

Up the Down Escalator?

How Nonmetropolitan Low-Income Families Experience Work, Poverty and Immobility

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Sociology
in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This research examines the economic well-being of nonmetropolitan low-income households through an analysis of their objective economic outcomes and subjective experiences of poverty. Despite a large body of scholarship aimed at urban poverty, comparatively little research examines economic hardship among impoverished nonmetropolitan families. This research contributes to existing work through an analysis of nonmetropolitan low-income households' employment experiences and short-term economic trajectories. Additionally, this research uses fine-grained longitudinal data to address how families subjectively experience poverty and economic im/mobility. The analyses use ethnographic data from a sample of households (n=71) in the Family Life Project, a multi-method, longitudinal study conducted in six counties within Pennsylvania and North Carolina. The analyses reveal that families across these two regions experience a high level of constraint with respect to their employment choices and economic mobility outcomes. The analyses also present alternative metrics for job quality and job satisfaction which explicitly include criteria from the perspectives of low-wage nonmetropolitan workers. Most households experience little or no upward economic mobility throughout their participation in the study, and family members express conservative expectations for their long-term economic well-being. The study concludes with suggestions for continued research in the nonmetropolitan U.S. This work contributes to existing scholarship in the areas of economic mobility, work and poverty. These analyses reveal scholarly assessments of work, poverty and the decisions of

economic actors can be improved through the inclusion of subjective household perspectives. Additionally, these analyses should motivate scholars to reevaluate the effectiveness of employment for promoting upward economic mobility, especially among contemporary nonmetropolitan low-income households.

To my folks –

Without you, I'd be up a crick without a paddle.

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Acknowledgements

All of the things people say about writing a dissertation are true. Every step of the process is rife with self-doubt and isolation. It is a constant challenge to one's sanity and endurance. However, it is equally true that this process presents an unparalleled

opportunity to learn the craft of academic writing and engage thoughtfully with existing scholarship. For this, I am grateful. I am also forever grateful to the people who made this project possible, from the finish to the start.

Thank you one million times over to my incredible advisors, Dr. David Brady and Dr. Linda Burton. So as not to belabor the point, these two people are responsible for any and all of my academic success. They will both forever inspire me to be a better teacher, mentor and scholar. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope my students make you proud someday.

I am also incredibly indebted to my committee members, Dr. Angela O’Rand and Dr. Christina Gibson-Davis. Thank you for your support and your incredible scholarship, which inspires me every day.

I am grateful for the financial support from Duke University, the Department of Sociology and beyond that made this project possible. The ethnographic research reported here was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (PO1-HD-39667), Lynne-Vernon Feagans and Martha Cox, Program Project PIs and Linda Burton Ethnography PI, with co-funding to Linda Burton from the National Science Foundation (SES-07-03968).

Thank you also to the many members of the FLP ethnographic research teams in PA and NC for doing such excellent work and collecting all of this wonderful data. My analyses are made better by your efforts. Last and certainly not least, thank you to the families who truly made this project possible. Thank you for opening up your doors and

lives, to let complete strangers ask you questions. That someone would opt into this research process still boggles the mind sometimes. I hope to see you again someday to thank you in person.

1. Introduction

This dissertation examines how nonmetropolitan low-income families experience employment, poverty and economic immobility. Two major questions motivate these analyses. Like other scholarship addressing the economic well-being of impoverished households, I seek to understand how nonmetropolitan low-income families can improve their economic status over time. To that end, this dissertation project will address the

objective economic outcomes of families including their un/employment and the direction and degree of change in their economic trajectories. These analyses also seek to understand how families' subjective experiences of poverty and im/mobility influence their subsequent choices or strategies about employment. What do these families think of their employment opportunities, and by what criteria do they differentiate good jobs from bad ones? What do families think about being impoverished? Do they have an expectation of upward mobility, or of some alternative trajectory?

Much more scholarly attention has focused on minority poverty and welfare receipt in urban areas. By contrast, there has been a relative neglect of poverty outside such settings. In turn, an overarching contribution of this study is to offer analyses focused on a nonmetropolitan sample of white and African-American families living in six U.S. counties in 2003-2006. The nonmetropolitan perspective is essential for understanding the evolving challenges of American poverty, as the poverty rate of nonmetropolitan U.S. counties has exceeded the metro rate every year since the 1960s (ERS 2004).

