

Income Inequalities and Working Conditions

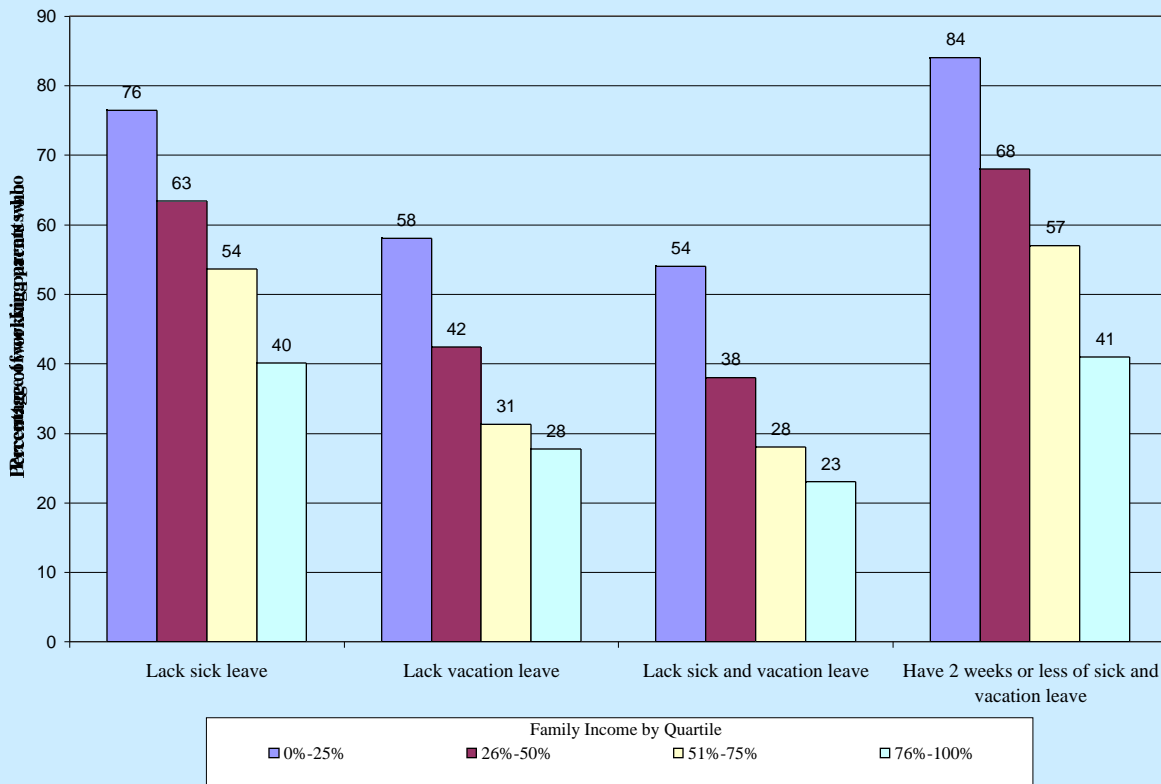
Over the past two decades, the United States has had considerably widening income inequalities, which have adversely affected middle-income as well as poor families. Moreover, when it comes to widening disparities in the conditions working Americans face, income only begins to tell the story.

Low- and middle-income families face greater obstacles--at home, in their neighborhoods, in their children's childcare centers and schools, and at their own work--than upper-income families do. When there is little state and national funding for preschool and school-age child care, communities must rely on local tax dollars and family contributions--with their resultant gross inequities. When our nation's school budgets are based on local property taxes, schools in low- and middle-income districts cannot afford to provide as many services as schools in high-income ones. In the absence of basic job benefits guaranteed by the government, lower-wage jobs bring with them less or no paid leave and flexibility, and fewer or no supports for employees who need to care for children and elderly parents. While the resources available to low- and middle-income families are less than those available to upper-income ones, the needs they have to address are greater. As income falls, the amount and severity of health problems among children and the elderly rise. These disparities are affecting a far broader range of families than we typically acknowledge in public policy debates.

Disparities Disadvantage Poor and Middle Class Families

Employees' marked disparities in working conditions disadvantage families across the income scale from middle class to poor. In our studies, families in the bottom quartile of income were significantly more likely to lack paid sick leave, paid vacation leave, and flexibility than families in the upper three quartiles of income. But even people who earn just above the median income were less likely than those in the top quartile of income to have either paid sick leave, paid vacation leave, or flexibility (see Figure 6.1), as well as significantly less likely to have at least four weeks of combined paid sick and vacation leave. At the same time, they were more likely than those in the top quartile to have to work evenings or nights. Among employed parents, 20 percent of those in the lowest income quartile work evenings, compared to 14 and 13 percent of those in the middle quartiles and 7 percent of those in the highest one; for night work, the respective figures are 10, 9 (for both middle quartiles), and 6 percent.

