost of quality daycare is so high that they cannot afford it, while the “special needs” families may tag-team parent because there are no appropriate childcare facilities in their community for their disabled or special-needs children.

This paper looks inside tag-team families to understand how they balance schedules and childcare. This family type describes millions of American families today. Most (57.8 percent) two-earner, married-couple families have children at home, only slightly less than single-earner, married-couple families (66.1 percent). Significant shares of those families work “alternating schedules,” where spouses are at work at different times. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a “typical” American family had one partner working 40 hours per week, the other working around 27 hours per week, with about 21 of those hours overlapping with the partner working longer hours.

We find that tag-teaming is a strategy employed more by couples with children, and especially young children, than couples without children. We also find that tag-team parents are less advantaged compared to couples whose schedules overlap more. Tag-team parents are more likely to be low-income, to be less educated, and to be younger than other two-earner, married-couple families. There is evidence that tag-team parenting is a way of coping with the high cost of childcare for young children, or a way of coping with the lack of childcare at odd hours. This is supported by the finding that families with spouses on alternating schedules are much more likely to use parental childcare as their child’s primary type of childcare and that very few families with alternating schedules use other forms of childcare. Low-income families are more likely to tag-team parent, which implies that tag-team parenting may be more about ability to pay for good childcare, rather than simply about parental choices. However, moderate-income tag-team families are more likely to report that they work their schedule to address childcare needs, while higher-income tag-team families are more likely to report that their schedule is determined by job requirements.

Because most two-earner, married-couple families have children, how they balance jobs and family responsibilities has become fodder for political debate and water-cooler discussions alike. These findings should serve as a wake-up call to policymakers about the realities that families face in the labor market and their capacity to care for their families. Families who tag-team parent are obviously in a tough bind, and the policy implications from this research are clear: tag-team parents need policies to help them better balance work and family. Tag-team parents who choose this arrangement out of a desire to spend time with their children need jobs with the flexibility that allows them to coordinate their schedules. Tag-team parents who are pushed into this arrangement

because they cannot find suitable childcare at the times that they are at work need access to safe, affordable, and enriching childcare at all hours.

Working long hours and using childcare is the norm

Tag-team families are a large and growing subset of married-couple families. A generation ago, most families had a stay-at-home parent (almost always the mother), but now most families do not have a stay-at-home parent. Among couples with children, the majority have two-earners, even among those who have very small children at home (Table 1). Two-earner families are only slightly less likely to have children, compared to single-earner families. Among couples where only the husband works, 66.1 percent have a child at home, whereas among two-earner families, 57.8 percent have a child at home. Two-earner families are more likely than other kinds of families to have older children at home, compared to all other family types. (Full discussion of the data and methods can be found in the Appendix.)

TABLE 1

Household Demographics

Sample is married-couple families, with spouses aged 18 to 64

	Married couple families			
	Two-earner couple	Only wife works	Only husband works	Neither works
Distribution of all married couples across family types	64.5	6.1	24.6	4.7
Distribution of married couples with children across family types	64.9	4.3	28.3	2.6
Within family type:				
Share with any children	57.8	40.1	66.1	31.6
Among those with children:				
Share with one child	39.0	44.2	31.0	39.3
Share with two children	41.9	34.1	38.9	29.4
Share with 3+ children	19.1	21.7	30.1	31.4
Share with children, by child's age				
Infant to age 5	24.2	15.7	40.1	13.8
Among those with young children:				
Share with one young child	72.1	73.7	62.3	63.9
Share with two young children	25.3	22.9	31.8	28.3
Share with 3+ young children	2.6	3.4	5.9	7.8
Aged 6 to 12	31.5	21.8	36.7	18.1
Aged 13 to 17	24.1	18.1	20.5	14.1

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: Sample is families matched in 96 and 01 panels. Of all women who report being married or cohabitating, 88.8 percent matched to a spouse or partner in the SIPP. This sample represents 37.1 percent of all adults aged 18 to 64 in the SIPP.

Tag-team families may also result from the relatively long hours that spouses in two-earner married-couple families put in at work. Figures 1 and 2 show within two-earner, married-couple families, the distribution of work hours is clustered around full-time for husbands and just below full-time for wives. The United States has a longer average workweek than any other OECD nation (Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005) and part-time work is generally only available in a small number of occupations, and there is a high penalty in terms of pay and benefits for workers who choose to work less than full-time. Thus, tag-team parenting may be due to the reality that there are few options for parents who want to work, but who also want and need to take care of their children.

