

Employment Rates Higher Among Rural Mothers Than Urban Mothers

KRISTIN SMITH

As men's jobs in traditional rural industries such as agriculture, natural resource extraction, and manufacturing disappear due to restructuring of rural labor markets, the survival of the family increasingly depends on women's waged labor.¹ Rural mothers with children under age 6 have higher employment rates than their urban counterparts, but have higher poverty rates, lower wages, and lower family income, placing rural mothers and their children in a more economically vulnerable situation than urban mothers.

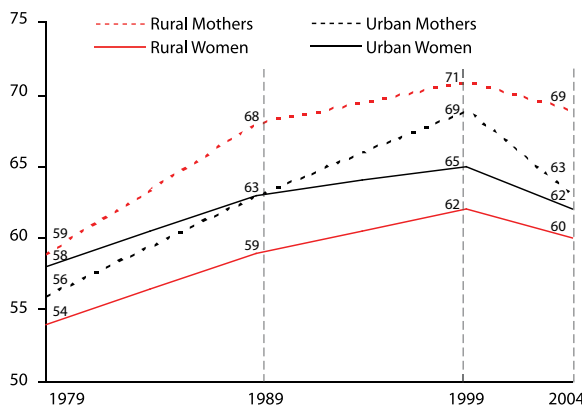
The entry of rural women, and particularly rural mothers, into the paid labor market is important to consider in light of recent research that finds rural children lagging behind urban children in letter recognition or beginning sounds recognition when entering kindergarten.² Good quality child care enhances early brain development, cognitive and language development, and school readiness, setting the stage for successful early school achievement.³ As more rural mothers enter the workforce, ensuring good quality child care is critical because child care providers play an important role in promoting child development, especially for preschoolers, whose early life experiences play a fundamental role in their development.

Rural Mothers Are More Likely to be Employed Than Urban Mothers

In 2004, 69 percent of nonmetropolitan, or rural, mothers with young children under age 6 were employed, compared with 63 percent of urban mothers (see Figure 1).⁴ For the past 25 years, rural mothers have consistently had higher employment rates than urban mothers. Employment rates for both rural and urban mothers rose from 1979 to 1999, before declining between 2000 and 2005. However, the decline in employment has been steeper among urban mothers than rural mothers since 2000.

Although rural *mothers* have higher employment rates than their urban counterparts, rural *women* overall historically have been less likely to be employed than urban women. However, that gap is decreasing. In 1979, 54 percent of rural women and 58 percent of urban women were employed. By 2004, 62 percent of urban women were employed and 60 percent of rural women were employed. Differences in employment rates among rural mothers and rural women overall have remained relatively large and consistent since 1989. On the other hand, differences among urban mothers and urban women overall have been less pronounced.

FIGURE 1. EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN AND MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN UNDER 6 BY RESIDENCE, 1979-2004



Source: 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2005 March CPS

Employment Rates Rise as Educational Attainment Increases

Employment rates increase with education for both rural and urban mothers. In 2004, 46 percent of rural mothers with less than a high school education were employed, but 84 percent of rural mothers with a college degree were employed (see Figure 2). Similarly, 41 percent of urban mothers with less than a high school education were employed, but 72 percent of urban mothers with a college degree were employed. Despite the similar patterns of increasing employment with increasing education level, rural mothers with young children have higher employment rates than their urban counterparts at every education level. In addition, although employment rates among rural mothers rise substantially with education level,

employment rates among urban mothers taper off at higher education levels, leaving a large discrepancy in employment rates among rural and urban mothers who are college graduates (84 percent compared with 72 percent, respectively).

Higher employment rates among rural mothers are not surprising, given that rural mothers with children under 6 have higher poverty rates. In 2004, 24 percent of rural and 20 percent of urban mothers with young children lived in poverty. At every education level, rural mothers of young children are more likely to live in low-income families (incomes below 200 percent of the poverty level), have lower hourly wages, and have less family income other than their own earnings (such as a spouse's earnings or interest income). For example, rural mothers with less than a high school education reported other income totaling, on average, \$13,200 compared with \$16,600 for their urban counterparts.⁵ This gap in other family income is the widest among college graduates. Rural mothers with a college degree had, on average, \$39,028 in other family income, which is substantially less than the \$60,000 reported by urban mothers with college degrees.