1.1 Research Questions

This research investigates the economic outcomes of nonmetropolitan, low-income families through two central questions: How do nonmetro low-income households experience employment? What do families think of their prospects for employment and upward mobility, and how do these assessments affect their choices and/or actions? Somewhat unique to the literature, I measure employment and economic

trajectory at the household level, as decisions about employment include, affect and are influenced by all household members.

Given the characteristics of nonmetropolitan jobs and the study sample, I first ask what kinds of jobs these families obtain. I address the objective and subjective characteristics of employment, including jobs' wages, hours and benefits. I then evaluate employment from the household perspective. How do families think about these jobs and what criteria do they use to make choices about their employment? How do families distinguish between good and bad jobs? Through an assessment of nonmetro low-income households' perspectives on employment, these analyses establish new criteria for job quality and job satisfaction among low-wage nonmetropolitan workers.

To address households' economic status and mobility, I objectively assess households' economic well-being over the period of their participation in the study, including families' income, employment stability and their overall economic trajectories. I also include households' subjective perspectives, such as families' thoughts about their mobility prospects, and how their goals and/or dreams factor into their work decisions. I argue that nonmetropolitan, low-income families generally experience stagnant economic trajectories. However, families develop adaptive economic strategies, as they express a desire for economic stability rather than mobility. Families also consider criteria beyond the strictly economic, such as wages and benefits, when selecting employment.

1.2 Gaps and Contributions

This research will address three gaps in the poverty literature. First, this study provides much needed attention to an understudied segment of the American poor. By

virtue of sampling and analytical approaches, current research has a limited understanding of the differential experiences of nonmetropolitan low-income and impoverished families. The public policy research tradition, for example, has focused mostly on urban families' transitions from welfare, particularly since welfare reform (Lichter, McLaughlin, and Ribar 1997; Lichter and Jayakody 2002). The omission of non-welfare families overlooks the sizeable population of impoverished families currently not on welfare, working poor families living at or just above the poverty line and families who have failed to exit poverty but have surpassed their 60-month lifetime limit for social support (Ellwood 2000). Additionally, families who do exit welfare are often likely to return through multiple iterations of welfare receipt, as some research of single-parent households suggests (Harris 1996).

Second, this study provides a unique longitudinal perspective through a frequent interview tempo and fine-grained, household-level data. Poverty research is typically conducted with survey data and longitudinal studies which collect data annually rather than on a more frequent basis. Although survey data allow researchers to conduct analyses on large samples, consistent weekly or monthly data collection better allows researchers to understand how individuals interact with social institutions, make decisions about employment and experience economic hardship in their daily lives. A large body of ethnographic work has sought to provide this depth of analysis by including more years of interviewing (Duneier 1999; Newman 2006), more frequently-spaced interviews, constant access to respondents (Anderson 1990; Anderson 1999), or by sharing respondents' living spaces (Stack 1974), neighborhoods (Edin and Kefalas 2005)

or jobs (Newman 1999). Even among the rich body of ethnographic literature, few studies of impoverished or low-income populations have incorporated a frequent and consistent interview tempo, the depth of ethnographic methodology and a household-oriented research design that would be required for a comprehensive study of household poverty and economic mobility (Edin and Lein 1997; Three City Study 1999).

Finally, this study provides a rare inclusion of the subjective perspectives of nonmetropolitan low-income households and of low-wage workers embedded in these households. The subjective experiences of families can help enhance scholarly understanding of families' economic actions or decisions involving their employment, education and economic well-being. An explicit focus on low-wage workers' reflections about their jobs also reveals which job characteristics matter most to these workers. Low-wage work and workers are not a central focus within the job satisfaction and job quality literatures, and as a result, scholars have limited knowledge about what constitutes a good job among this population. As this project will discuss in the analyses below, low-income, nonmetropolitan households consider a different and unique set of criteria when evaluating the types of jobs available to them in a nonmetropolitan setting.

