

“My Hands are Really Tied in so Many Ways”

How Children Both Constrain and Motivate the Labor Force Participation of Mothers with Disabilities

Sarah Deming

Mentor: Dr. Mariana Amorim

Department of Sociology, Washington State University



BACKGROUND



Literature Review

- Motherhood constrains women's paid work—both earnings and hours
 - These financial impacts of motherhood are disproportionately larger for women who already experience disadvantages in the labor market: unmarried mothers (Gangl and Ziefle 2009), those with lower levels of education (Amuedo-Dorantes and Kimmel 2005), and Black mothers as opposed to White mothers (Pal and Waldfogel 2016).
- Disability is associated with decreased rates of labor force participation and increased rates of poverty (Bleiweis 2020)
- Women with disabilities face a “double handicap” of occupying two concurrent minority statuses (Deegan et al. 1985)

In conversation with Amorim's (2019) findings

- Mothers with a disability are 10.5% more likely to be in the labor force than similar non-mothers with a disability
- Mothers receiving SSDI are less likely to have a job; mothers receiving SSI are more likely to have a job
- Mothers with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than non-mothers

What we still don't know

- How many disability beneficiaries are mothers?
- How does motherhood *promote* labor force participation?
- How does motherhood *hinder* labor force participation?
- Do the existing rehabilitation programs work for mothers?

RESEACH APPROACH



METHODS

DESIGN

In-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted via telephone or Zoom

RECRUITMENT

Targeted, nonprobability sampling approach: Physical fliers hung locally (N. Idaho) on community bulletin boards and posted virtually on various disability-related Facebook groups. Also advertised in the “gig” section of various Craigslist pages in large metro areas.

PARTICIPANTS

32 current and former SSDI + SSI recipients with children <19 years of age

INCENTIVES

\$40 for a ~45-90 minute interview

ANALYSIS

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to Nvivo qualitative analysis software. I then conducted multiple rounds of inductive coding following the Grounded Theory approach to data, letting themes emerge from the transcripts



Seeking mothers with disabilities



Researchers at Washington State University are examining the impact of motherhood on the labor force behaviors of women with disabilities

We are looking to interview mothers currently receiving SSI and/or SSDI benefits for a disability as well as mothers who have received benefits in the past 5 years. *Must have at least one child 18 years old or younger who resides with you at least 50% of the time.*

Eligible participants will receive \$40 for a ~60 minute interview

For more information or to volunteer for participation:

www.thepushandthepull.com
phone: 208.741.3824
email: sarah.deming@wsu.edu

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

#1: How do children shape the labor market behaviors of mothers with disabilities—from decisions about pursuing work to locating suitable employment?

#2: What additional resources and accommodations might facilitate mothers with disabilities returning to work?

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Sample (N=32)

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> |
|----------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Income | | |
| Less than \$25,000 | 19 | 59% |
| \$25,000 to \$34,999 | 5 | 16% |
| \$35,000 to \$49,999 | 4 | 13% |
| \$50,000 to \$74,999 | 3 | 9% |
| \$75,000 to \$99,999 | | |
| Partnership Status | | |
| Married or Cohabiting | 16 | 50% |
| Single | 16 | 50% |
| Race | | |
| White | 17 | 53% |
| Black | 9 | 28% |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 2 | 6% |
| Asian | 1 | 3% |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Hispanic | 6 | 19% |
| Non-Hispanic | 26 | 81% |

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Sample (N=32)

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> |
|--|----------|-------------|
| Disability Benefit Status | | |
| SSI | 5 | 16% |
| SSDI | 20 | 63% |
| SSI + SSDI combo | 4 | 13% |
| Former beneficiary | 3 | 9% |
| Labor Force Status | | |
| Not working or looking, <u>unlikely</u> to work | 7 | 22% |
| Not working or looking, possible <u>future</u> work | 6 | 19% |
| Not working, <u>actively</u> looking | 2 | 6% |
| Reported "Not working, looking" (but no evidence of job-seeking) | 7 | 22% |
| Currently working | 10 | 31% |
| | | <i>Mean</i> |
| Years on benefit | | 8.2 |
| Number of children in household | | 1.9 |

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERING WITH A DISABILITY

I. Insufficiency of the benefit amount for supporting a family

- Recurring theme of “kids are expensive!”
- Particularly salient for the N=14 living exclusively on their benefit amount

“I just wish . . . they could just imagine trying to live off of \$799 a month. If they could just imagine that, then that really says it all right there . . . Trying to raise a child! . . . [T]his person is highly dependent upon me for *everything*, and I have \$799 a month to make it happen. . . [A]nything for myself is completely out the window.

