

Do Children's Behavior Problems Limit Poor Women's Labor Market Success?

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Abstract:

Economically disadvantaged mothers face numerous barriers to stable, quality employment opportunities. One barrier that has received limited attention in previous research is having a child with significant psychological or behavioral problems. Using a representative sample of low-income mothers and early adolescent children from the Three-City Study (N = 717), we assessed whether adolescents' behavior problems prospectively predicted mothers' employment status, consistency, and quality. Lagged random-effects regression models suggested that adolescents' psychological distress and delinquency inhibited the labor market success of disadvantaged mothers, although school problems were related to greater work effort among mothers. Links between labor market success and both psychological distress and delinquency differed across mothers with male and female adolescents.

Keywords: barriers to employment | child behavior problems | maternal employment | welfare reform | low income families | family studies

Article:

Economically and socially disadvantaged parents experience numerous barriers to finding and maintaining stable, high-quality, and well-paid employment in today's competitive labor market. These barriers include both personal factors, such as low education and skills, substance use, domestic violence, and mental health problems, and family-related factors, such as childrearing responsibilities and a lack of reliable child care (Olson & Pavetti, 1996). Such factors may inhibit women's entry into jobs, decrease the consistency of their work effort, and reduce the stability of their job holding. Employment barriers also may make it difficult for women to improve the quality of their jobs, wage rates, and access to benefits. In the past decade, several studies have assessed such barriers by delineating the challenges low-income women face in the labor market. Even with the push of welfare reform and the pull of a strong economy and work incentives, research has found that barriers may impede low-income women's work success (e.g.,

Bernheimer, Weisner, & Lowe, 2003; Danziger, Kalil, & Anderson, 2000; Dworsky & Courtney, 2007). However, limited attention has been paid to whether children's behaviors and characteristics affect mothers' employment. On the basis of transactional and family systems theories, we hypothesize that high levels of psychological or behavior problems among children, particularly common during the early adolescent years, may be barriers to mothers' success in the labor market.

Potential Mechanisms Linking Child Behavior Problems and Maternal Employment

Although previous studies have delineated a host of barriers to the employment success of disadvantaged mothers, few studies have investigated possible barriers associated with the psychosocial functioning of children and related caregiving demands. Olson and Pavetti (1996) identified children's health or behavioral problems as one of the eight primary barriers that could impede poor women's success in the labor market in the face of welfare reform. Previously, scholars highlighted the challenging balance of caregiving and employment for mothers of infants and young children (e.g., Acs & Loprest, 1999; Corman, Noonan, & Reichman, 2005). Here, we draw attention to the special caregiving demands of children with psychological or behavior problems as those children transition into adolescence. Early adolescence brings a broad range of shifts in physical, cognitive, and social growth and development (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). These shifts are associated with increased caregiving demands and parent-child conflicts as families renegotiate roles and adjust to changing skills, behaviors, and expectations (Collins & Laursen, 2004). This developmental transition is often associated with the emergence or intensification of challenging child behaviors, such as psychological distress and mental health problems (e.g., depressive symptomatology), problems in school (e.g., truancy, disciplinary problems), and a range of externalizing problem behaviors, such as interpersonal conflicts and delinquency (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004).

Given the demands of parenting early adolescents, we seek to assess whether early adolescents' functioning, and particularly their engagement in behavior problems, hinders disadvantaged mothers' success in the labor market. There are numerous processes that might underlie links between adolescents' behavior problems and mothers' employment success. As Olson and Pavetti (1996) noted, children who suffer from behavioral or health problems demand enhanced parental attention and care, such as direct parental monitoring and supervision, meetings with educational personnel, and medical visits. The time devoted to such tasks may compete with time for employment, thus potentially reducing the incidence, hours, or stability of employment. Beyond these measures of the quantity of work, parenting pressures from child demands could reduce work performance through interruptions, distractions, and lower work efficiency.

The caregiving demands of adolescents' behavior problems are likely to be challenging for all parents, but perhaps especially so for parents with restricted economic and social resources. Children in economically disadvantaged circumstances have higher rates of significant emotional and behavioral problems than their better-off counterparts (Lohman, Pittman, Coley, & Chase-Lansdale, 2004) and are more likely to experience negative outcomes such as school dropout and early pregnancy (Duncan, Kalil, Ziol-Guest, 2008). In addition, low-income parents may be less aware of their children's rights to specialized supports through public and educational services, may have limited economic resources to purchase such supports in the private market, and may have fewer social resources on which to draw. For example, economically disadvantaged mothers are more likely to be single parents and, therefore, lack the resources of a spouse. High-risk neighborhoods in which many disadvantaged families live may also increase risks for children's engagement in behavior problems and limit the availability of protective resources (Evans, 2004). Finally, economically disadvantaged parents are less likely than their more advantaged counterparts to work in jobs that provide adequate benefits, such as sick and vacation leave or flexible schedules, which are important for dealing with increased demands from children. A recent study found that only 40% of working poor parents had received any paid sick leave in the previous year, and less than 20% had more than 1 week of such leave (Heymann, Alison, & Egleston, 1996). In short, research has suggested that economically disadvantaged children face greater risks of experiencing significant psychological and behavioral problems, yet their parents may be poorly equipped to access appropriate supports and services, which leads to enhanced stress and caregiving demands. Thus, the challenges of parenting a child with notable psychosocial problems could inhibit parents', most particularly poor mothers', ability to enter the workforce, sustain careers, devote substantial and consistent hours to their jobs, and experience earnings growth.