The results of these analyses make several other contributions to poverty, work and mobility scholarship. First, these analyses call into question the effectiveness of employment for motivating low income or impoverished families' upward economic mobility. These analyses reveal the very high level of constraint nonmetropolitan households face when making choices about employment, both in terms of the absolute number and types of work available. Due to shifts in the nonmetropolitan economy, there

has been a reduction in the availability of high-skill, high-wage jobs. Compared to their urban counterparts, nonmetro areas are also categorized by a higher proportion of nonstandard, contingent and part-time work. A lower level of educational attainment among these households further constrains their work opportunities and income.

The economic trajectories of nonmetropolitan households are likewise constrained, as households experience little upward or downward economic mobility. Instead, most economic trajectories consist of no net change in household income or economic well-being over the 24 to 36 months of families' study participation. However, these families' trajectories are categorized by frequent and consistent spells of poverty and increased economic hardship due to fluctuations in work schedules and periodic unemployment.

Existing poverty literature emphasizes the crucial role of employment for motivating families off welfare and promoting their upward economic mobility. Yet, the FLP's monthly interview tempo reveals the degree to which nonmetropolitan low-income families experience employment instabilities. As this research will show, it is not the act of finding a job in and of itself that leads to economic mobility, or even stability. Instead, economic "success" entails keeping a job or obtaining one of a limited number of higher-wage jobs while also negotiating a range of uncertainties and fluctuations in health status, childcare arrangements and access to reliable transportation. Despite their high level of workforce participation, employment instabilities limit these households' longer-term potential for upward economic mobility.

Findings from this analysis further contribute to scholarship about the precarious nature of low-wage workers' employment. This theme has emerged through more recent research on working poverty. Low-wage workers' access to jobs is staunchly situated in the lower segment of the labor market, even in times of relative national prosperity (Newman and Massengill 2006). Restricted access to better jobs and higher earnings sometimes continues well into adulthood, particularly for workers with lower educational attainment or certain family obligations (Newman 2006). Despite jobs' stigmatized or "dead-end" status, prospective workers' access to work in low-wage labor markets is competitive and often necessitates a personal or family connection (Newman and Massengill 2005). This literature has also noted the degree to which the experiences of the working poor are dictated by national labor, health and social investment policies (Zuberi 2004, 2006) and by welfare state generosity (Brady 2009). This project adds to the growing scholarly dialogue about the working poor through an emphasis on the frequency and degree of nonmetropolitan low-income households' employment instabilities.

Second, this dissertation contributes to the job quality and job satisfaction literatures, and in particular, addresses the importance of amending these concepts to improve their applicability to the employment experiences of low-wage workers. Existing scholarship has overwhelmingly emphasized the positive correlation between the economic rewards of work and job quality or satisfaction. Workers with high salary or high wage jobs are more likely to have high levels of job satisfaction. Thus, it follows

that low-wage workers cannot possibly be satisfied with their jobs because they offer, by definition, low rates of pay.

However, these analyses suggest that low-wage workers in low-income households do experience high levels of job satisfaction, and contrary to predominating discourse about low-wage work, actually like their jobs. Although a job's wage and benefits maintain importance, nonmetropolitan low-income families consider alternative characteristics of work, such as a job's degree of affirmation, when choosing a job. Some low-wage jobs provide a comparative advantage over others due to the alternative benefits they offer, such as increased schedule flexibility or "family-like" familiarity with coworkers. Thus, nonmetropolitan low-income households define job quality, gain job satisfaction and make decisions about employment using both economic and noneconomic criteria. Future scholarship should prioritize noneconomic criteria in addition to employment's wages and benefits when addressing job quality and job satisfaction among nonmetropolitan low-wage workers.

In sum, the results of the analyses challenge existing measurements of job quality and job satisfaction, especially as they pertain to the employment of low-wage nonmetropolitan workers. This research also provides insight into households' subjective experiences of poverty, including how regional context shapes household's perspectives on employment and their potential for economic upward mobility. Additionally, these analyses show the utility of measuring job quality and satisfaction at the household level, as employment decisions affect and are affected by the family as whole. Finally, this study adds to the modest but growing body of literature aimed at understanding the

experiences and economic outcomes of nonmetropolitan workers in a transitional economy.

