



mothers at work

When it comes to paid work, mothers are damned if they do and damned if they don't. The path to damnation is different for married and unmarried mothers, however. In Mary Eberstadt's 2004 book, *Home-Along America: The Hidden Toll of Day Care, Behavioral Drugs, and Other Parent Substitutes*, married middle-class mothers who swap full-time parenting for paid employment are blamed for everything from attention deficit disorder (ADD) to children's crazed consumerism to the childhood obesity epidemic. Just months before Eberstadt's polemic hit bookstore shelves, journalist Lisa Belkin's *New York Times Magazine* article "The Opt-Out Revolution" sparked intense debate over whether middle-class career women should "opt out" of the corporate rat race in exchange for full-time motherhood. The verdict, according to the well-coiffed mothers featured in Belkin's article, was that an exodus from the boardroom was best for both moms and children.

For single mothers, however, "opting out" simply isn't an option. And for poor, unmarried mothers "opting out" of the workforce can result in harsh penalties. The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) required the "head" of every family receiving welfare to find work within two years of their start in the program. Mothers of children under age six faced less stringent expectations: They were only required to work 20 hours per week, and this rule could be waived for mothers without child care.

According to Jason DeParle's 2004 book, *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*, these tough work rules, along with the demand for "personal responsibility," resulted in an estimated three million women and children being kicked off the public assistance rolls.

Rhetoric aside, how are mothers coping with the competing roles of "breadwinner" and "parent"? Although married and unmarried women arguably face different expectations, they show similar rates of labor force participation (LFP). According to data

from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), married and never-married mothers with school-age children had nearly identical LFP rates in 2000 (77 and 80 percent, respectively), although formerly married mothers of school-age children were much more likely to work. Among women with preschool children, formerly married mothers are more likely than single and married mothers to work. All mothers' LFP rates climbed steadily between 1970 and 1995, but married mothers' rates have been stable since 1995. Among single mothers, in contrast, LFP rates showed a sharp increase in 1997, following the passage of PRWORA.

While most American mothers—regardless of marital status or age of children—work for pay, many Americans still think that in the ideal family situation one parent stays home. A 2002 Gallup Poll asked Americans, "Considering the needs of both parents and children, [what] do you see as the ideal situation for a family in today's society?" The survey found that 41 percent of Americans believe that one parent should stay at home solely to raise the children; 13 percent say that both parents should work full time; 24 percent think that one should work full time and one part time; and 17 percent believe that one parent should work full time while the other works for pay at home. For unmarried mothers, however, these "ideals" simply are not options (see Edin and Kefalas, "Unmarried with Children," in this issue).