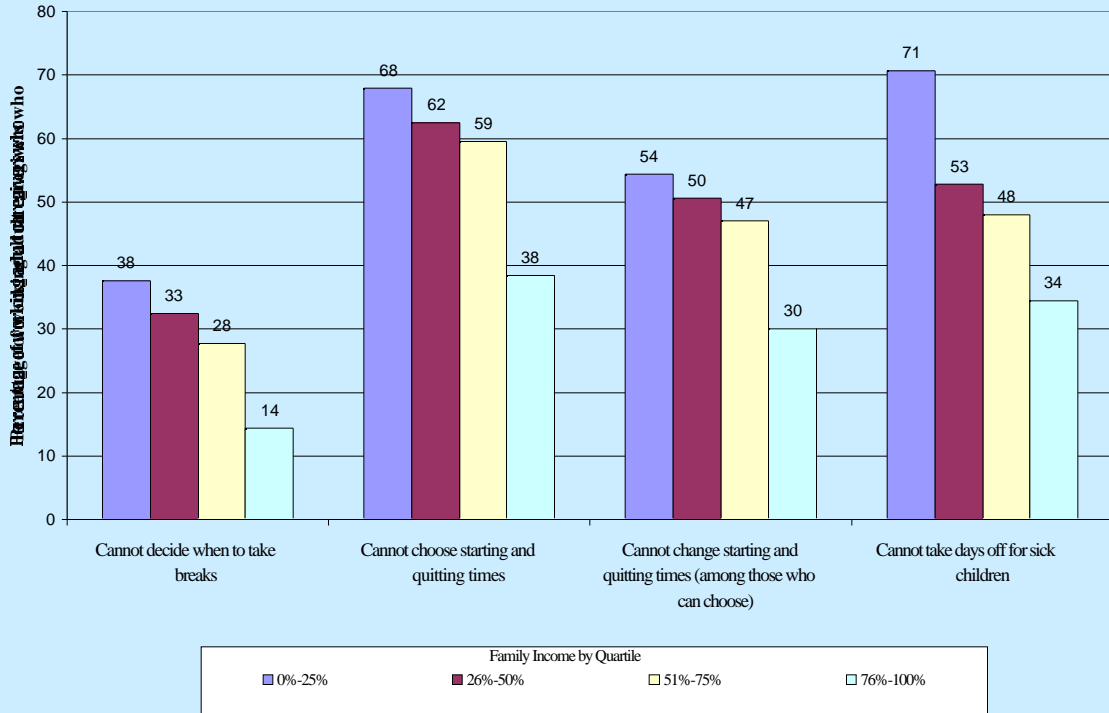
Figure 6.1 Lack Basic Fringe Benefits



Notes: The above figure is based on analyses we conducted with data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Bars represent parents who lacked benefits some or all of the time they worked between 1990 and 1996 (1996 data were the most recent available at the time of this study).

