

TIME FOR CHILDREN? THE DECLINING AVAILABILITY OF PARENTS, 1979-2008

Extended Abstract

This paper examines parental employment patterns over the past 30 years. Utilizing the March supplement to the Current Population Survey, we analyze the declining availability of parents from the perspective of children. We find that increasing female labor force participation and the growth in single-headed households has led to dramatic declines in parental availability. The share of children with all parents working full-time has risen from 38 to 49 percent between 1979 and 2007 (the paper will draw on another year of CPS data, 2008, when the data become available). Particularly striking is the reduction from 47 to 36 percent in the fraction of young children (0-5 years old) with a full-time parental caregiver. Increases in family work hours have primarily occurred at the extensive margins, with the movement of mothers from no work, to full-time employment.

Figure 1 shows trends in parental availability over the period. We define parental availability from the child's perspective, categorizing children as having: all parents working full-time (FT); at least one parent home FT; or at least one parent home part-time (PT). As shown in Figure 1, the share of children with all parents working FT has risen from 38 to 49 percent over the period, while the share with at least one parent home FT has fallen from 41 to 31 percent.

While a portion of the decline in parental availability is due to the declining share of children with two parents (which fell from 82 to 76 percent over the period), the main driver of this change is the increase in parental employment within family types. This can be seen in Table 1 which shows trends in parental availability within family types. In this table, we focus on the share of children who have at least one parent home FT. It can be seen that the availability of a FT caregiver falls for all types of families over the period, but most dramatically for children in single parent families, children whose parents have moderate levels of education, and pre-school age children.

The paper will also consider how these changes in parental employment and availability have affected family incomes as well as child and family well-being, and the possible implications for public policy.

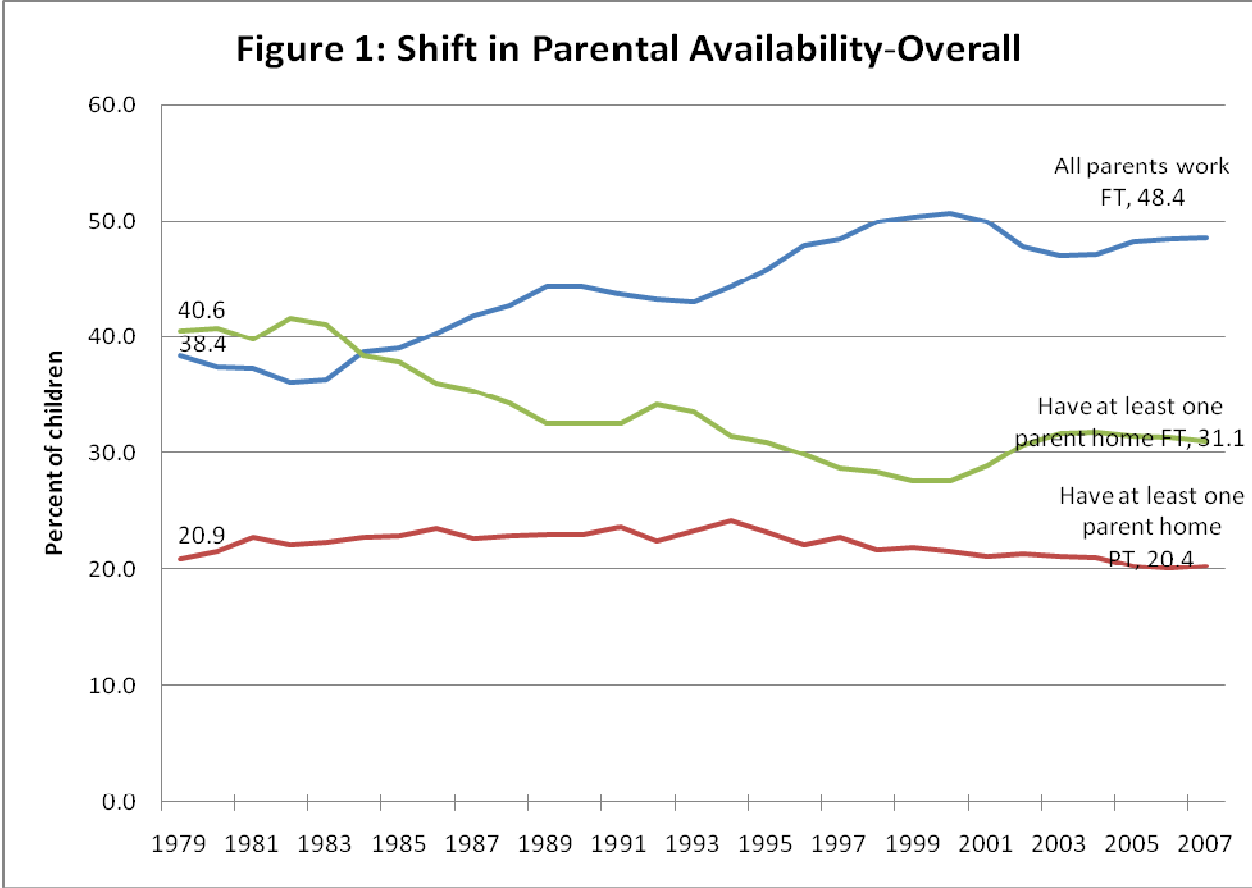


Table 1: Percent of children with at least one parent home full-time, 1979-2007 (selected years)

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2007
Overall	40.6	38.5	32.6	31.5	27.6	31.8	31.1
Family Structure							
Single Parent	32.6	37.1	33.3	31.7	18.3	22.7	21.4
Two Parent	42.5	38.8	32.4	31.4	30.6	34.9	34.5
Highest Parent's Education							
Less than High School	53.3	59.5	57.0	58.7	45.0	50.7	51.9
High School	39.4	37.5	31.3	32.1	27.2	34.0	34.3
Some College	34.4	32.4	26.3	24.4	21.8	25.8	25.5
Bachelor's +	38.1	31.8	27.3	25.7	26.9	28.9	27.3
By Age of Child							
Kid <6 yrs old	46.6	43.7	38.7	37.0	32.3	38.0	36.5
Kid 6-11 yrs old	39.6	38.3	31.5	31.2	27.4	31.6	30.5
Kid 12-17 yrs old	36.6	33.2	26.7	25.7	23.2	26.0	26.5

Source: Authors' analysis of March CPS data