1.3 Data and Method

This dissertation uses a modified grounded theory method and ethnographic data from a sample of 71 nonmetropolitan low-income households. The Family Life Project (FLP) is a longitudinal study of low-income families living in small cities, towns and rural areas in central Pennsylvania and North Carolina. The FLP examines a racially-mixed, non-urban population, which provides the opportunity to examine the heterogeneity of impoverished families beyond the oft-targeted urban racial minority population. Although some FLP respondent families utilize social services and welfare and are clearly below the official U.S. poverty threshold, others are working poor with incomes up to 200% of the poverty level. The study also incorporates a household-oriented, longitudinal research design with the frequent collection of fine-grained interview data. Thus, in addition to the aforementioned advantages, this project provides an opportunity to understand families' lived experiences, or how families' contextual meanings and shared understandings of local norms, practices and beliefs reciprocally influence their behaviors (Burton and Skinner 2005).

Through a modified grounded theory approach, I am able to scrutinize FLP households' employment and economic trajectories over time and across both objective and subjective perspectives. This approach is modified from the original (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to incorporate the use of existing literature which provides reflexivity in

the analysis process.¹ Despite the author's project involvement as a member of the ethnographic research team, and later, a research assistant, these analyses also rely largely on secondary, rather than primary, ethnographic data. The use of the grounded theory method promotes the discovery of emergent themes, and is the most suitable method for understanding the subjective experiences of households over time.

1.4 Chapter Outline

This study begins with a discussion of the demographic and economic characteristics of the nonmetropolitan United States. Chapter 2 establishes how changes in rural economies and the chronic nature of nonmetropolitan poverty have affected nonmetro households' opportunities for employment and economic mobility. This chapter also highlights the need for increased scholarly attention to the subjective experiences of low-income nonmetro families, especially as the majority of existing research has addressed urban poverty. Finally, this chapter also presents detailed information regarding the Family Life Project data, respondents and characteristics of the six study counties with comparison to both national demographics and comparable urban datasets.

The next three chapters present three sets of analyses, with each chapter dedicated to a particular aspect of low-income nonmetropolitan households' employment and economic mobility. Chapter 3 addresses the characteristics of FLP households' employment. I assess households' level of employment quality with objective criteria

¹ Traditional grounded theory does not advocate the use of prior literature, as it may adversely influence the ethnographer's identification of emergent themes.

such as wage, tenure and hours worked alongside families' subjective assessments of their employment and employers. Using a modified grounded theory approach, also outlined in more detail in Chapter 3, this analysis combines emergent themes from family interview data with existing scholarly metrics to present five separate dimensions of job quality. These five dimensions – affirmation, consistency, rewards, costs and trajectory – assess job quality with criteria explicitly informed by the perspectives of nonmetro low-income workers. Due to their use of existing job quality criteria, the five dimensions also allow for potential comparisons of job quality across existing studies.

Chapter 4 continues to examine FLP families' employment through an extended discussion of the affirmation dimension and its influence on how households make choices about employment. The chapter profiles two types of jobs in particular that present high levels of affirmation, including self-employment and jobs that are “like family”. I contend that the affirmation dimension is a succinct and effective measure of low-income workers' job satisfaction, as families consider affirmation to be nearly as important as jobs' wages and other monetary rewards when deciding to remain employed, become unemployed or when navigating their employment options. Therefore, approaches which emphasize the economic compensation or rewards dimension of employment fail to fully account for the employment decisions of low-income workers and their households.

The third and final analytical chapter (Chapter 5) addresses the economic mobility of FLP households. Through a detailed assessment of families' trajectories, these analyses show that significant changes in households' economic status are rare, and the

majority of households experience no net economic change throughout the duration of their study participation. However, despite a lack of overall net change in families' economic status, many families experience regularly-occurring spells of unemployment and economic volatility which preclude households' upward economic mobility and wealth acquisition. The chapter concludes with a discussion of families' perspectives on their economic mobility prospects, including what it means to "get ahead" and "move up in the world". The final chapter will summarize the study, its contributions and limitations and will offer suggested avenues for future research.