FIGURE 1
Wife's Regular Weekly Hours of Work

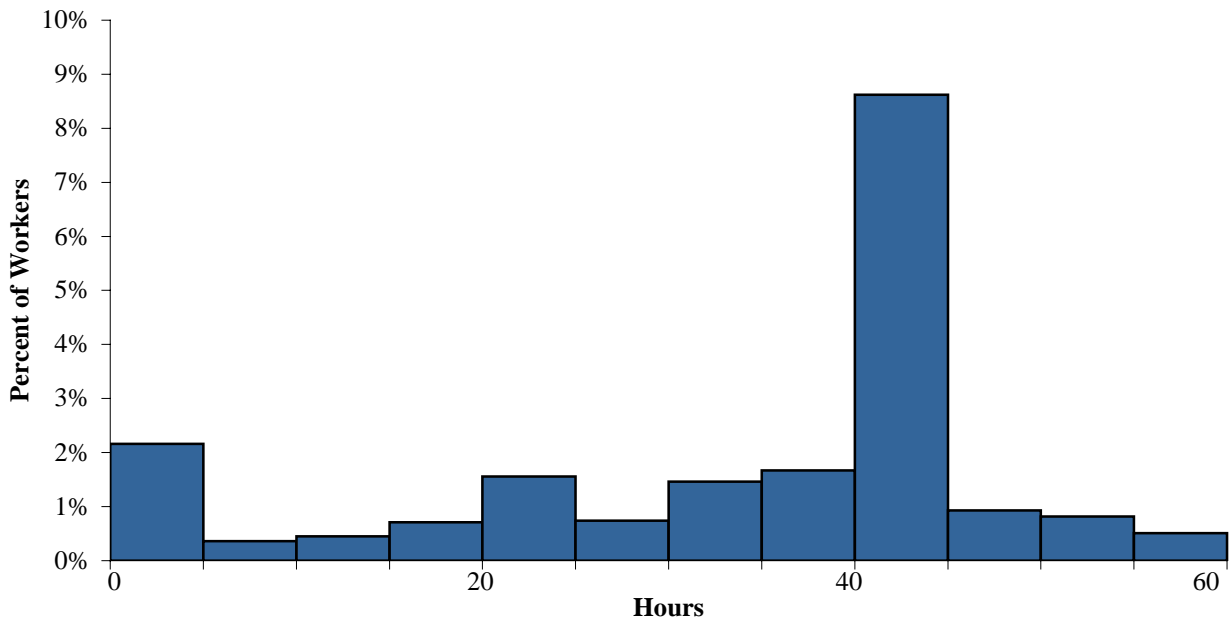
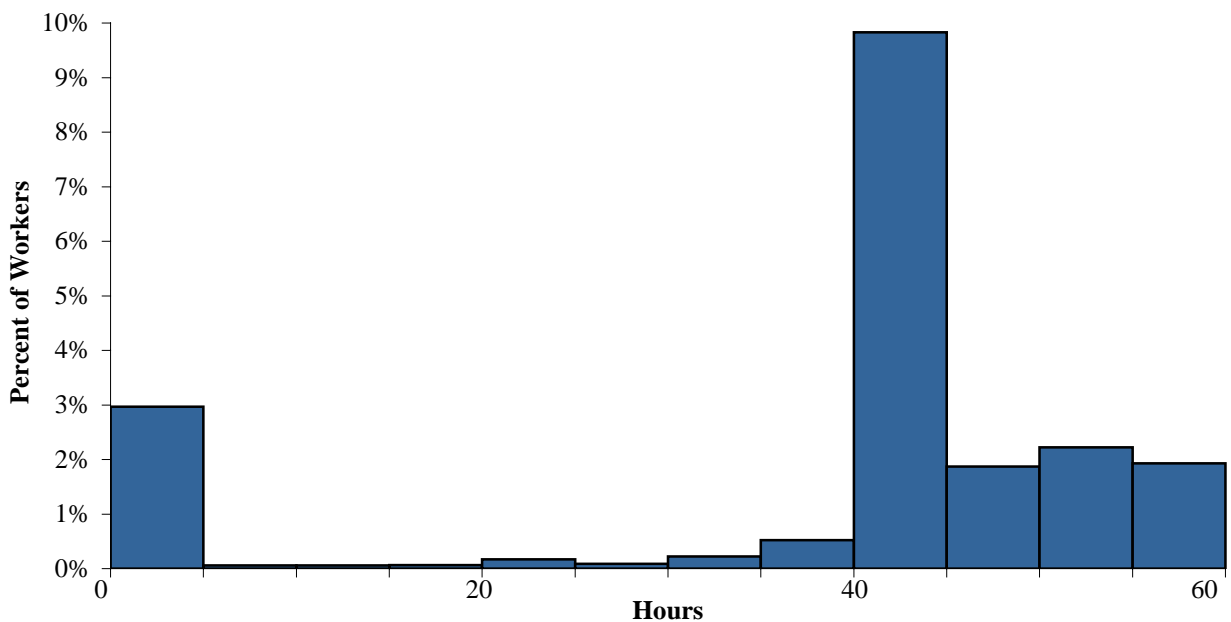


FIGURE 2
Husband's Regular Weekly Hours of Work



Because most two-earner, married-couple families have children, they must face head-on the dilemma of finding safe, affordable, and enriching childcare for their children while they are at work. It appears that many parents, especially younger, less educated parents of young children, choose to engage in tag-team parenting, working alternating schedules so that one parent can be with the children while the other is at work. The first piece of evidence hinting that this is true comes from looking at the kinds of childcare mothers' report using (Table 2).¹

TABLE 2
Kinds of Childcare Used by Families with Working Mothers

Sample is working mothers aged 18 to 64

	Parental	Relative	Family	Nanny	Formal	Self
Working mothers within two-earner families						
With young children	25.5	27.3	18.9	3.7	29.4	0.5
By family income quartile						
Bottom	33.9	32.9	14.3	2.8	20.0	0.6
Second	26.4	28.0	20.5	2.4	27.1	0.6
Third	20.9	24.3	21.4	3.4	34.7	0.4
Top	19.0	22.9	19.8	6.5	37.9	0.5
With older children						
By family income quartile						
Bottom	31.2	29.5	6.4	2.0	16.2	21.4
Second	29.3	28.3	6.7	2.4	20.1	20.9
Third	26.0	21.9	7.6	2.5	25.6	25.7
Top	21.5	18.5	7.5	4.6	30.3	26.1
Married women						
With young children	27.1	26.8	18.3	3.7	28.7	0.5
With older children	28.9	23.8	6.8	2.8	22.7	22.9
Single women						
With young children	10.3	42.5	15.8	3.4	30.6	1.1
With older children	10.8	41.7	8.7	3.7	19.6	21.5

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1.

Within two-earner married-couple families with young children, the most common kind of childcare is formal daycare (29.4 percent), followed closely by relative care (27.3 percent), then parental care (25.5 percent). For those with older children, parental care is actually the most common primary kind of childcare. This is more common among lower-income families than higher-income families, but even so, nearly one-in-five two-earner families in the top income quartile report that parental care as their child's primary type of childcare. Two-earner married-couple families in lower income

¹ These findings differ slightly from findings reported in prior work (Boushey and Wright 2004) because that paper present regression-adjusted estimates of childcare usage. The SIPP only asks childcare usage questions of mothers, so this table does not include single fathers.

quartiles are more likely to use parental and relative care, compared to higher-income families. The more income a family has, the more likely they are to use formal daycare.

Single mothers tend to use different kinds of childcare than married mothers. While 27.1 percent of married mothers use parental care, only 10.3 percent of single mothers report parental care as their most common kind of childcare. Single mothers, by definition, do not have the option of tag-team parenting, but do often rely on other relatives to help them with their childcare needs, especially when their children are young.

Work schedules: Who works when?

By definition, tag-team families work alternating schedules and thus are likely to put in evening, night, and weekend hours. Overall, in the United States, the majority of work hours for most spouses in two-earner, married-couple families occur during the “traditional” workweek (Table 3). A traditional schedule is to have at least 50 percent of work hours occur between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Non-traditional schedules include having at least 50 percent of work hours occur during evenings (between 4:00 p.m. and midnight), nights (between midnight and 8:00 a.m.), or weekends.

Even though most spouses in two-earner, married-couple families work daytime hours, there are substantial differences in schedules across family types. Most importantly, parents are more likely to work non-traditional schedules than non-parents: 68.5 percent of wives with children under age six work a traditional schedule, while 74.5 percent of wives without children work a traditional schedule. Among husbands, 63.1 percent of fathers of young children and 65.1 percent of non-fathers work a traditional schedule. Overall, husbands are more likely than wives to work nights, but less likely than wives to work evenings. This provides some evidence that in families with workers on non-standard schedules, tag-team parenting may be a common strategy to cope with problems of work/family balance.