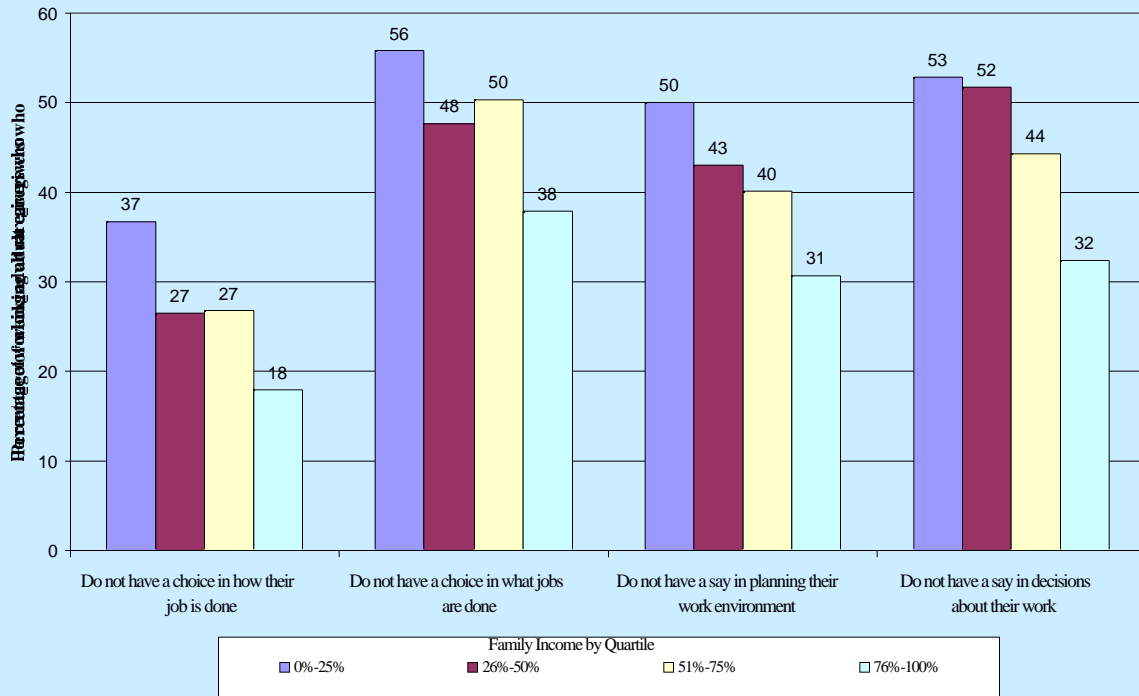
As demonstrated earlier, paid leave and flexibility at work can make a critical difference in the feasibility of a worker meeting family members' needs while succeeding at, or least surviving on, a job. People who can choose when to take a break can more readily meet with teachers about a child's school problems or with nurses about sick parents. Those allowed to select work hours have a better chance of minimizing the possibility that their young children will need to be left home alone before or after school. Those allowed to work at home can help disabled family members with eating or toileting. Those who can take days off do not have to leave their sick children by themselves. In each of these critical aspects of working conditions, the middle-income employees we studied were worse off than higher-income ones (see Figure 6.2). In fact, no matter how questions about flexibility were asked, middle-income working Americans and their families were significantly worse off (see Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.2 Job Inflexibility



The above figure is based on analyses we conducted with data from the National Survey of the Changing Workforce.

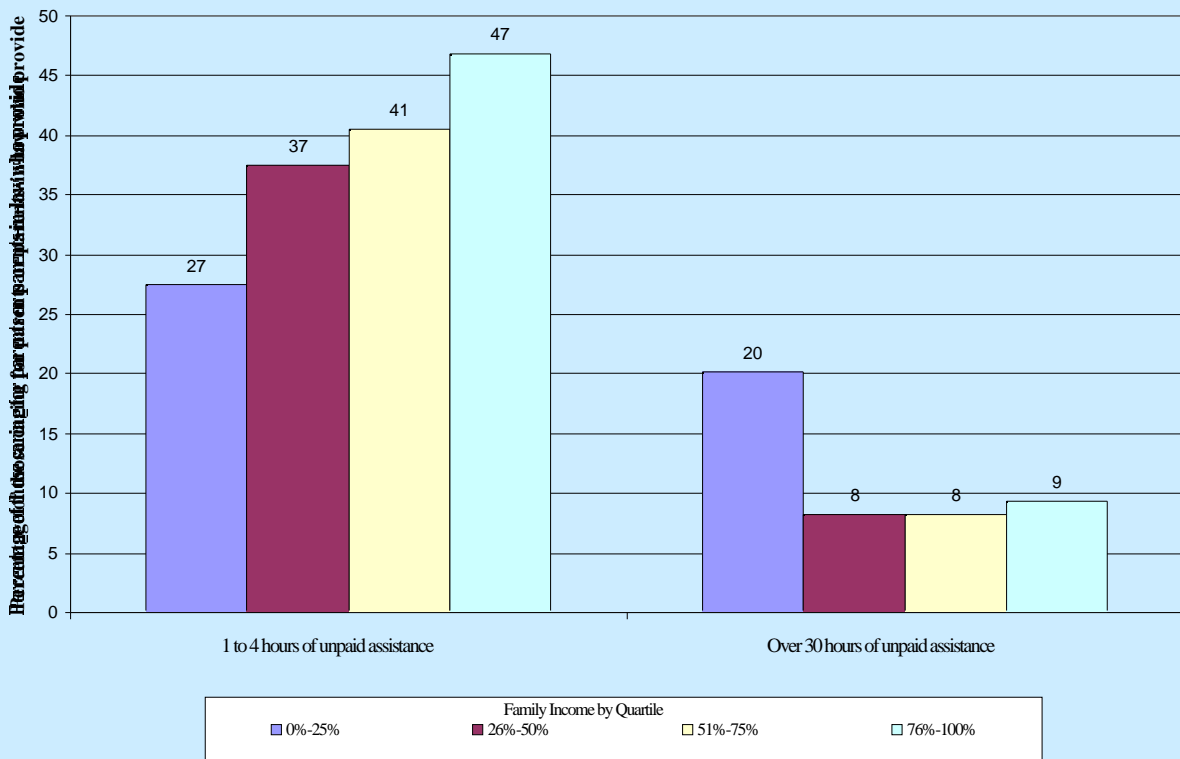
Figure 6.3 Lack Decision-making Latitude



The above figure is based on data we collected in the Survey of Midlife in the United States.

