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To Work or Not to Work? A Reevaluation of Correlates of Adolescent Employment

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Abstract

Considerable research attention in the adolescent literature has been paid to the adverse consequences of employment on youth development. Much of the debate in the literature revolves around whether early employment has adverse effects on educational outcomes or not. We enter into this debate to address shortcomings in previous research including a lack of attention to youth time use in activities beyond school and paid work and how time use varies by individual characteristics of youth including gender, race, and social class. In addition, our data allow us to include contextual factors presumed to influence the relationship between adolescent employment and educational outcomes, including objective and subjective measures of neighborhood and family context. We use the Survey of Parents and Youth (SPY), to examine how the effect of youth employment on educational outcomes varies by individual and contextual characteristics of youth in the U.S.

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In his recent review of the literature on the sociology of adolescence, Furstenberg (2000) argues that adolescent research has disproportionately focused on the problematic aspects of this developmental phase. For example, considerable research attention in the adolescent literature has been paid to the adverse consequences of employment on youth development. Rather than viewing early paid work as a means to develop young people's skills and maturity in easing the transition to adulthood, researchers argue that adolescent employment, particularly that over 20 hours a week, may have serious deleterious consequences. Specifically, researchers have examined the effects of youth paid employment on their likelihood to engage in problematic behaviors (Bachman, Johnston, & O'Malley 1981), and on opportunity costs in terms of academic achievement (Marsh 1991), extracurricular activities (D'Amico 1984), and time spent with family (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). Expectations about the effect of paid employment on youth development in some of this early literature is particularly alarmist (Greenberger & Steinberg 1986), bearing a striking resemblance to past speculation about the adverse effects of female employment on children in the early maternal employment literature (Belsky 1984; Belsky & Eggebeen 1991).

More recently, however, a renewed debate has emerged over whether the positive effects of paid employment on youth were overlooked during the furor of the 1980s to condemn it (interestingly, this tide change corresponds with the growing overall rejection of the negative link between maternal employment and child well being (Bianchi 2000)). Researchers on the positive consequence side posit that paid employment may foster both personal and social resources (Mortimer and Johnson 1998; Mortimer 2003), although both sides agree that consequences vary by individual characteristics of youth prior to employment, by the type of job, and the job environment (Schoenhals, Tienda & Schneider 1998; Mortimer, Staff, & Oesterle 2003).

Supporters of adolescent employment have been aided by the growing usage of longitudinal datasets, allowing more comprehensive tests of causality than those of the original negative allegations. Using panel data, Mortimer et al. (1991) find that selection factors predicting who works and how

much -- not the act of work itself-- explain negative outcomes associated with youth employment. Others have found a long term positive association between prior levels of adolescent employment and labor force participation, income, and occupational status in adulthood (Carr, Wright & Brody 1996; Ruhm 1997). Yet, using the same dataset, Hotz, Xu, Tienda & Ahituv (1999) find that youth employment involves substantial sacrifice in short term educational outcomes, far outweighing any long term career advantages. In fact, the early employment linkage to future labor force success may itself be an artifact of unobserved heterogeneity where adolescents who work are more likely to be from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Hotz et al. 1999). And hence the debate continues.

Furstenberg (2000) suggests the need for a more even-handed approach to research on the consequences of adolescent employment. In this paper, we reevaluate past findings on youth employment using data from a new national dataset designed to fill in the gaps of datasets that have been used in the past. Among the most notable limitations in the literature is the lack of fully detailed time use patterns for adolescents and families more generally. (Folbre 1997). A further lacunae exists in detailed descriptions of youth time use by gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. For example, previous research finds that girls spend more time than their male peers in paid work, housework, and homework; whereas boys spend more time than girls in extracurricular activities (Gager, Cooney, & Call 1998). Thus, the effects of paid work on adolescents, both short-term and long-term, may vary significantly by gender. Thus, we utilize a unique new dataset, which includes more detailed measures of time spent in other activities in addition to school, *i.e.* school and non-school related extracurricular activities, housework, housework, volunteer work, and with friends and family *etc.* In addition, few datasets that allow equally deep insight into adolescent time use are nationally representative. Furthermore, by collecting data from youth in addition to parents, our data provides a more accurate portrait of youth in paid employment. Parental reporting on children's time use, the primary source of data in many surveys, is known to underreport child employment (Committee on the Health and Safety Implications of Child Labor 1998).