A few other findings stand out:

- Education is correlated with schedules. Husbands and especially wives who have less education are more likely to work evening and night shifts. Among mothers without a high-school degree, only 58.5 percent have a day shift and 14.9 percent work most of their hours in the evening. Those who have graduate degrees are most likely to work day shifts.
- Men in families where both spouses are African American are less likely to work day shifts, compared to men of other races, while women in mixed-race families are least likely among women to work day shifts.
- Workers in younger families are less likely to work day shifts, compared to workers in older families.
- Day shifts are more common among both husbands and wives in higher-income families, compared to lower-income families.

Overall, most people work a daytime schedule, but workers who are younger, less-educated, lower-income and have young children at home are less likely than their counterparts to have a daytime shift.

TABLE 3
Share of Spouses Working Traditional and Non-Traditional Schedules
 Sample is married-couple, two-earner families, with spouses aged 18 to 64

	Wives			Husbands		
	Majority (50% or more) of hours worked are during:					
	Weekdays	Evenings	Nights	Weekdays	Evenings	Nights
All	73.0	6.9	3.8	64.6	5.4	5.4
No children	74.5	5.9	3.4	65.1	5.4	4.9
Children						
Under age 18	72.0	7.6	4.1	64.2	5.4	5.8
Under age 13	72.0	7.4	4.3	63.7	5.1	6.0
Under age 6	68.5	10.3	4.7	63.1	6.5	5.9
With children under age 18						
Two parent family	72.0	7.8	4.1	64.6	5.2	5.8
Family with 3+ adults	71.9	6.9	4.4	62.7	6.5	5.6
Highest level of education in family						
Less than high school	58.5	14.9	6.2	62.2	5.9	7.5
High school	67.0	9.6	5.1	61.3	7.1	8.2
Some college	70.6	8.0	4.8	60.5	6.4	7.0
College graduate	74.4	6.1	3.5	67.8	4.2	4.3
Graduate degree	79.6	5.0	2.2	70.6	3.2	2.3
Family's race/ethnicity						
Mixed	68.7	8.6	5.4	60.4	6.3	7.6
White	72.5	7.5	3.6	65.1	4.7	5.2
Black	74.7	4.5	6.1	63.9	8.1	7.9
Hispanic	71.1	8.9	4.5	63.2	5.9	6.9
Other	64.3	10.4	5.9	58.5	10.7	6.2
Median age of spouses						
Under age 25	59.8	15.9	4.3	60.8	11.8	7.4
25 to 34	68.2	9.9	5.2	60.6	7.0	6.6
35 to 44	72.8	6.5	3.9	65.5	4.6	5.4
45 to 54	77.1	5.4	3.1	67.1	4.4	5.1
over 54	77.7	9.8	2.5	64.7	7.9	7.6
By income quartile						
Bottom	63.1	11.4	4.8	58.4	7.8	6.5
Second	67.4	8.4	5.2	61.6	6.1	6.9
Third	73.9	6.2	3.5	63.7	5.0	6.4
Top	77.5	4.4	3.0	69.3	3.0	3.3

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1. Weekdays is from 8:00 am through 4:00 pm, Monday through Friday only; evening work is from 4 pm through midnight, any day; and night work is midnight through 8:00 am, any night.

Measuring the overlap in spouses' schedules

In order to determine the likelihood that a couple will be at home at the same time, it is useful to have an index that measures the extent to which spouses' work schedules do not overlap or are dissimilar. Chenu and Robinson (2002) developed a "dissimilarity index" to measure the overlap of work hours between couples, which is lowest when a couple has similar schedules, both in terms of the number of hours worked and the overlap of those hours. The dissimilarity index is equal to 0 when the two spouses work identical schedules and equal to 200 when both spouses work 84 hours a week (50 percent of their available time in the workweek) and there is no overlap in the hours worked.

In order to understand why a couple has a high or low dissimilarity index, we separate the index into two components, a measure of the difference in the **overlap of hours** worked and a measure of the difference in the total **number of hours** each spouse works. When spouses are both at work at the same time, their schedules overlap and the **overlap** component of the dissimilarity index moves to zero. When husbands and wives work the same number of hours, the **hours** component of the total dissimilarity index falls to zero.

To summarize:

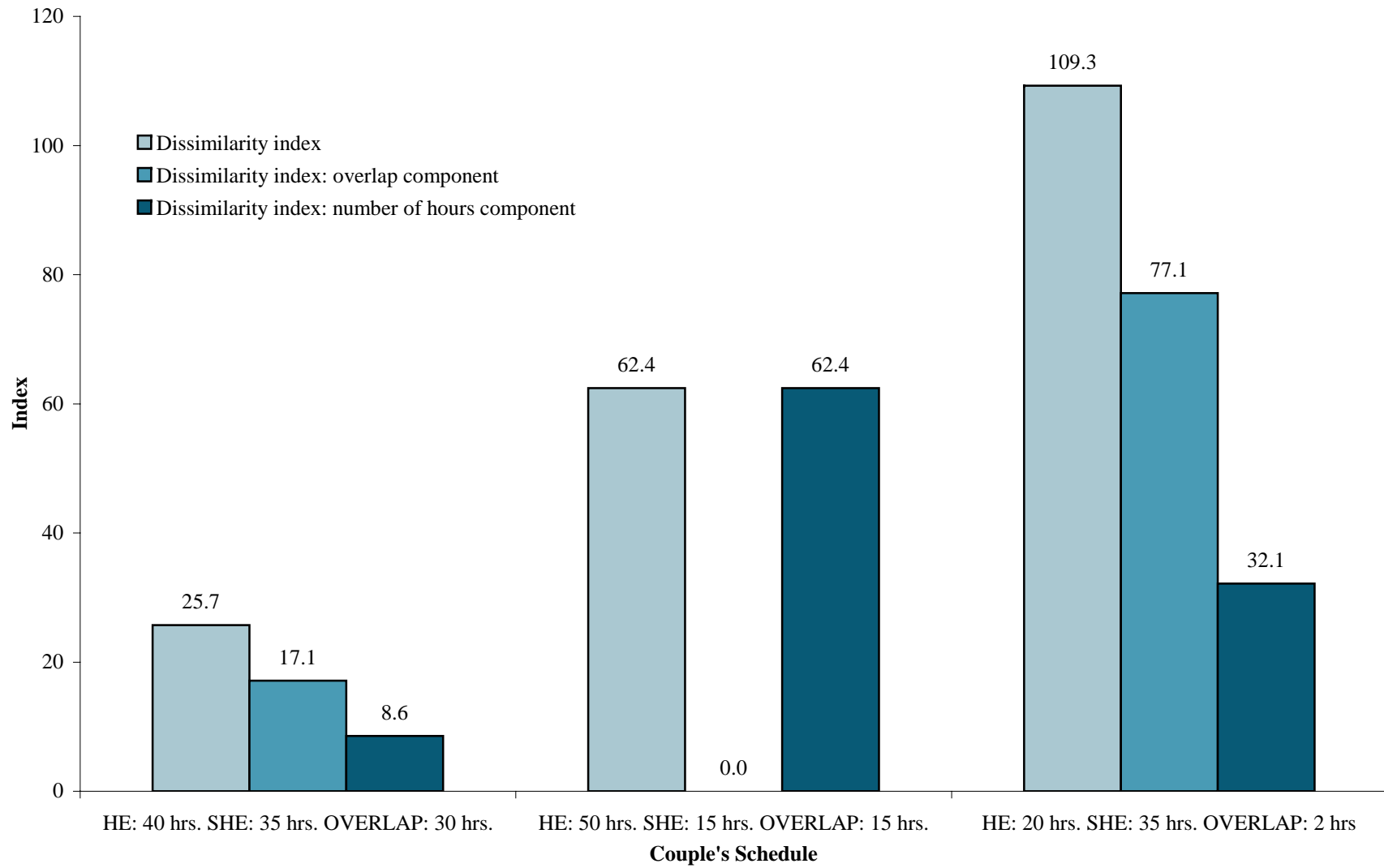
- The **overall dissimilarity index** measures the overall difference in a couple's schedule. A low index indicates similar schedules and a high index indicates different schedules.
- The **overlap of hours** component measures the difference in the times that each spouse is at work. This component is smallest when spouses are both at work at the same time.
- The **number of hours** component measures the difference in the total number of hours that each spouse works. This component is smallest when both spouses work the same number of hours.