At the same time, it is possible that significant psychological and behavior problems on the part of adolescents motivate mothers' employment efforts. This could happen if mothers prioritize work in an effort to garner additional financial or in-kind resources for their children, such as health insurance. For example, research has found that having a greater number of children can serve as an incentive for maternal employment, conditioned on previous employment (Nakamura & Nakamura, 1994). Employment also could serve as a diversion for mothers of children with notable health or behavioral problems by providing a source of positive identity or social relationships outside of family demands.

These conflicting hypotheses lead to an open empirical question concerning how adolescents' psychological and behavior problems influence mothers' employment experiences and success.

Given the push of welfare-reform rules and the pull of the strong economy at the turn of the 21st century, assessing influences on employment trajectories among low-income and unmarried women targeted by welfare reform policies is especially important.

Empirical Evidence Linking Child Behavior Problems and Maternal Employment

The notion that children's characteristics and behaviors may influence parents' behaviors is a central, though rarely assessed, aspect of family systems and transactional developmental theories (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974). These theories posit that parents respond to and are influenced by children's characteristics and behaviors, just as parents' actions and characteristics in turn affect children. A growing segment of literature has assessed associations between children's behavioral or psychological problems and parenting behaviors, arguing that high levels of or increases in behavior problems lead to changes in parenting behaviors (e.g., Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Coley, Votruba-Drzal, & Schindler, 2008; Epps & Huston, 2007). Yet in the broad base of research on maternal employment, researchers have rarely taken the next logical step of considering whether children's behaviors affect parents' employment success (for a review, see Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999).

A related literature has assessed the effect of children's physical health problems or disabilities on maternal labor-force participation. Recent studies have used a variety of national and targeted data sets and have employed numerous definitions of children's health problems or disabilities. Although the results showed some inconsistencies, overall the evidence suggested that childhood health disabilities act as a barrier to maternal employment, particularly among unmarried or poor mothers (Acs & Loprest, 1995, 1999; Brady, Meyers, & Luks, 1998; Corman, et al., 2005; Dworsky & Courtney, 2007; Meyers, Lukemeyer, & Smeeding, 1998; Powers, 2003; Wolfe & Hill, 1995). Most of this research has focused on mothers of infants and young children, however, and considers only physical health issues and not other aspects of children's functioning that might demand additional caregiving. If the time and energy demands of parenting a child with a health disability and parenting a child with significant behavioral problems are similar, children's behavior problems could inhibit poor women's success, stability, and wages in the labor market. Indeed, psychological and behavior problems are notably more common than health disabilities among children, particularly early adolescents and poor children, which suggests the possibility that such behavioral problems are a more significant barrier to employment for disadvantaged women (Lohman et al., 2004).

We know of no studies that have directly addressed this question, although there is indirect empirical evidence from a recent welfare-reform experiment. Ethnographic research from the New Hope evaluation, a welfare-to-work program instituted on the eve of federal welfare reforms, found that 60% of families reported having at least one child with significant behavioral, cognitive, or health-related problems, identifying problems both at home and at school. The ethnographers viewed such child problems as one piece of a cumulative package of challenges that limited poor women's labor market success (Bernheimer et al., 2003). The larger survey sample of New Hope did not consider quantitative effects of those problems on mothers' job outcomes, although mothers expressed concerns about potential dangers for their children such as gang affiliation and violence. Their concerns led mothers to direct greater resources toward the children, especially boys, whom they considered the highest risk (Gibson-Davis & Duncan, 2005; Huston et al., 2005). It is difficult to determine from this research whether children's behavioral problems inhibit maternal employment, as a result of time competition and stress related to worrying about and dealing with children's behaviors, or whether children's problems lead mothers to increase employment in an effort to garner additional resources for troubled youths.

In summary, there exists extremely limited evidence on whether adolescents' behavioral and psychological problems directly affect low-income mothers' labor market participation and success. Given the high prevalence of behavioral and psychological problems among disadvantaged families, however, this is an important question. Moreover, because of disparities in prevalence rates and indications of differences in maternal perceptions, it is important to consider whether links between adolescent problems and maternal employment outcomes differ for boys and girls. In the present research, we used a representative sample of low-income families from the Three-City Study, followed prospectively over 6 years, to assess whether early adolescents' behavioral and psychological problems predict mothers' patterns of work behavior and job success. We focused explicitly on families with children traversing early adolescence, a challenging developmental period. Heeding calls in previous research, we controlled for important potentially confounding demographic characteristics, including race and ethnicity, child gender, and the child's and mother's ages; the mother's skills and experiences, including her education and prior work experience; and the mother's access to economic and social resources, including the presence of a spouse or additional adults in the household, a working spouse, and receipt of welfare. On the basis of previous research, we hypothesized that significant behavioral and psychological problems in adolescents serve as a barrier to mothers' labor market success, thus limiting growth in employment rates, consistency, and wages.