Finally, we feel more attention must be given to socioeconomic and community level differentials in patterns of adolescent employment. Our dataset provides a rich array of variables ranging from objective measures of neighborhood socioeconomic level as well as more subjective measures of parent and youth perceptions of their neighborhood and school opportunities. Thus, in this paper we will reexamine the relationship of teen labor force participation by social class with school performance, stress levels, conflict with parent(s), controlling for youth time in all reported alternate activities, and by youth individual and neighborhood characteristics.

DATA AND METHODS

This study will analyze data from the Survey of Parents and Youth (SPY), a nationally representative telephone survey conducted during the 1998-1999 school year using random digit dialing (RRD). This survey, conducted by The Center for Child Wellbeing at Princeton University, is currently considered one of the best sources for data on children's and adolescents' time use. The sample consists of 6,675 30-minute interviews with children, ages 10-18, in addition to 20-minute interviews with at least one of their parents. Nonresponse rates (largely parental refusals for interviews with children) were approximately 22 percent. The dataset is unique in that it provides extensive and detailed time use data, as well as information on family structure, parent/child relationship evaluations, measures of the time parents spend working outside the home, socioeconomic status, and objective and perceptual measures of neighborhood and school characteristics.

The latter two subjects are of special interest for this paper, and, in addition to using basic control variables on age, race/ethnicity, gender, family structure, *etc.*; we plan to create scales measuring overall levels of socioeconomic status and neighborhood/community typology. Our socioeconomic scale indicator will be a combination of variables in the SPY data from the parental interviews, which include income, government assistance, home ownership, parental education and self-assessment of ability to "get by" measures. Our community-level scale indicator will combine variables in the SPY data from both

child and parental interviews. In addition, our data include zip code information from which we will derive indices of racial isolation, opinions on neighborhood safety and access to community services and resources, as well as questions on peer and risk environment at school.

After limiting our sample of teenagers to ages 14 to 18, we will use multinomial logistic regression analysis to predict paid employment as our outcome variable, measured categorically, in up to six cut-off points:

Dependent Variable: Time Spent in Paid Employment

- Doesn't work for pay at all
- Works less than 5 hours a week
- Works 6 to 10 hours per week
- Works 11 to 15 hours
- Works 16 to 20
- Works 21 hours or more

While we can be certain that the relationship between hours of teen employment and youth time allocation and development outcomes is not linear (and have thus chosen to use a categorical rather than continuous variable), the effect of the various time intervals is less clear. We will most likely reduce our number of categories accordingly, possibly to just three, depending on the shape of the relationship: *e.g.* 1) Doesn't work 2) Works 20 hours or less 3) Works more than 20 hours.

We will test for the two primary theories in the literature, which relate youth employment to a) opportunity costs and b) negative outcomes by using the following groupings of independent variables:

Primary Independent Variable Groupings

a) Opportunity Cost

- Amount of time spent on **household activities**
- Amount of time spent in school-related **extracurricular activities**
- Amount of time spent in nonschool-related **extracurricular activities**
- Amount of time spent in **leisure time with friends**
- Amount of time spent in **leisure time alone**
- Amount of time spent in **leisure time with family**
- Amount of time spent doing **volunteer work**
- Amount of time spent doing **schoolwork**

b) Negative Outcomes

- Grades on last report card
- Frequency of skipped classes
- Projected educational completion
- Held back a grade
- Level of worry
- Parental relationship quality

LIMITATIONS

We are cognizant of the fact that significant findings from this analysis cannot be ruled causal mechanisms (in either direction) due to the cross-sectional nature of the SPY data. We therefore acknowledge in advance that potential findings will have to be considered to be *associated* with teen employment, as the direction of the causality — be it cause or be it result of youth employment — cannot be discerned. It is important to note that causality is only an issue, however, if we find that there *is* a significant relationship between teen employment and any of our tested associations. If no associations exist between any of our various independent variable groupings and our dependent variable, then we may deduce that teen employment is neither caused by nor cause of the theories we are testing. Alternatively, significant associations will be justification to take our analysis to the next level, using a longitudinal dataset, using our findings from the SPY data as a baseline.

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