Figure 3 shows what the indices would be for three hypothetical families. In the first family, the husband works 40 hours per week and the wife works 35 hours per week and their work schedules overlap for 30 of those hours. Thus, she's not working for five hours a week when he is working and he's working for 10 hours a week when she is not working. Because their schedules overlap quite a bit and because they work similar numbers of hours per week, the total dissimilarity index is relatively low, 25.7, as are the overlap component, 17.1, and hours component, 8.6.

In the second family, the husband works 50 hours per week and the wife works 15 hours per week, entirely when he's at work. Because they work dissimilar numbers of hours, their overall dissimilarity index is high, 62.4, but because the hours that she works occur entirely when he is at work, their overlap component falls to zero.

The third family works alternate schedules. In this case, he works 20 hours per week and she works 35, with only two of those hours overlapping. Their total dissimilarity index, 109.3 and their overlap component, 77.1, are both much higher than the other couples, but their hours component (32.1) is in the middle since they work similar numbers of hours.

FIGURE 3
Dissimilarity Index Explained



Source: Author's calculation.

Table 4 shows the actual dissimilarity indices for married-couple, two-earner families in the late 1990s and early 2000s, by presence of children of different ages. The average total dissimilarity index is 47.9, with a standard deviation of 37.7, which suggests significant differences in experiences across families and is consistent with the notion that tag-team parenting is a strategy for working parents to provide adequate care for their children. On average, families with children have a higher total dissimilarity index, as well as higher dissimilarity in overlap and hours worked, compared to couples without children. Families with children under age six have the largest dissimilarity indices.

TABLE 4
Dissimilarity Index

Sample is married-couple, two-earner families, with spouses aged 18 to 64

	Overall dissimilarity	Overlap component	Hours component
Average	47.9	22.5	25.4
Standard deviation	37.7	31.8	25.2
With children under age 18			
Average	51.3	23.8	27.4
Standard deviation	38.3	32.9	26.0
With children under age 13			
Average	53.2	24.5	28.7
Standard deviation	38.7	33.3	26.7
With children under age 6			
Average	56.1	26.5	29.6
Standard deviation	39.9	34.2	27.2

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1.

Table 5 breaks down characteristics of two-earner, married-couple families with children by ranges within the overall dissimilarity index. Families with a low overall dissimilarity index—that is, families where the husband and wife have similar schedules—have higher income, on average, compared to families with relatively high overall dissimilarity. It may be that a higher income “buys” the family time to be together, which provides some evidence that tag-team parenting may be at best a second-best solution for working families.

Families with higher levels of dissimilarity have lower levels of average education among the spouses, compared to families with lower levels of dissimilarity.

There is a u-shaped relationship between average total (husband and wife) hours at work and the overall dissimilarity index. Families with very low dissimilarity tend to work longer hours, compared to families with moderate dissimilarity. Among families with the lowest levels of dissimilarity, on average, the family has two, full-time workers. As the dissimilarity index rises, the total hours fall. However, at very high levels of dissimilarity, average hours again rise.

TABLE 5
Average Characteristics within Ranges of the Overall Dissimilarity Index

Sample is married-couple, two-earner families with children and spouses aged 18 to 64

Dissimilarity index range	Averages within dissimilarity index range		
	Monthly family income	Highest educational attainment	Total family hours
0-19	\$7,250	3.5	78.9
20-39	\$6,958	3.4	75.4
40-59	\$6,545	3.4	70.6
60-79	\$6,150	3.3	65.7
80-99	\$5,994	3.3	62.1
100 +	\$5,392	3.0	72.1

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1.

Tag-team families tend to be less advantaged compared to other two-earner, married-couple families with children. Table 6 shows the average and median dissimilarity indices across various demographics characteristics. The trends are similar to those shown in Table 3 for non-traditional schedules in that younger, less-educated, or lower-income families have higher average and median levels of dissimilarity among spouses' work schedules compared to other kinds of families.

- Higher-income families have more similar spousal work schedules. Families in the bottom income quartile have an index for schedules that is twice as large as that for families in the top income quartile.
- Families that have a higher level of educational attainment are more likely to have similar schedules. The index measuring median overlap in hours among families with a graduate degree holder is zero, indicating that the spouses in the median family have identical schedules.
- White families are more likely to have similar schedules compared to other races. Mixed-race/ethnicity families appear to have the most dissimilar schedules among all racial/ethnic groups. Black, Hispanic, and other race/ethnicity families have comparable levels of overall dissimilarity in their work schedules, however, black families have less dissimilarity in hours and more dissimilarity in overlap, meaning that black spouses tend to work more similar hours, but have less overlap, compared to other families.
- The older a family is, the more likely it is that the spouses have similar schedules.
- There are few differences within married-couple families that live with other adults and those that do not. This is unexpected in that if married-couples are on alternating schedules voluntarily to adapt to childcare needs, then this may be less common among families living with other adults as those adults may provide some childcare backup for the family. This does not appear to be the case, however.