Method

Sampling and Data Collection

We drew the data for our empirical analyses from the three waves of the main survey component of Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study, a longitudinal, multimethod study of the well-being of children and families in the wake of federal welfare reform. The Three-City Study main survey interviewed a household-based, stratified, random sample of more than 2,400 low-income children and their primary female caregivers (whom we term mothers, as more than 90% were biological mothers of the interviewed children) in low-income neighborhoods in Boston; Chicago; and San Antonio, Texas. In each household, one child (the “focal” child) was randomly selected for inclusion in the study. Included children were in one of two age cohorts: early childhood (aged 0–4 years) and early adolescence (aged 10–14 years). The age cohorts were chosen because they represent centrally important developmental transition periods. Children and mothers were interviewed individually in their homes in 1999 (90% screening rate; 83% interview response rate) and again in 2000–2001 (88% retention rate) and 2005 (80% retention rate of Wave 1 respondents). Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish. Sections of the child and mother interviews that covered particularly sensitive topics (e.g., delinquency, psychological distress) were conducted using Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing (ACASI), which has been shown to increase the validity of reporting on sensitive topics (Turner et al., 1998). All respondents were paid for their participation in the study. For further details about the survey, see Winston et al. (1999).

We focused on the families with early adolescent focal children, aged 10–14 years in Wave 1. Our analyses excluded families with focal children in the younger cohort aged 0–4 years ($n = 1,244$, 51.8%) because the measures of behavioral and psychological problems were not applicable to young children. We further restricted our analyses to families in which the focal adolescent lived with the same primary caregiver at Waves 1, 2, and 3 (excluding $n = 441$, 18.4% of the sample), for a sample of 717 adolescent-mother pairs. Attrition analyses indicated few differences between the included and excluded families with adolescents. Families in the included sample contained younger adolescents and mothers who were more educated and more likely to be Hispanic. Included families were also more likely to live in Chicago and less likely to live in Boston than excluded families. We controlled for these characteristics in our multivariate analyses. In our analytic sample, there were missing data on individual measures (0–122 cases, or 0–17% of the cases, were missing data on individual variables included in analyses). Missing data were imputed using multiple imputation by chained equations (Royston, 2004, 2005). Sampling weights were used in all analyses to account for the study's design and to adjust for differential response and attrition. The use of these weights made the sample representative of adolescents in low-income families in low-income neighborhoods in the three cities.

Measures

Maternal employment variables. The primary outcomes of interest were characteristics of mothers' labor market experiences. To comprehensively explore these experiences, we considered several self-reported measures of the mothers' work effort, consistency, and quality of employment. Employment status, a dichotomous variable, indicated whether mothers were employed at the time of the survey. Months of employment, a count variable, assessed the number of months in the previous six that mothers were employed. Hours of employment assessed the average hours per week mothers worked in their primary jobs in the six months preceding the interview. As a measure of employment quality, we used mothers' reports of monthly earnings from their primary jobs. Mothers also reported whether they had lost hours of work in their primary job in the week preceding the interview, which was coded dichotomously. The empirical analyses used employment measures from the second and third waves of the Three-City Study as outcome variables. Parallel measures from the first and second waves (lagged measures) were included as control variables.

Adolescent behavioral and psychological functioning. The primary explanatory variables in the empirical analyses were indicators of adolescent behavioral and psychological functioning. Information on adolescent functioning was obtained from both adolescent and mother reports at each wave of the survey. Measures from Waves 1 and 2 were included in analyses. Adolescents reported on three aspects of their functioning using an ACASI procedure to increase the validity of their reports for sensitive information. Adolescents described their engagement in problem behaviors using items derived from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY; Borus, Carpenter, Crowley, & Daymont, 1982) and the Youth Deviance Scale (Gold, 1970; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991), reporting on a 4-point scale (1 = never; 2 = once or twice; 3 = several times; 4 = often in the past year). Items were highly skewed, with 1.1% to 12.3% of youths reporting that they engaged in each type of problem behavior several times or often. Therefore, items were dichotomized to indicate engagement or lack of engagement in each behavior in the past year. Factor analysis led to the creation of two subscales of problem behaviors. One subscale assessed school problems, including whether the youth had cheated on a test, cheated on homework, skipped school, been suspended, or been expelled in the past year; items were summed into a total count of school problems. The second subscale assessed adolescents' engagement in delinquency in the prior year, including property crimes (e.g., stealing, damaging property, getting in trouble with the police) and violence (e.g., fighting, attacking someone, using a weapon). Items were summed to create count scores of delinquency. Adolescents also reported on their psychological distress using a shortened version of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI-18; Derogatis, 2000), which assessed symptoms of depression, somatization, and anxiety. Respondents were asked 18 items about their experiences in the previous week, on a 4-point scale (0 = not at all; 4 = extremely). All items were averaged and a natural log taken to help correct skewness, with higher scores indicating a greater incidence of

