

Married Moms In U.S. Buck Trend Toward Shorter-Term Work

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Have American jobs become less stable? Do workers change employers more frequently than in the past?

Many Americans would probably say the answer to these questions is an obvious yes. Yet for the past few decades, researchers looking at the data haven't been so sure: average job tenure (the number of years working for the same employer) has been surprisingly stable over time.

In a study published in the February issue of *American Sociological Review*, sociologists Matissa Hollister of McGill University and UNH's Kristin Smith solve this puzzle by breaking out trends in job tenure separately for men and women and by marital and parental status. They show that men and never-married women have seen declines in job tenure, but this overall trend was masked by increases in the job tenure of married mothers.

The authors argue that these divergent patterns point to two fundamental shifts in expectations and behaviors in the U.S. labor market. The first shift reflects employers' and workers' increasing belief that they are no longer expected or obligated to pursue long-term employment relationships. The second shift stems from a quiet revolution in mothers' behaviors and labor market expectations as women increasingly find identity through work, in the process reducing work disruptions due to childbirth.

Using data from the Current Population Survey, the primary source of U.S. labor-force statistics, the researchers found that the average job tenure among men slid from 8.3 years in 1983 to 7.4 years in 2012 — an 11 percent decline. "That decrease may not seem dramatic, but it marks a broad and significant trend," says Hollister, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at McGill's Desautels Faculty of Management.

Meanwhile, average job tenure among women rose 19 percent, from 5.8 years in 1983 to 6.9 years in 2012. In particular, married mothers experienced a 32 percent increase in job tenure before 1996, to 6.6 years.

Fewer employment disruptions around childbirth

The authors argue that job tenure for mothers is affected by two factors: labor-market job stability and employment disruptions around childbirth. It is likely that married mothers faced declines in labor market stability similar to those for men and single women, but a shift toward more continuous work around the time of childbirth overwhelmed this effect.

Indeed, the rise in married mothers' job tenure before 1996 corresponds to a sharp increase in employment levels for married mothers with infants. The employment rate for married mothers with infants leveled off after 1996, however, and average job tenure for married mothers grew more slowly after that point. Single mothers with infants, in contrast, saw a jump in employment after 1996 as well as an increase in job tenure during this period.

"Workplace changes and accommodations likely supported job continuity among married mothers," says Smith, a family demographer at the Carsey Institute and research assistant professor of sociology at UNH. "With rising access to job flexibility, family leave, and family-friendly workplace policies, some married working mothers may increasingly have found a way to balance the care of children and remain with their same employer." Further research is needed to fully assess the factors underlying this trend, the researchers say.

"Despite the statistical countercurrent among married mothers," Hollister adds, "the consistent pattern of declining employer tenure among men and never-married women supports the popular perception that the labor market on the whole is shifting toward short-term work arrangements and employment instability."

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