- Claudia, white mother of two receiving both SSI and SSDI

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERING WITH A DISABILITY

II. Difficulty of caring for children while balancing the limits of their disability

- Especially for unpartnered mothers without the support of another adult in the household (N=16)

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERING WITH A DISABILITY

III. Added sense of responsibility that children create in women's lives

- Increased fear of benefit (and medical insurance) loss
- Willingness to do “whatever it takes” to support children

“Yeah. I'm not gonna share a certain thing, but thank God, you know, I made it through that. I was cut off for . . . maybe like almost two months—and two months with a child! Oh my God. But I survived though. Like I said, I'm not gonna reveal it. Nope. Nope. I'm not going to talk too much. But I—I did survive. Moms do what they have to do.”

- Deja, a married Black mother who receives SSDI benefits for anxiety and depression as well as benefits for her 3-year-old son with autism

RQ #1: How do children shape the labor market behaviors of mothers with disabilities?

Decisions about pursuing paid work varied along four axes:



1. Severity of disability
2. Household resources
3. Labor market prospects
4. Childcare needs vs. supports available

BARRIERS TO LOCATING + SECURING EMPLOYMENT: CHILDCARE

- School schedules
 - Ashley: “The types of jobs have to fall into like--after I drop my daughter off to school, but before I have to pick her up at 2:30 . . . So it's like, what am I going to do? Because back then--now she's 15, that's fine. But a couple of years ago I couldn't just leave her or just let her bus home. I mean, what do I do between 8am and 2:15sh pm, a couple days a week? So it was severely limiting. It's like, who wants to hire mornings Monday through Friday? Oh wait, no one....”
- Precarity of informal care networks
- Covid-complications

BARRIERS TO LOCATING + SECURING EMPLOYMENT: CHILDCARE

“We live on a very tight budget and going back to work... I do want to go back to work. I'm trying to figure it out, but at the same time, . . . I don't know. It's . . . very difficult. . . . I'm already limited on what I can do [as a quadriplegic], but . . . it's just really difficult finding a career or job path that also meets . . . I'm the only one that's home. He doesn't have a dad at home. I need to make sure I'm there for homework and keeping him on track and making sure he's not . . . getting on YouTube or whatever all the time. . . . It's—not only are you limited on what you can do, but it's just . . . everything.” <defeatedly>

- Naomi, a White, single mom to a 12-year-old son who has received SSDI since a car accident left her quadriplegic

BARRIERS TO LOCATING + SECURING EMPLOYMENT: FEAR OF BENEFIT LOSS

I probably wouldn't care as much [if I didn't have children], I probably would try to work more and I probably would have tried to get off disability faster because I wouldn't have been so worried about income . . . I wouldn't be so worried about losing housing or, you know, worried about losing the check, I could just do whatever I wanted. It would kind of feel like, “Oh, well, if this doesn't work out I can move here” or “If this didn't work out, I could go stay here or do this...”, you know? You can't just take the risk . . . I know I can struggle and go live in this little place or whatever, and not have food for a little bit, or just eat a little bit of this, but you can't do that when you have kids . . . I have to sit here on SSI until he leaves, you know, then I can try to do all that.

- Tasha, a single Black mom who lived on SSI benefits for depression throughout the duration of raising her now 19 and 17-year-old children

THE MULTIPLICATIVE EFFECT OF BARRIERS

Nancy: “When you're somebody who doesn't have a lot of **family support** and other types of support, it's not easy . . . Especially when you have children, you know? I'm a lot better than I used to be, 20 years ago in **my disability**, but I do have moments . . . times when I'm not doing so well, my depression gets really bad, you know? [And] a part of me is afraid that, you know, am I going to have the **support for my daughter?** Let's say she gets sick . . . And plus, schools are hybrid and there's not even **childcare!** And if I do get a job and I have to pay childcare, I have to be concerned about my daughter's safety. Or am I going to just be working to pay the childcare? If I go out there and work full time . . . some jobs, they don't offer a package deal in terms of **medical, dental, and everything.** And I do need that as a, as a parent, **I need that for me and my family.**” After articulating these myriad challenges precluding employment and rehabilitation off SSI benefits, Nancy concluded,

“I just feel like my hands are really tied in so many ways.”

RQ #2: What resources and accommodations might facilitate mothers with disabilities returning to work?