psychological distress ($\alpha T1 = .89$, $\alpha T2 = .92$). The BSI-18 has shown high internal and test-retest reliability as well as discriminant reliability (Derogatis, 2000). A final measure of youth functioning came from mothers' reports of whether the focal adolescent had an emotional, mental, or behavioral problem requiring professional care (0 = no; 1 = yes). We viewed this as a rough marker for an adolescent disability. Bivariate correlations among the adolescent functioning variables were moderate, ranging from .01 for disability and school problems to .49 for school problems and delinquency in Wave 1, and from .05 for disability and school problems to .50 for school problems and delinquency in Wave 2. As expected, boys reported higher rates of delinquency, and girls reported higher rates of psychological distress, although no significant gender differences were observed in rates of school problems. Mothers also reported higher rates of disabilities among sons than daughters.

Background characteristics. Following the previous literature, characteristics of adolescents and families were controlled in models assessing links between adolescent behavior problems and mother employment to take into account likely selection factors. The controls included adolescent gender and age, coded in months. Mothers' race/ethnicity was designated Hispanic of any race, African American, or White/other. We controlled for several human and social capital factors likely to be linked with maternal employment, including mothers' education, coded as a continuous measure ranging from 1 = less than high school to 9 = graduate or professional degree and work history (proportion of years worked since age 16). Mother's age was coded in years, as was length of time between interviews. Family structure was assessed through a dichotomous variable indicating whether mothers were married and a count of the number of adults in the household. We also assessed mothers' alternative means of access to resources by including a dichotomous variable indicating whether the mother or focal child received income from welfare, food stamps, or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), as well as a variable indicating whether the mother lived with an employed partner. Dummy variables were included designating the respondents' city, to control for different regional economic, social, and institutional conditions in the three locations. Finally, mothers' own psychological distress was assessed through the BSI-18, the same measure for adolescents ($\alpha T1 = .91$, $\alpha T2 = .93$), to control for the possibility that mothers' psychological functioning affects both their children's functioning and their own work success.

Sample description. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the sample. Consistent with the improving economic conditions in the late 1990s, followed by the deteriorating conditions after the turn of the 21st century, many of the variables assessing maternal work effort (employment status, hours worked, months worked) improved between Wave 1 (1999) and Wave 2 (2000–2001) and then declined slightly by Wave 3 (2005). Variables indicating the quality and stability

of employment, however (e.g., wages, loss of hours), did not show a decline between Waves 2 and 3; wages, in fact, grew across all waves.

Table 1. Weighted Descriptives of Study Variables (N = 717)

Wave 1			Wave 2			Wave 3			
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	
Mother employment variables									
Employed	.58	.49	0–1	.66	.47	0–1	.60	.49	0–1
Hours worked	17.16	17.84	0–84	21.05	17.99	0–80	19.01	18.20	0–65
Months worked	3.15	2.84	0–6	3.59	2.76	0–6	3.35	2.89	0–6
Earnings in \$1,000s	.35	.58	0–3	.68	.76	0–3	.77	.98	0–3
Lost hours	.64	.48	0–1	.55	.50	0–1	.55	.50	0–1
Adolescent functioning variables									
School problems	1.22	1.17	0–5	1.29	1.21	0–5	1.71	1.41	0–5
Delinquency	.94	1.20	0–6	.96	1.34	0–6	.85	1.35	0–6
Psych. distress	1.53	1.02	0–4.13	1.54	1.09	0–4.06	1.46	1.11	0–4.06
Disability	.15	.36	0–1	.09	.28	0–1	.11	.31	0–1
Covariates									
Boston	.33	.47	0–1						
Chicago	.35	.48	0–1						
White/other	.07	.26	0–1						

Wave 1			Wave 2			Wave 3			
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	
Hispanic	.51	.50	0–1						
Adolescent male	.46	.50	0–1						
Adolescent age (months)	148.54	16.99	111–185	164.29	16.97	126–200	217.67	17.03	177–256
Mother age	38.78	8.20	18–74	40.13	8.19	19–75	44.56	8.16	24–80
Δ mother age				1.35	.59	1–2	4.43	.50	4–5
Mother education	4.30	2.29	1–8	3.62	2.03	1–8	3.81	2.13	1–8
Mother married	.33	.47	0–1	.35	.48	0–1	.34	.47	0–1
Partner employed	.25	.43	0–1	.34	.47	0–1	.32	.47	0–1
Adults in household	1.86	.89	1–7	1.95	.94	1–9	2.49	1.07	1–7
Mother work history	.49	.38	0–100	.51	.36	0–100	.55	.35	0–100
Social service receipt	.49	.50	0–1	.43	.49	0–1	.44	.50	0–1
Mother psych. distress	1.44	1.09	0–4.11	1.40	1.12	0–4.08	1.31	1.20	0–4.16

Note: Ranges presented from unimputed data.