On average, two-earner, married-couple families generally work some alternating hours. However, young families and lower-income families have schedules that alternate more, which implies that tag-team parenting may be more common among “odd hours,” “cost containment” or “special needs” families, rather than the “anti-childcare/ pro-flexibility families.”

TABLE 6
Dissimilarity Indices, by Family Characteristics

Sample is married-couple, two-earner families with children and spouses aged 18 to 64

	Means			Medians		
	Overall dissimilarity	Overlap component	Hours component	Overall dissimilarity	Overlap component	Hours component
Two parent family	51.9	23.9	27.9	42.2	10.7	19.9
Family with 3+ adults	49.6	23.3	26.3	41.0	10.4	17.1
Highest level of education in family						
Less than high school	58.8	31.2	27.6	54.1	15.5	18.8
High school	55.5	29.9	25.6	44.8	15.4	16.6
Some college	55.0	27.3	27.7	46.1	14.6	19.9
College graduate	48.3	19.8	28.5	39.3	6.8	19.6
Graduate degree	42.1	13.7	28.4	33.1	2.1	20.3
Family's race/ethnicity						
Mixed	55.1	27.7	27.4	46.6	14.6	18.8
White	50.9	22.0	28.9	42.0	8.0	20.6
Black	51.2	29.4	21.9	39.0	15.5	12.8
Hispanic	52.2	28.7	23.5	43.5	15.4	14.6
Other	52.8	28.4	24.4	41.0	13.2	15.1
Median age of spouses						
Under age 25	63.6	35.5	28.2	62.1	21.9	19.3
25 to 34	56.3	28.0	28.3	47.7	14.3	19.9
35 to 44	50.1	22.4	27.7	41.0	9.7	19.1
45 to 54	45.4	19.3	26.1	36.1	5.7	18.1
over 54	50.3	25.1	25.2	46.1	7.7	15.1
By income quartile						
Bottom	61.6	27.7	34.0	57.6	13.9	27.8
Second	56.9	28.5	28.4	47.9	15.2	20.0
Third	50.9	24.8	26.1	40.7	11.7	17.1
Top	43.3	17.4	25.9	33.6	4.2	17.1

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1.

Tag-team parenting: Solving the childcare crisis?

Tag-team parenting, measured by having a high overall dissimilarity index and high overlap index (indicating relatively low overlap of spouses' hours worked) may either be a proactive strategy for addressing childcare needs or wants, or may be the outcome of job-related schedule constraints. Two-earner, married-couple families may choose to tag-team parent because it allows both parents to work and provide the care for their children. These "anti-childcare/pro-flexibility" families may

value having parental care, as well as having jobs with sufficient flexibility to allow them to coordinate their schedules.

However, tag-team parenting may be a necessary evil for other families. While the “anti-childcare/pro-flexibility” families may want workplace flexibility, other workers may have to deal with schedules that are inflexible and occur during non-standard hours, making childcare impossible to find or if found, afford. These “odd hours” families may include any number of job combinations, such as the astronomer wife and grade-school teacher husband, or the two-retail worker married-couple who have rotating and alternating schedules and cannot find adequate childcare during their non-standard schedules, so they end up tag-teaming.

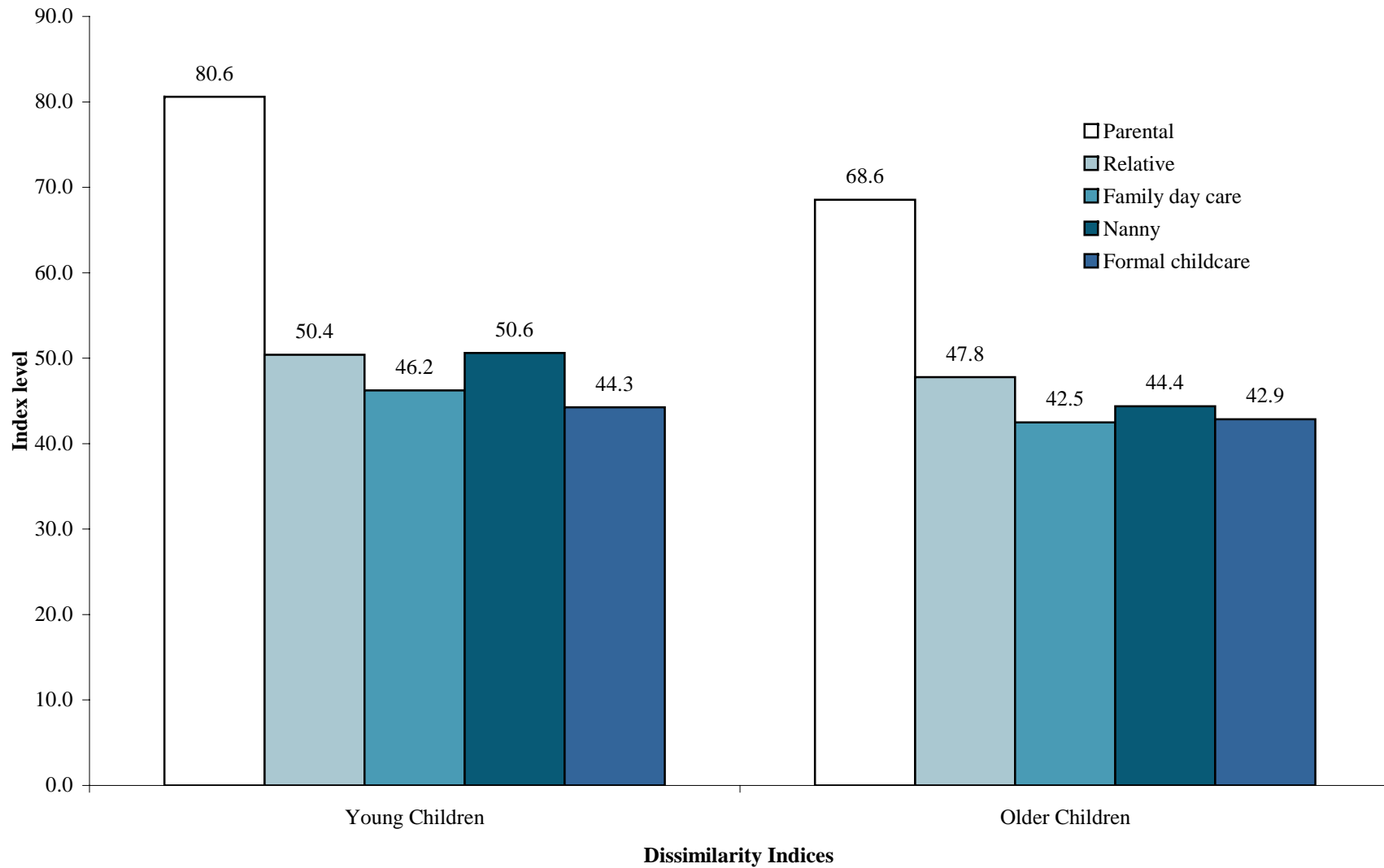
“Cost containment” families may become tag-team parents because they cannot afford the high cost of quality daycare. The Children’s Defense Fund reports that in most states, the cost of quality pre-school is greater than the cost of tuition and fees at the state university (Schulman 2000) and Boushey and Wright (2004) found that families in the bottom 40th percentile of the income distribution who pay for center-based childcare pay on average about one-fifth of their total income for this care. “Special needs” families, with children with disabilities or other special needs, may also end up tag-team parenting because there simply are no appropriate or affordable childcare facilities for their children in their community.