“SUPPORT, SUPPORT, SUPPORT”

- More information about how the “system” works
- Caseworkers who *know* mothers’ circumstances

“If you were to ask me-- if you would ask me, what's the main thing that someone in my situation, a mother with a child, especially a child with a disability, what would they need to transition into the workforce? **Support, support, support.** That's what we need. As much support as we could get, and referrals and, and any type of, guidance, you know, that's definitely needed. Because on my own, I can't do it on my own.”

--Nancy, *single mom of 3 on SSI with PTSD following domestic abuse*

RQ #2: What resources and accommodations might facilitate mothers with disabilities returning to work?

CHILDCARE SUPPORT

- Affordable + high-quality
- Flexibility of hours to accommodate mothers with disabilities who can work only part-time or non-standard schedules
- Availability for job *seeking* as well as employment

“I would have had to have found childcare through another agency and see if I would have qualified. But most of the time you don't qualify unless you're able and willing to work, or you have proof of employment, or there's a reason why you need to go to work. But if you're disabled and you're looking for work, you know?”

--Gabriella, mother of two who rehabilitated off SSDI benefit

RQ #2: What resources and accommodations might facilitate mothers with disabilities returning to work?

EARNINGS THRESHOLD FLEXIBILITY

“They [SSA] could at least eliminate a lot of their financial responsibilities by allowing us to work. And then, you know, let's say five years goes by and more often than not, you have exceeded that [income threshold], *then* you'd get reevaluated. I'm not saying I want *both*, you know, I don't want to work *and* get the disability, I just want the opportunity to make more money. But you know, there's going to be dry spells. There's going to be slow periods, and there's going to be health flares. So—I don't know, an intermittent type of work program [would be beneficial].” -- Ashley

RQ #2: What resources and accommodations might facilitate mothers with disabilities returning to work?

SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

- Increasing mothers' labor market prospects with education and/or job training could help "tip the scales" such that the challenges + risks of paid work are overcome

"Education! If they could have paid for any type of college. I have my BA, but in today's world, a BA is going to get you \$17 an hour instead of \$15. If I could have had a master's or a certificate...? But they won't pay for school. If tuition would have been a thing, that would have been a big—I searched for so many ways to get a certificate or like, you know, programming for computers, anything paid for so I could do something higher paying as a stay at home mom, you know? But paying for continuing education, instead of just getting you trained to do something that is already on their list is—would have been beneficial." --Courtney

DISCUSSION

RECOMMENDATIONS: Acknowledge the salience of motherhood

“God gave me my child and I have to protect my child, period. I don't think nobody should tell a mother—I just don't think nobody's allowed to tell a mother what they're supposed to do because *you* know what's best for your child . . . [A]ll our decisions are based on our child . . . Every decision you make, you're not thinking about just yourself, you're thinking about your kids, first. And so, in every decision I'm making, I'm thinking about my son, period. And Social Security needs to understand that.”

-- Deja

RECOMMENDATIONS:

More nuanced measures of “labor force participation”

Amorim’s findings:

- *Mothers with a disability are 10.5% more likely to be in the labor force than similar non-mothers with a disability*
- *Mothers receiving SSDI are less likely to have a job; mothers receiving SSI are more likely to have a job*

Results from qualitative exploration:

- Social desirability might lead beneficiaries to indicate that they are “looking for work” (and thus “in the labor force”), despite no apparent sign of job-seeking behaviors
- Conversely, many are “not working” but earning wages under the table

WHO IS THE SYSTEM WORKING FOR?

MOTHERS WITH:

- **Financial resources**

- High SSDI benefit
- Outside income sources (partner employment, settlement money, etc.)
- Earned income via under-the-table side gigs
- Lived in low cost-of-living area
- Utilizing other social supports (Section 8 housing, NFP disability groups, etc.)

- **Outside support**

- Partners, older children, grandparents

IMPLICATIONS

- The presence of children is salient to some (but not all) women with disabilities' employment decisions
- Mothers experience unique barriers to securing and maintaining employment
- The challenges mothers with disabilities face spill over to their children
 - Particularly the impacts of living in poverty
- Surveying women with disabilities about their labor force participation obscures the structural challenges they face in actually pursuing and securing paid work that aligns with their capacity for engaging in work

LIMITATIONS + FUTURE RESEARCH

- Convenience sampling method
- Diverse population--did not necessarily reach "saturation"
- Phone + Zoom interviews
- Difficulty accessing former recipients who had rehabilitated back to work
- Covid-19-related challenges

"You can't come up empty-handed. . . You can't ever be empty-handed as a mother. As a father, maybe. But you can't ever be empty-handed as a mother. Never, never, never."

-Iris, single mother of 3