Multivariate Analysis Methods

A fundamental challenge in analyzing the associations between adolescents' behavioral and psychological problems and their mothers' job outcomes is that adolescents' problems are not exogenously assigned but are outcomes of other processes. Observed associations may reflect causal effects of those problems on work behavior, causal effects of work behavior on adolescents' problems, effects of other variables that are mutually associated with adolescents' problems and mothers' work outcomes, or some combination of the three processes.

The availability of longitudinal information from the Three-City Study helped us address the problems of reverse causality and omitted variables. In particular, observations of problem behaviors and employment outcomes were available at three different points in time. For our empirical analyses, we examined how adolescents' problem behaviors measured at one point in time were associated with mothers' work outcomes measured at a subsequent point in time, thus helping mitigate concerns regarding reverse causality.

To address problems of spurious correlation, we estimated multivariate models that accounted for associations from observed explanatory variables such as adolescent characteristics, mother characteristics, family circumstances, and geographic location. Let $E_{i,t}$ represent an employment outcome for the mother from family i at time period (wave) t ; let $P_{i,t-1}$ represent a set of focal adolescent behaviors from the previous period; let $X_{i,t-1}$ represent a set of additional possibly time-varying background variables for the mother and adolescent, and let $e_{i,t}$ be a random variable that represents unmeasured determinants of work behavior. Further, assume that the random variable for each household can be decomposed into a time-invariant component, μ_i , and a time-varying component, $\eta_{i,t}$. We estimated lagged, or dynamic, random-effects models, in which we included the mothers' work outcome from the previous period as an additional explanatory measure. That is, we estimated models of the form

$$E_{i,t} = \gamma E_{i,t-1} + \mathbf{A}'_1 P_{i,t-1} + \mathbf{B}'_1 X_{i,t-1} + e_{i,t},$$

where $e_{i,t} = \mu_i + \eta_{i,t}$ for $t = 2, 3$.

In this specification, $E_{i,t-1}$ represents lagged work behavior; γ is a coefficient to be estimated, and \mathbf{A}_1 and \mathbf{B}_1 are sets of coefficients. The estimates of \mathbf{A}_1 provided the measured associations between adolescent problems and mother work outcomes conditioning out the observed characteristics and previous work behavior.

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We estimated Specification 1 using longitudinal random-effects methods. In the random-effects model, the time-invariant, unobserved characteristic of family i , μ_i , is assumed to follow a normal distribution and to be uncorrelated with the other observed variables in the model. The presence of μ_i in the model leads to serial correlation in the unobserved determinants for each household ($e_{i,t}$ and $e_{i,t-1}$ will be correlated because they both share the component μ_i). Serial correlation, in turn, can lead to biased estimates of the coefficients in the dynamic model because the unobserved determinants are associated with the lagged measure of work behavior

($E_{i,t-1}$ depends on μ_i). The dynamic random-effects estimation procedure accounts for these issues (Hsiao, 2003).

We estimated the random-effects models using continuous-outcome methods. However, two of our dependent variables—mothers' employment status and lost hours—had binary outcomes. Estimates from continuous-outcome models are more robust to alternative assumptions regarding the unobserved terms in the models than binary methods; the estimates are also easier to interpret. As an alternative specification, we reestimated the models using binary methods. There was no appreciable difference in the results (results available on request).

Results

Adolescents' Behavior Problems and Maternal Employment

Table 2 presents results from the lagged random-effects models for each of the employment outcomes. Coefficients for the lagged employment variables were all highly significant, indicating that mothers' work outcomes were correlated across time. Several consistent sets of results concerning the role of adolescent problems emerged from the models. The strongest and most consistent finding indicated that adolescent reports of psychological distress were associated with worse job outcomes for mothers in the subsequent wave, with statistically significant coefficient estimates for all five employment measures. That is, greater psychological distress among adolescents predicted a lower likelihood of employment for mothers; fewer hours worked, fewer months worked, and lower earnings; and a greater likelihood of having lost hours in the previous week. Adolescent delinquency and disabilities less consistently predicted mothers' lower employment effort. Youths' engagement in delinquent activities predicted mothers' lower work effort, including fewer hours worked and fewer months worked. Youth disability showed a mixed pattern, with links to a lower likelihood of employment and weak links to lower hours and months worked but also a positive link to higher earnings.

Table 2. Random-Effects Regression Models Predicting Mothers' Employment (N = 1,434)

Employment	Hours Worked		Months Worked		Earnings		Lost Hours			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Lag of DV	.42**	(.02)	.47**	(.03)	.48**	(.03)	.45**	(.03)	.18**	(.03)
School problems	.03*	(.01)	1.35**	(.42)	.17**	(.06)	.02	(.02)	-.03*	(.01)
Delinquency	-.02	(.01)	-.89*	(.41)	-.15*	(.06)	-.00	(.02)	.02	(.01)