Rural families at all education levels feel the toll of economic restructuring. Rural mothers of young children, even those with college degrees, have higher employment rates than urban mothers of similar education levels because rural areas experienced a real loss in men's earnings, income, and employment.⁶

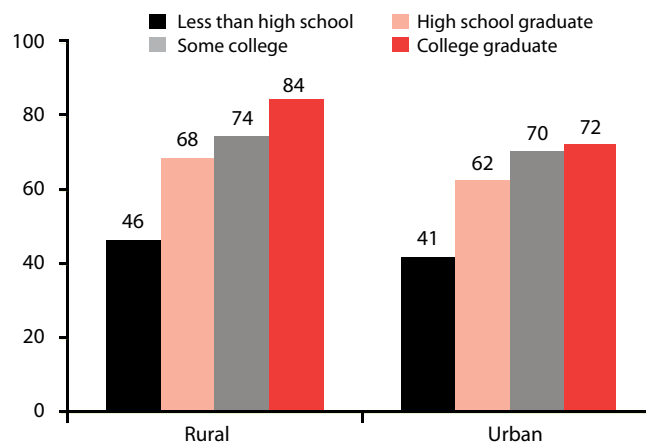
Rural Areas Need More High Quality Child Care

Once vibrant communities, many rural areas now face obstacles resulting from unstable labor markets, limited job and educational opportunities, and lack resources and infrastructure, such as good quality child care, health care, and transportation. Rural families, suffering from economic contraction and restructuring and the loss of good paying, traditionally male jobs with benefits, are turning to women's waged labor to bolster the economic security of their families.

Rural mothers' participation in the paid labor market has grown in the past twenty-five years, and employment rates are consistently higher among rural mothers than urban mothers. This strong presence of rural mothers in the paid labor market is important in light of research indicating that rural children in America enter kindergarten with fewer key early literacy skills than urban children.

Yet rural mothers face serious challenges in finding and securing good quality child care. Rural mothers rely on home-based care arrangements to a greater extent than urban mothers⁷ and rural families have fewer child care choices than urban families, with center-based care being the least common available option.⁸ It is critical that rural working parents have greater access to high quality child care and early education programs for their preschoolers. Ensuring that rural preschoolers' early learning experiences prepare them for future school success should be a strong focus of state and federal policy.

FIGURE 2. EMPLOYMENT AMONG MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN UNDER 6 BY EDUCATION LEVEL, 2004



Source: 2005 March CPS

Data Used

This fact sheet uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Surveys (CPS) March Supplements from 1980, 1990, and 2000, and Annual Social and Economic Surveys (ASEC) from 2005. The CPS provides a nationally representative sample of households and the individuals in those households, and collects demographic, economic, and employment information, as well as participation in select government assistance programs. Employment rates are calculated for civilians aged 16 and over who, during the previous year, were gainfully employed. Comparisons presented in the text are statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

ENDNOTES

¹ Tickamyer, A. and D. Henderson. 2003. "Rural Women: New Roles for the New Century?" in *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by D. Brown and L. Swanson, 109-117. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

² Grace, C., E. Shores, M. Zaslow, B. Brown, and D. Aufseeser. 2006. "New Clues to Reaching Very Young Children and Families in Rural America." *Zero to Three* 26:7-13.

³ Shonkoff, J., and D. Phillips, eds. 2000. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

⁴ The term "rural" here refers to persons living outside the officially designated metropolitan areas. "Urban" refers to persons living within metropolitan areas. Metropolitan residence is based on Office of Management and Budget delineation at the time of data collection.

⁵ The averages reported for other family income are medians.

⁶ Falk, W., and L. Lobao. 2003. "Who Benefits from Economic Restructuring? Lessons from the Past, Challenges for the Future?" in *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by D. Brown and L. Swanson, 152-165. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

⁷ Smith, K. 2006. "Rural Families Choose Home-Based Child Care for their Preschool-Aged Children." Policy Brief No. 3. Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire.

⁸ Gordon, R. and L. Chase-Lansdale. 2001. "Availability of Child Care in the United States: A Description and Analysis of Data Sources." *Demography* 38:299-316.