Looking at Figure 4, there is a clear relationship between the dissimilarity index and using parental care as the primary type of childcare. Thus, families with alternating schedules do tend to provide parental care. The overall dissimilarity index for families who use parental care for their young children is 80.6, one of the highest levels seen in any of the tables shown so far. The trends are similar for the overall and hours components of the dissimilarity indices: parents who use parental care as their primary kind of childcare have relatively low overlap of schedules and tend to work dissimilar numbers of hours.

Families may tag-team parent because they want to—the “anti-childcare/pro-flexibility” families—or because they need to—the “cost containment,” “special needs,” and “odd hours” families. We can gauge the degree to which tag-team parenting is truly a choice, not an imposition, by seeing whether this choice varies across income groups. If we assume that income is not associated with parents’ propensity to choose to spend time with their children, then tag-team families should not be more likely to be low income. To get at this, the next three tables look at the tag-team families by income.

Table 7 looks at the dissimilarity indices for families using parental care by family income quartile to examine whether it is high- or low-income families who are driving the high levels of dissimilarity in schedules. Families in the bottom two income quartiles have a much higher level of overall dissimilarity, compared to higher-income families. However, higher-income families still have a relatively high overall dissimilarity index at 64.2. Since lower-income parents who use parental care have higher dissimilarity than higher-income parents, it may be that working alternate schedules to accommodate childcare needs is not about “parent’s preferences,” but rather driven by the paucity of affordable childcare available to parents nationwide.

FIGURE 4
Dissimilarity by Childcare Type, Young Children



Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.
 Note: Sample is individuals aged 18 to 64 with children under age 18 at home.

The most critical difference between lower- and higher-income families is in the components of the overall dissimilarity index. Lower-income families have relatively high overlap indices, hovering in the high 40s, meaning that the parents tend to be at work at different times. However, higher-income families with either young or older children have an overlap dissimilarity index closer to the average for all families with children of 23.0 (from Table 4).

Both lower- and higher-income families have a relatively high index of hours, meaning that the parents are working different numbers of hours. The bottom panel of Table 7 shows that lower-income couples have a slightly smaller percent difference in number of hours worked and both the husband and wife tend to work fewer hours, compared to higher-income couples. This reinforces the conclusion that lower-income couples who use parental care as their primary form of childcare tend to work similar hours, but differing schedules, while couples in the top quartile tend to have a slightly higher gap in number of hours worked, but relatively high overlap in hours worked.

TABLE 7
Dissimilarity Indices for Parents Using Parental Care as Most Common Childcare Type

Sample is married-couple, two-earner families with children and spouses aged 18 to 64

Income quartile	With young children			With older children		
	Overall dissimilarity	Overlap component	Hours component	Overall dissimilarity	Overlap component	Hours component
Bottom	86.0	46.8	39.2	77.2	44.5	32.7
Second	85.6	48.0	37.7	73.8	41.5	32.4
Third	77.5	43.8	33.7	66.0	37.3	28.7
Top	64.2	24.4	39.8	54.6	25.3	29.3

Income quartile	Average hours		% difference in hours	Average hours		% difference in hours
	Wife	Husband		Wife	Husband	
Bottom	27.8	34.3	23.2	31.3	33.9	8.4
Second	31.3	40.5	29.3	34.8	38.7	11.2
Third	32.2	41.2	28.1	36.0	40.4	12.3
Top	32.3	41.8	29.3	36.3	40.1	10.4

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1.

The data in Figure 4 tells us that within two-earner, married-couple families with children, spouses with alternating schedules are more likely than other families to use parental care, but this tells us nothing about why this is the case. To get a clearer picture of how families fall into the four kinds of tag-team families, we can look beyond income to examine a parent's reported reason for having their current schedule. In the SIPP, workers are asked why they have their current schedule and possible answers are "better childcare arrangements," "could not get any other job," or "requirement for the job." If families who work at dissimilar times report that they have their current schedule for "better childcare arrangements," then this can be seen as voluntary.

Overall, the share of wives reporting that they have their current schedule for job requirements is larger than those reporting that they have their schedule to address childcare needs and there are sharp differences by income group (Table 8). Low-income wives are more likely to report that they

work their current schedule to address childcare needs (41.5 percent) compared to those in the top income quartile (30.0 percent). The dissimilarity indices are larger for lower-income women than for higher income women, but overall, women who use parental care and have their current schedule to address caring needs live in homes with the highest levels of dissimilarity that we've seen in any of the preceding tables. The index is at 98.3 for women in the bottom income quartile and 89.9 for those in the top.

Wives who report having their schedule for childcare reasons live in families with very high overlap indices, indicating that they and their spouse are likely to have schedules that do no overlap so that they can tag-team parent.

Women who report using parental care, but work their schedule because it is either a job requirement or because that was the only job that they could find also live in families with very high dissimilarity indices, but smaller than those who have their schedule for childcare reasons. Higher-income wives are more likely to report working their schedule to suit their employer's needs, compared to lower-income wives.

TABLE 8

Dissimilarity Indices for Parents Using Parental Care as Most Common Childcare Type, by Why Have Work Schedule

Sample is married-couple, two-earner families with children and spouses aged 18 to 64

Income quartile	Share	Overall dissimilarity	Overlap component	Hours component
Has schedule to suit wife's caring needs				
Bottom	41.5	98.3	54.0	44.3
Second	45.5	97.2	57.3	39.9
Third	37.4	95.3	54.3	41.1
Top	30.0	89.9	50.0	40.0
Has schedule to suit wife's job's needs				
Bottom	47.2	78.5	39.1	39.3
Second	44.6	76.6	45.4	31.2
Third	56.1	67.5	38.0	29.5
Top	58.2	57.5	20.3	37.3

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1.