Employment	Hours Worked		Months Worked		Earnings		Lost Hours			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>		
Psychological distress	-.04 ⁺	(.01)	-1.76 ^{**}	(.53)	-.23 ^{**}	(.07)	-.05 ^{**}	(.02)	.03 [*]	(.01)
Disability	-.07 ⁺	(.04)	-2.43 ⁺	(1.29)	-.35 ⁺	(.20)	.13 [*]	(.06)	.04	(.04)
Covariates										
Boston	.04	(.03)	.14	(1.17)	.22	(.18)	.04	(.05)	-.04	(.04)
Chicago	.01	(.03)	-.46	(1.24)	-.08	(.19)	.01	(.06)	-.07	(.04)
White/other	-.02	(.05)	-1.32	(1.71)	-.04	(.27)	-.07	(.08)	-.00	(.05)
Hispanic	.03	(.03)	.06	(1.12)	.16	(.17)	-.11 [*]	(.05)	-.08 [*]	(.04)
Adolescent male	.02	(.02)	-.41	(.94)	.15	(.12)	-.09 [*]	(.04)	-.00	(.03)
Adolescent age	.00	(.00)	.02	(.03)	.00	(.00)	.00	(.00)	-.00	(.00)
Mother age	-.01 ^{**}	(.00)	-.25 ^{**}	(.05)	-.04 ^{**}	(.01)	-.01 ^{**}	(.00)	.00 ^{**}	(.00)
Δ mother age	-.02 ^{**}	(.01)	-1.20 ^{**}	(.29)	-.14 ^{**}	(.04)	-.02	(.01)	.01	(.01)
Mother education	.02 ^{**}	(.01)	.74 ^{**}	(.20)	.09 [*]	(.03)	.04 ^{**}	(.01)	-.01 ⁺	(.01)
Mother married	.00	(.04)	-1.72	(1.47)	.05	(.22)	.13 [*]	(.07)	.01	(.04)
Partner employed	-.05	(.04)	1.06	(1.41)	-.12	(.20)	-.01	(.07)	.05	(.04)
Adults in household	.03 ⁺	(.01)	1.86 ^{**}	(.55)	.19 [*]	(.08)	.04 ⁺	(.02)	-.02	(.02)
Mother work history	.02	(.03)	2.46 [*]	(1.23)	.28	(.19)	.29 ^{**}	(.06)	-.03	(.04)
Social service receipt	-.11 ^{**}	(.03)	-2.97 ^{**}	(.95)	-.53 ^{**}	(.14)	-.24 ^{**}	(.05)	.13 ^{**}	(.03)
Mother psych. distress	-.02 ⁺	(.01)	-.30	(.39)	-.05	(.06)	-.01	(.02)	.04 ^{**}	(.01)

1. ⁺ $p < .10$.

2. ^{*} $p < .05$.

^{**} $p < .01$.

In short, most results in Table 2 conform to the notion that adolescents' problem behaviors inhibit mothers' subsequent work performance. However, a final pattern in the results suggested the opposite, namely that some types of problems may prompt increased work effort. In particular, the random-effects model estimates in Table 2 indicated that adolescents' school problems predicted enhanced employment outcomes for mothers, with results significant for all employment outcomes except earnings. That is, youths' greater engagement in school problems predicted a higher likelihood of mothers being employed and of mothers working more hours per week and more months in the previous 6 months and a lower likelihood of mothers' having lost employment hours in the previous week.

Numerous significant links emerged between covariates and maternal work outcomes as well. We found no significant differences across the three cities, and few links emerged between child demographic characteristics (gender and age) and maternal employment. Mothers' demographic and human capital characteristics were more important. Hispanic mothers reported no differences in work effort but lower earnings and a lower likelihood of lost hours in comparison to African Americans. Older mothers reported lower work success across all measures, whereas more educated mothers reported greater work success. A longer period between waves was linked with lower work effort, perhaps because the final wave of data collection moved into an economic downturn. Although having a spouse and a working partner were not particularly important predictors of maternal work behavior in this sample (with the exception that married mothers reported higher earnings), other sources of income and support were significant. Having more adults in the household predicted greater hours and months of work, whereas receiving income from other sources such as welfare or SSI predicted lower work effort and success for mothers. Maternal work history was predictive of greater hours of work and higher pay. Mothers' psychological distress was not linked to work effort or pay but predicted a higher likelihood of having lost hours of work.

Gender Differences in Links Between Behavior Problems and Maternal Employment

In Table 3, we report results of a second set of lagged random-effects models including interactions between adolescent gender and each of the four adolescent functioning measures, to assess whether the links differed across mothers with male and female adolescents. The results present two consistent patterns. First, across all measures of mother employment, there were significant interactions between adolescent gender and adolescent delinquency. Comparisons of the coefficients and post hoc analyses indicated that sons' engagement in delinquent activities consistently predicted less subsequent employment success for mothers. In contrast, coefficients for daughters showed no significant link between delinquency and mother employment, with the exception of one positive coefficient between delinquency and mothers' earnings. A second

consistent pattern in the interaction results was that of significant interactions between adolescent gender and psychological distress for all mother employment outcomes except lost hours. Here, daughters' greater symptoms of psychological distress predicted lower subsequent work success among mothers—a lower likelihood of employment, fewer hours and months worked, and lower earnings. These relationships were null among sons. In contrast to these two consistent patterns, there were no significant interactions between gender and adolescent school problems or gender and disability, thus indicating that the main effect patterns among the variables functioned similarly for girls and boys.