2. Nonmetropolitan Low-Income Families in Context: The Family Life Project and Study Setting

Rural America has undergone many changes over the past 40 years. Substantial shifts in population size and composition have transformed rural people and places. Changes to the rural economy, including the waning prevalence of traditional commerce such as agriculture, call into question the static images of rural places as old-fashioned, idyllic farming communities. Rural families are not immune to these structural alterations. They have also transformed and are no longer defined by their formerly distinctive characteristics. Although the vast majority of the U.S. population lives in urban areas, over 52 million people, or nearly a fifth of the total population, lived in rural areas in 2000 (Brown and Swanson 2003). Despite the colossal metropolitan population shift of the last century, almost 75 percent of all U.S. counties remain classified as rural (Brown and Swanson 2003). Given the strong residual presence of rural people and places, as well as the substantial changes facing nonmetropolitan America, what do these social landscapes actually look like? The following section will address the ways in which contemporary rural people and places are different than they were forty years ago, as well as to the degree they now resemble their urban counterparts.

2.1 Rural/Nonmetropolitan Population Composition and Change

Because the technical distinction between urban and rural is largely dictated by dichotomous measures of population size and/or density, it is important to understand

each designation's criteria.¹ The U.S. Census classifies areas as urban or rural using a population cutoff of 2,500 persons. Thus, rural places include areas with populations under 2,500 or containing "open country" (Weber et. al 2005:409). Alternatively, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) uses a more detailed, county-based system of classification which better accounts for population variability in rural places. This definition designates metropolitan counties as such if they contain or are in the commuting proximity of a "core" city exceeding 50,000 persons (Weber et. al 2005; Mackun 2005; Brown and Swanson 2003). Nonmetropolitan counties are simply those not meeting the above metropolitan definition. However, the rural/urban and non/metropolitan system of county classification does not account for heterogeneity in population size within counties. For example, nonmetropolitan counties often contain sparsely populated places as well as smaller central cities and towns. Nor does this system account for population size differences across nonmetropolitan counties.

Beginning with the 2000 Census, nonmetropolitan counties could also be classified as micropolitan, which are nonmetropolitan areas integrated with centers of population sized 10,000 to 49,999 persons (Brown and Swanson 2003). Nonmetropolitan counties lacking core cities of at least 10,000 persons were designated "territory outside core based statistical areas," or CBSAs (Mackun 2005). The addition of micro and CBSA designations introduced a means of capturing the variable population size of nonmetropolitan places. Despite this recent advance in population measurement, these

¹ I use the terms "rural" and "nonmetropolitan" ("nonmetro"), and "urban" and "metropolitan" ("metro"), interchangeably, despite the limitations associated with this approach (Weber et. al 2005).

definitions continue to present classification issues. For example, metropolitan counties often contain residential areas technically falling under a rural designation (Weber et. al 2005). Conversely, rural classifications sometimes fail to recognize their geographic proximity to large city centers in neighboring areas.

Despite the continuing challenges of classification, what are the average characteristics of the U.S. nonmetropolitan (rural) population? In terms of absolute population change, nonmetropolitan areas have experienced several notable cycles of population gain and loss over the past 40 years (Johnson 2003). Shifts in rural population size are due in large part to changing patterns of in- and out-migration, although not all rural regions of the U.S. have been uniformly affected. Throughout the 1970s, nonmetropolitan areas gained more than 3 million persons due to the relocation of metropolitan Americans (Johnson 2003). However, this rural population increase was short-lived, as the 1980s were accompanied by rural out-migration and population decline (Johnson 2003). From the 1990s through 2000, it appears many nonmetropolitan areas recouped population lost during the 1980s, although population losses continued unchecked in the Great Plains, the Corn Belt and the Mississippi Delta (Johnson 2003). Although more recent rural population gains can be attributed in some part to natural increase, the primary driver of changes in rural population size has been in-migration (Johnson 2003).

It is important to note that population gains to rural areas peaked around 1994-1995 only to slow again in the late 1990s (Beale 2000; Cromartie 2001, in Johnson 2003). Thus, rural population size may once again be in decline (Johnson 2003). The rural

population does appear to have declined from 2000 to 2003, as the combined population of newly-designated micropolitan areas and CBSAs did not quite reach 50 million persons (Mackun 2005). However, rural population size has fluctuated across these three years as well, as the Census reports modest growth in both micro areas (1.6 percent) and CBSAs (0.5 percent) for 2003 (Mackun 2005).