Finally, we can look at the effects of income, the reported reason for a worker having their current schedule, and the kind of childcare used on the family's dissimilarity indices. If most families are "anti-childcare/pro-flexibility families," then the estimated coefficient on having a schedule to fit childcare needs should be positive, that is, the choice of having parents provide childcare leads to more tag-team parenting. If most tag-team families are "odd hours" families, then the coefficient on having a schedule due to job constraints should be positive. If most families are either "cost containment" or "special needs," then the estimated coefficient on having a schedule to fit childcare needs may also be positive. The coefficients on the kind of childcare should show that families who use parental care have more dissimilar schedules. However, in no case do we expect, *a priori*, that income group should affect the dissimilarity index once we have included the possible reasons for tag-team parenting. If income is important and low-income families are more likely to have

dissimilar schedules, then this implies that tag-team parenting is a strategy of those who cannot “buy” other options.

Table 9 provides results from regression estimates on the dissimilarity index. The regressions measure the effect of reported reason for schedule, kind of childcare, and control variables on the family’s dissimilarity index. The estimates shown are from regressions that also include both the husband and wife’s average hours of work per week, the median age of the spouses, the family’s race (white, black, Hispanic, other, or mixed race), the maximum educational attainment level of the spouses, whether the family has a child under age six, between ages six and 12, or between ages 13 and 17. (Full results are shown in Appendix A.)

TABLE 9
Effect of income group on dissimilarity indices

Sample is married-couple, two-earner families with children and spouses aged 18 to 64

	Overall dissimilarity	Overlap component	Hours component
Primary kind of childcare			
Family care	-0.162 (0.063)***	-0.157 (0.087)*	-0.088 (0.077)
Formal care	-0.244 (0.060)***	-0.216 (0.084)***	-0.153 (0.074)**
Nanny care	-0.077 (0.085)	-0.119 (0.120)	0.072 (0.104)
Parental care	0.314 (0.062)***	0.200 (0.087)**	0.241 (0.077)***
Relative care	-0.154 (0.061)**	-0.178 (0.085)**	0.002 (0.076)
Self care	0.025 (0.176)	0.147 (0.236)	-0.157 (0.216)
Income quartile, relative to bottom quartile			
Second	-0.072 (0.041)*	-0.040 (0.054)	-0.170 (0.050)***
Third	-0.175 (0.042)***	-0.105 (0.056)*	-0.267 (0.052)***
Top	-0.237 (0.046)***	-0.220 (0.063)***	-0.219 (0.057)***
Reason for current schedule			
Wife's schedule fits job needs	-0.110 (0.044)**	-0.028 (0.059)	-0.013 (0.053)**
Husband's schedule fits job needs	-0.055 (0.038)	-0.100 (0.051)**	-0.119 (0.047)
Wife's schedule fits care needs	0.169 (0.047)***	0.194 (0.078)***	-0.068 (0.075)
Husband's schedule fits care needs	0.151 (0.061)**	0.283 (0.063)***	0.076 (0.057)

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1. Full regression results available from the author.

*** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; *Significant at the 10% level.

Table 9 clearly shows that income plays an important role in families having alternating schedules, even once we include information in the regression about workers' preferences for schedules and kind of childcare used. Being in a higher-income family lowers the family's dissimilarity indices, all else equal. This is true for the overall index, as well as the overlap and hours indices. Thus, lower-income families are more likely to tag-team parent than are higher-income parents, accounting for some information about preferences.

The regression results also show that in families where husbands and wives report having a schedule to fit job needs, this lowers all three dissimilarity indices, meaning that these spouses tend to have schedules that overlap more and where spouses work more similar numbers of hours. However, in families where husbands and wives report having a schedule to suit childcare needs, this leads to higher dissimilarity, that is, more tag-team parenting. Looking at the effects of why parents have their schedule on the overlap index, in column two, the regression shows that when wives have a schedule to suit care needs, this increases the dissimilarity index by 0.194, or 19.4 percent, while if husbands work their schedule to suit care needs, this increases the overall index by 0.283, or 28.3 percent.

The kind of childcare used is correlated with tag-team parenting. Families who use parental care as the primary kind of childcare for their children have a 31.4 percent higher overall dissimilarity index and a 20.0 percent higher overlap index, while other kinds of childcare are correlated with lower dissimilarity.

Conclusion

Tag-team parenting is a strategy employed by parents to help them balance work and family. We identify four possible kinds of tag-team parents: anti-childcare/pro-flexibility, odd hours, cost containers, and special needs. Overall, low-income families are more likely to tag-team parent than are high-income families, even once we account for other things that we know about the family. Thus, policymakers should be concerned about tag-team parenting because it may be at most a second-best solution for working families. Families who are pushed into tag-team parenting must accept a day-to-day life where parents are not able to spend much quality time with one another. This clearly has implications for family life and family happiness.

However, even for families who "choose" tag-team parenting, policymakers should be concerned. If working alternating schedules is the best way for families to provide care, then there may be something wrong with our system of childcare or our workplaces. Parents need flexibility to balance work and family, but the solutions must create a workable day-to-day balance for families, which truly allows them to care not only for their children, but for themselves and their spouses as well.

Appendix

This analysis uses data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). The SIPP is a multi-panel, longitudinal survey of the civilian, non-institutional population in the United States, conducted by the U.S. Census. It is designed to examine issues related to participation in income maintenance programs, such as welfare and unemployment insurance and contains extensive information on individuals' backgrounds, employment and earnings, and access to services, including health insurance and childcare.

The SIPP asks a series of questions about individuals' hours of work, work schedules, and workplace flexibility. Specifically, it asks about an individual's schedule, whether the schedule is usually daytime, nighttime, or rotating, or whether an individual works at home (and how often). Further, the survey asks what is the main reason the individual works their current schedule. This is an open-ended question and the answers that are coded are: (1) Better childcare arrangements; (2) Better pay; (3) Better arrangements for care of other family members; (4) Allows time for school; (5) Other voluntary reasons; (6) Could not get any other job; (7) Requirement of the job; or (8) Other involuntary reasons. We recode the answer "better childcare arrangements" as having one's schedule for childcare and recode the job-related reasons (could not get any other job and requirement for the job) as having one's schedule as a job requirement.

The SIPP data has one known problem with the work schedules data. In the 1996 panel, about one-quarter of the sample had their answers about their work schedules accidentally deleted from the data tapes. The U.S. Census Bureau imputed answers for these individuals based on their characteristics. This is only a problem in the questions asked in one wave of the 1996 panel, but not a problem in the 2001 data.

The SIPP data have the advantage of containing a series of questions on child-care usage alongside the work schedule questions, allowing us to determine whether families who work alternating schedules are doing so in order to provide parental childcare and the extent to which those with non-traditional schedules use informal, rather than formal, childcare. In the SIPP, working mothers are asked what kind of child care their children are in, how many hours per week their children are in each kind of care, and how much they pay for the care. The questions are asked for up to five children under age six and up to five children between ages six and 12.