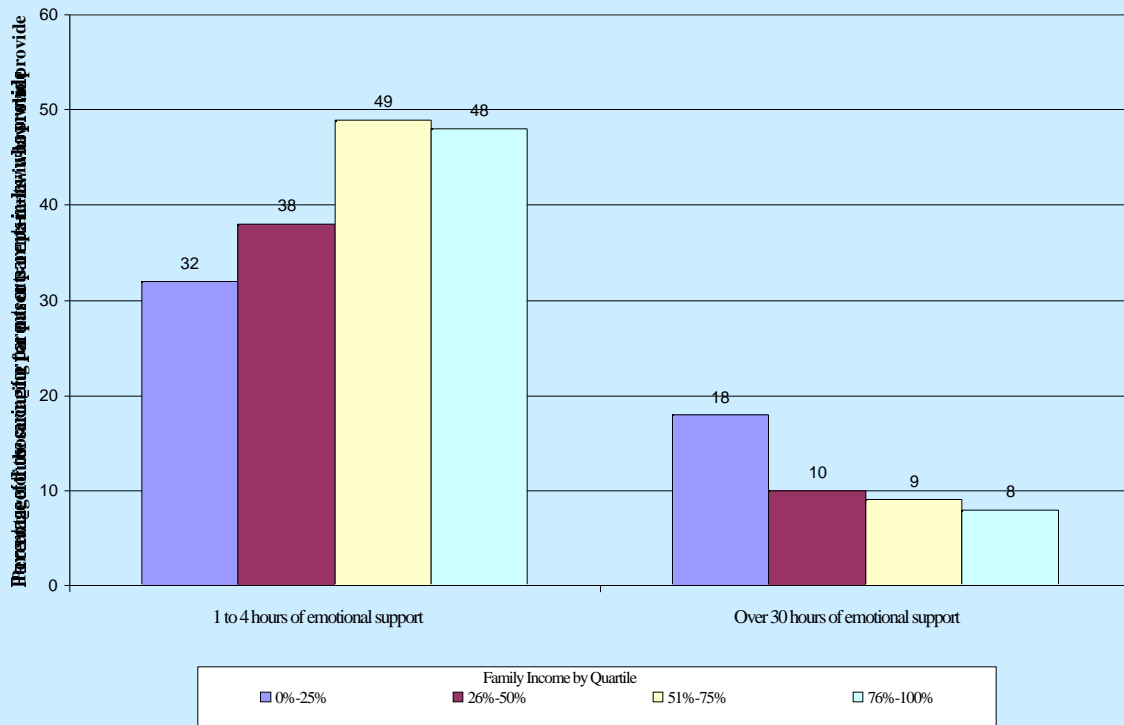
A gradient in need exists, as well as in working conditions. For example, lower and middle income working adults spend substantially more time caring for elderly parents and parents-in-law (see Figures 6.4 and 6.5). One of many reasons for this is that lower- and middle-income adults and children get sick more often and have more chronic conditions than upper-income adults and children. Yet, fewer lower- and middle-income workers have the economic resources to pay for someone to help them care for family members with health problems while they work, and the government provides few public caregiving services.

Figure 6.4 Extent of Caregiving for Parents or Parents-in-law



The above figure is based on data we collected in the Survey of Midlife in the United States.

Figure 6.5 Extent of Caregiving for Parents or Parents-in-law



The above figure is based on data we collected in the Survey of Midlife in the United States.

Experiences of Parents Working in Poverty

While the income gradient in working conditions has left middle-income families in substantially greater jeopardy than upper-income ones, the poor face the worst conditions with the least resources to fill the chasms in services that threaten millions of families' health and welfare. When social institutions fail families, middle-income families have more resources of their own with which they can try, at least for a time, to plug some of the holes in the dike. While there is no doubt that families across the country from every ethnic and racial group, middle-income as well as poor, are dramatically affected by the widening gap between American institutions and American working families, the poor are affected first and worst because they have both the most substantial problems and the most limited resources.