Despite the ebb and flow of nonmetro population size, rural racial and ethnic diversity is inarguably increasing. From 1990 to 2000, non-white minorities drove approximately 40 percent of the population increase in both adjacent and non-adjacent (to a metro area) counties (Johnson 2003). Non-white minorities accounted for 18.3 percent of non-metro residents in 2005, with Asians and Latinos comprising the two fastest-growing and widely-dispersed minority groups (Cromartie 2009). Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population even grew faster in some nonmetropolitan areas than in metropolitan areas, including those in the South, Northeast and Midwest (Saenz and Torres 2003).

In contrast, other minority groups remain relatively static and immobile or have actually retreated from rural areas. Rural African-Americans largely remain confined to the Black Belt, a band of impoverished counties in the Southeast. The Black Belt contains 79 percent of all nonmetropolitan African-Americans and 45 percent of all African-Americans (Harris and Worthen 2003). Nonmetropolitan areas have also seen a decline in Native American populations. Ninety percent of all Native Americans lived in nonmetro areas prior to World War II, yet as of 2000, only 50 percent lived in these areas (Gonzales 2003). However, the dispersion of Native Americans may be attributable to

changing racial/ethnic identification questions in the U.S. Census and to urban Native Americans' increasing willingness to identify themselves as such.

At the household level, the composition of nonmetropolitan families has been subject to the same dynamics affecting the metro U.S. population. The formerly distinctive features of rural families such as larger household sizes and traditional two-parent households have been on the decline. The in-migration of metro families has also influenced rural household structure, resulting in less divergence between the composition of rural and urban households (Snyder and McLaughlin 2004). Changes to rural family structure include the growth of single-headed households due to increases in divorce and nonmarital childbearing. Nonmarital childbearing rates are now similar across rural and urban areas (Lichter, Roscigno and Condron 2003). Median rural household size is also currently similar to, and perhaps even smaller than, that of metropolitan households – 3.02 versus 3.14 persons according to the 2000 Census (MacTavish and Salamon 2003). Between 1980 and 2000, the percentage of single parent families with children rose across central city metro, suburban metro and nonmetro areas, with approximately 50 percent increases in both suburban and nonmetro areas (Snyder and McLaughlin 2004). During this time period, the proportion of single parent families in nonmetro areas rose from 9.1 to 13.6 percent (Snyder and McLaughlin 2004).² Although metro areas have led the way in terms of household compositional changes,

² These percentages are similar for suburban areas over the same time period. Within urban areas, single parent families rose only 17 percent, from 17.6 to 21.3 percent of all families.

rural households have become more similar to suburban and urban households over the past few decades.

In sum, nonmetropolitan areas have experienced notable transitions in population size and composition over the past 40 years. Although rural areas experienced several waves of population change driven primarily by in- and out-migration, the relative size of the rural population continues to be significant and has held steadily at approximately 50 million persons. Nonmetropolitan areas have continued to become more diverse both in terms of their racial/ethnic composition and household structure. Rural areas increasingly resemble their urban counterparts, as they have experienced an increase in minority populations and in the prevalence of nontraditional households. The transformation of nonmetropolitan areas discussed above is linked to changes to the rural economy. The next sections will discuss relevant aspects of economy and poverty.

2.2 Shifts in the Nonmetropolitan Economy, Employment & Job Characteristics

Changes in the nonmetro economy can be summarized by two major categories – the shift from traditional rural economic sectors to a service-sector economy and the polarization of wages by differential educational attainment. Rural areas have undergone a post-agrarian transition, as fewer than 1 in 10 rural families now earn their primary livelihood from farming or similar work (MacTavish and Salamon 2003) compared to the 42 percent of the population who lived on farms at the turn of the last century (Murray 1984, 1994). In the last century, traditional rural industries such as natural resource extraction, agriculture and manufacturing have declined by half (Freudenberg 1992 in

McGranahan 2003; Tickamyer and Henderson 2003). Emergent new industries, such as those in the high-tech sector, have settled disproportionately into urban areas (McGranahan 2003). Although this deindustrialization is principally due to technology and improved worker productivity (Brady and Denniston 2006), the globalization of production has also exacerbated this situation. Markets like the U.S. South are no longer as competitive to manufacturers seeking a source of low-skilled labor (McGranahan 2003). The loss of manufacturing to overseas firms and workers has resulted in less domestic job opportunities for individuals with lower levels of educational attainment.