Table 3. Gender Interactions in Lagged Random Effects Regression Models Predicting Mothers' Employment (N = 1,434)

Employment	Hours Worked		Months Worked		Earnings		Lost Hours			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>		
Lag of DV	.42**	(.02)	.47**	(.03)	.48**	(.03)	.45**	(.03)	.18**	(.03)
Adolescent functioning										
School problems	.01	(.02)	.99	(.65)	.08	(.09)	.02	(.03)	-.02	(.02)
Delinquency	.02	(.02)	.02	(.58)	.04	(.09)	.06*	(.03)	-.03 ⁺	(.02)
Psychological distress	-.07**	(.02)	-2.51**	(.69)	-.41**	(.09)	-.10**	(.03)	.05*	(.02)
Disability	-.09 ⁺	(.05)	-4.14*	(2.05)	-.42	(.31)	.07	(.09)	.09	(.06)
Gender × Functioning interactions										
Male × School problems	.02	(.03)	.70	(.92)	.17	(.13)	-.01	(.04)	-.03	(.03)
Male × Delinquency	-.07**	(.02)	-1.67*	(.72)	-.35**	(.11)	-.10**	(.04)	.09**	(.02)
Male × Psych. distress	.08**	(.03)	1.85*	(.92)	.43**	(.14)	.11**	(.04)	-.03	(.03)
Male × Disability	.04	(.07)	3.33	(2.56)	.18	(.45)	.14	(.12)	-.10	(.08)

Employment	Hours Worked		Months Worked		Earnings		Lost Hours			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>		
Covariates										
Boston	.03	(.03)	.10	(1.18)	.19	(.18)	.05	(.06)	-.04	(.04)
Chicago	-.01	(.04)	-.79	(1.23)	-.16	(.20)	-.00	(.06)	-.06	(.04)
White/other	-.01	(.05)	-1.32	(1.71)	-.01	(.27)	-.07	(.08)	-.01	(.05)
Hispanic	.03	(.03)	.09	(1.13)	.16	(.17)	-.11*	(.05)	-.08*	(.04)
Adolescent male	.01	(.02)	-.85	(1.02)	.12	(.14)	-.11**	(.04)	.01	(.03)
Adolescent age	.00	(.00)	.02	(.02)	.00	(.00)	.00	(.00)	-.00 ⁺	(.00)
Mother age	-.01**	(.00)	-.25**	(.05)	-.04**	(.01)	-.01**	(.00)	.00**	(.00)
Δ mother age	-.02**	(.01)	-1.20**	(.29)	-.14**	(.04)	-.02	(.01)	.01	(.01)
Mother education	.02**	(.01)	.72**	(.20)	.08*	(.03)	.04**	(.01)	-.01	(.01)
Mother married	.01	(.04)	-1.60	(1.54)	.09	(.22)	.12 ⁺	(.07)	.01	(.05)
Partner employed	-.06	(.04)	.89	(1.46)	-.16	(.21)	-.01	(.07)	.06	(.04)
Adults in household	.03*	(.01)	1.96**	(.56)	.21**	(.08)	.05*	(.02)	-.03	(.02)
Mother work history	.01	(.03)	2.43*	(1.22)	.27	(.19)	.28**	(.06)	-.03	(.04)
Mother psych. distress	-.02 ⁺	(.01)	-.35	(.39)	-.06	(.06)	-.02	(.02)	.04**	(.01)
Social service receipts	-.11**	(.03)	-2.98**	(.94)	-.53**	(.14)	-.25**	(.04)	.13**	(.03)
Mother psych. distress	-.02 ⁺	(.01)	-.35	(.39)	-.06	(.06)	-.02	(.02)	.04**	(.01)

1. +p < .10.

2. *p < .05.

**p < .01.

Discussion

Following the reform of the welfare system in the 1990s and the expansion of the economy, employment rates of low-income and single mothers rose dramatically. Policymakers and academics alike applauded the successful transitions to employment of so many disadvantaged women. Yet these successes were neither universal nor sustained across time for all women. Thus, concern remained regarding poor women's ability to attain and to retain stable jobs with wage growth, benefits, and reasonable schedules to fit their family demands. Numerous potential barriers to employment success were identified, primarily focused on maternal characteristics and behaviors, with less attention paid to the effect of children's characteristics and behaviors. In this research, we sought to address this gap in the literature regarding low-income mothers' employment experiences by quantitatively exploring whether children's characteristics and behaviors contributed to their mothers' labor market success. We specifically focused on families with young adolescents, who are navigating a challenging developmental transition. Engagement in problem behaviors often rises at this age, including both internalizing symptoms such as depression and anxiety and externalizing behaviors such as school problems and delinquency. In turn, parenting presents new challenges at this developmental stage, as parents adjust to increasing autonomy demands and increasing problem behaviors from early adolescent children (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004).