The sample for this analysis is married-couple families with spouses aged 18 to 64 with children in cases where both spouses or partners can be matched in the survey and where both spouses work and report their work schedules. We match spouses and thus are able to look inside the family to understand how the spouses' schedules overlap. The SIPP allows cohabitating, but reportedly unmarried heterosexual couples to be matched, but there are no matches for same-sex couples. Throughout this paper, I refer to married-couple families, but these families also include cohabitating couples who provide an id number for their partner. Of all women who report being married or cohabitating, 88.8 percent match to a spouse or partner in the SIPP. Our final sample includes data on individuals from spring 1997, spring 1999, and spring 2001. This sample represents 37.1 percent of all adults aged 18 to 64 in the 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Ideally, we would examine the extent to which spouses' alternating schedules affect marital stability. However, due to the short timeframe of the SIPP and the relative few divorces we are able to identify—less than two percent of matched, two-earner couples report being divorcees two years

later in the 1996 SIPP panel—we are unable to examine this question in this paper. However, prior work has established a link between alternating schedules and marital happiness (Grosswald 2004).

The sample for this analysis is a select group of all families with children in the United States. Figure 5 shows where these families fit into the overall income distribution of all families with children. Families with only one parent are clustered in the bottom of the income distribution. Families with two parents, but without both parents working are relatively evenly distributed across the four quartiles. These families are less likely to be in the bottom quartile, but about the same share are in the second, third, and fourth quartiles. Married-couple families with two-earners are clustered in the top two quartiles of the distribution of income for families with children.

Table 10 shows some demographic characteristics of married-couple families. Wives tend to be older if the wife only works, whereas the wife tends to be younger if the wife does not work. The same is true for men, indicating that families that have a traditional male-breadwinner, female-homemaker model tend to be younger families than those that have either two-earners or the female-breadwinner model. Both husbands and wives tend to be better educated in two-earner families, compared to other family types. Within two-earner families, wives work an average of 33.3 hours per week and husbands work an average of 39.8 hours per week. The median husband and wife each work 40 hours per week.

TABLE 10
Demographic characteristics of married-couple families

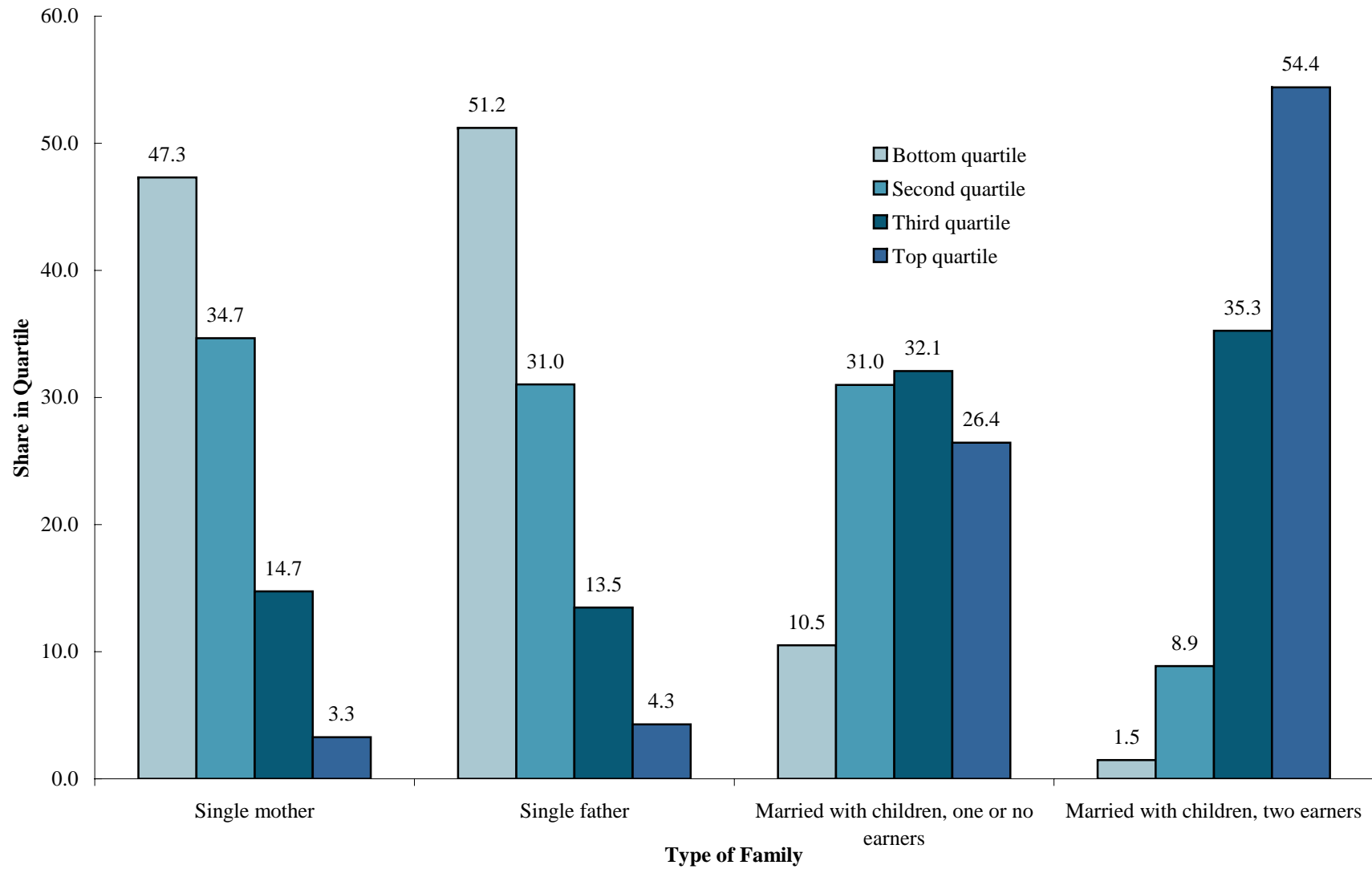
Sample is married-couple, two-earner families with children and spouses aged 18 to 64

	Two-earner couple	Only wife works	Only husband works	Neither works
Median monthly family income	\$5,364	\$2,619	\$3,433	\$869
Wife's characteristics				
Median age	37	39	35	38
Median education level	Some college	Some college	Some college	High school
Husband's characteristics				
Median age	39	41	38	41
Median education level	Some college	High school	Some college	High school

Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.

Note: See note to Table 1.

FIGURE 5
Income Distribution of Families with Children, by Family Type



Source: Author's analysis of 1996 and 2001 SIPP panels.
 Note: Sample is individuals aged 18 to 64 with children under age 18 at home.

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