Our results unearthed a general pattern indicating that greater behavior problems among early adolescents were predictive of less work success and stability among disadvantaged women. In line with transactional and family systems theories (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Cox & Paley, 1997), the results suggest that parents respond to the behaviors of their children. The pattern of greater adolescent behavior problems prospectively predicting lower maternal work effort and success was found in relation to adolescent internalizing problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, somatization) and externalizing problems, namely delinquency, with weaker results for adolescents' behavioral and psychological disabilities. Moreover, findings were replicated across multiple measures of employment. One pattern of exception, discussed in greater detail below, indicated that youths' engagement in school problems predicted greater, rather than lesser, maternal work effort and success. Overall, our results support a limited body of qualitative research that has suggested that mothers' concerns over their children's behavior problems and challenges may serve as a barrier to disadvantaged mothers' employment success (Bernheimer et al., 2003).

Three specific patterns emerged in our results linking behavior problems among youths to mothers' work success and stability. One pattern indicated that greater psychological distress as

reported by youths predicted less work success among mothers, including lower rates of employment, fewer hours and months worked, lower earnings, and a greater likelihood of having experienced reduced work hours. Interactive models indicated that daughters drove these patterns. A strong history of research has found that girls are more likely than boys to experience psychological distress such as depression and anxiety, and early through midadolescence is the period of greatest increase in the prevalence of such mental health problems (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). Mothers thus may be particularly reactive to girls' internalizing distress.

A second pattern found that adolescents' engagement in delinquent activities, including property crimes and violence, also were predictive of lower subsequent work success, with boys' behaviors driving this pattern. As in the results above, it is interesting to note that these types of externalizing problems are more normative among the group that is driving the results—here, boys. Mothers may be particularly responsive to their sons' engagement in violent and criminal activity in relation to concerns over gang involvement and incarceration risk. We also draw attention to the fact that we found prospective links between youths' problem behaviors and mothers' work success when controlling for mothers' own psychological distress, which indicates that the former relationship was not simply spurious, or driven by maternal problems leading to both youth distress and lower maternal work success.

Why might adolescent problems inhibit maternal work effort and success? There are several possible explanations. Greater behavior problems among youths might increase parenting demands and parenting stress, as well as limit the time and energy mothers have to devote to employment. This process could be purposive, in that mothers of adolescents exhibiting high levels of distress or behavior problems may feel compelled to be home to provide greater supervision and support to their children. Or the process could be subtler, with greater caregiving demands sapping mothers' energy and efforts to find employment or interfering with mothers' abilities to retain employment by requiring them to call in sick or leave early, for example, to attend to issues with their children. Other research has found that poor workers are much less likely than their more advantaged counterparts to receive benefits like paid sick leave or flexible hours (Heymann et al., 1996), which limits such mothers' ability to manage high caregiving demands from their children. It is also possible that mothers of children with severe emotional or behavioral problems qualify for alternative sources of monetary support, thus limiting their labor market participation. Our analyses indeed found that mothers' and children's receipt of SSI, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or food stamps was a significant deterrent to employment, and yet the links between adolescent behavior problems and maternal employment emerged controlling for these alternate sources of income, which limits the likelihood that this process explains our results.

Overall, most of our results supported the argument that problems among adolescents that are likely to increase caregiving demands have a dampening effect on maternal work effort and success. A third pattern in our results, however, counteracted this general pattern. We found that adolescents' engagement in problematic behaviors related to school (e.g., detention, cheating, truancy) was predictive of more rather than less work effort among mothers—including greater employment rates, more work effort, and lower lost hours—but was not related to wages. These relationships functioned similarly across mothers of daughters and sons. Maternal reports of adolescents' mental, behavioral, or emotional problems requiring medical services also predicted higher wages among mothers, although such youth disabilities were also predictive of lower work status and effort. It is unclear why school problems would show a different link with mothers' work success than more serious types of behaviors such as violence and property crimes. Perhaps when youths engage in illegal activities with potential repercussions such as incarceration, mothers respond by devoting more direct supervision and time to parenting. In response to less serious problems such as school detention, cheating, and truancy, mothers may view their own employment success as a model for their children with respect to the importance of hard work and education. In addition, mothers may attempt to garner more resources through employment to purchase additional educational services or supports for their children. Analyses of the experimental New Hope employment support program suggested that low-income mothers appeared to channel more financial and service resources to their children, particularly their sons, in response to concerns about potential negative outcomes for their children from engagement in problem behaviors (Gibson-Davis & Duncan, 2005; Huston et al., 2005).

In closing, it is important to note limitations to this research, including a lack of information on other children in such families, which might present downward pressure on our estimates. Moreover, the data relied solely on maternal reports of employment outcomes, and we had limited information on the role of fathers in the family system. As always, we must be cautious in attributing causal explanations to correlational data. Beyond these limitations, results from this study suggest that early adolescents' behavior problems are an important component of the multiple barriers poor women face in accessing and retaining stable and quality employment. Given the high prevalence of significant behavior problems among disadvantaged youths, our results suggest the need for policies and programs to support both the psychological and the behavioral health of disadvantaged children and to help ameliorate the numerous barriers that disadvantaged women face in sustaining employment. Future research efforts should seek to understand the processes through which adolescent functioning influences mothers' employment success.

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