The decline in traditional rural economic sectors and manufacturing alternatives is accompanied by an expansion in service-sector jobs, including those in communications and business, professional and financial services (McGranahan 2003). Although some of these service-based employers settled in rural areas (McGranahan 2003), these higher-paying, high-skill service sector jobs require post-secondary education and are not attainable options for low-skilled rural workers. Rural-to-urban commutes require access to reliable personal transportation (MacTavish and Salamon 2003), as public transportation is largely not available in these areas. Thus, well-educated rural residents with reliable transportation have access to a greater range of service-sector employment opportunities within both the metro and nonmetro markets. In contrast, lower-income, less-educated rural residents without the means to commute have less high-earning opportunities in the rural service sector and are at a distinct disadvantage relative to their highly-educated counterparts.

Rural areas are themselves characterized by reduced access to high-wage, high-skill standard employment, meaning rural households in general have less access to “good” jobs. Nonstandard work is much more prevalent in rural areas as compared to urban or suburban areas, and nonmetropolitan workers are more likely to be employed in contingent or varied-hour work (McLaughlin and Jensen 2008). Nonstandard work is characterized by part-time hours, short-term, tenuous or temporary schedules and locations (such as in contract work or work mediated through a temporary agency) and/or by little expectation of continued employment (McLaughlin and Jensen 2008; Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson 2000). These types of jobs often include work in construction, factories, retail and food service.

Explanations for the prevalence of “bad jobs” in rural areas vary, including mechanisms such as the push of market forces and intentional worker exploitation (Jensen, McLaughlin and Slack 2003). Despite the cause, the end game means less “good” jobs for rural workers. Benefits and wages also tend to be lower for nonstandard workers, which creates further financial hardship for those rural families confined to these types of jobs (Haynie and Gorman 1999). Holding human capital and job type constant, rural workers experience less economic returns from employment than do their urban counterparts (McLaughlin and Perman 1991 in Jensen, McLaughlin and Slack 2003).

The transformation of the rural economy has disadvantaged rural workers, particularly those with lower levels of educational attainment and the inability to commute to urban areas for high-skill, high-wage service sector jobs. Without the

resurgence of traditional rural industries or the creation of employment options which offer a living wage to low-skilled workers, rural workers with low educational attainment seem confined to contingent, part-time, lower-paying positions in the rural service economy. As rural areas have traditionally experienced higher rates of poverty to begin with, how does this shift in the rural economy influence rural poverty? How do people experience poverty in contemporary nonmetro areas?

2.3 Poverty and Welfare in Rural Environments

Rural areas have long been noted for their predisposition to poverty (Weber et. al 2005). Traditionally, rural studies have investigated the prevalence and persistence of poverty in specific areas of the U.S. including the Appalachian mountain region (Plunkett and Bowman 1973; Billings and Blee 2002). More recent studies of rural poverty have included regional poverty in the South and Northeast (Duncan 2000), and in counties classified as rural according to population density measures (Grinstein-Weiss, Curley, and Charles 2007; McLaughlin and Coleman-Jensen 2008). Although rural poverty has not received as much scholarly attention as urban poverty (Cotter 2002), one-fifth of the nation's poor live in nonmetropolitan areas where poverty is more likely to be disproportionately high (Weber et. al 2005) and chronic (Lichter, Roscigno and Condron 2003). [Please see Appendix A for a comparison of metro-nonmetro county poverty statistics.]

Poverty rates have been consistently higher for nonmetropolitan residents as compared to their metro counterparts for the past 50 years, although central-city poverty has reached slightly higher levels than rural poverty (Jensen, McLaughlin and Slack

2003). Not unexpectedly, nonmetropolitan children are more likely to be poor than their urban counterparts (Lichter, Roscigno and Condron 2003). Despite a decline in poverty rates for rural children since the late 1980s, rural African-American children continue to experience rates of poverty three times higher than that of comparable whites – 36.4 percent versus 10.9 percent in 2000 (Jensen, McLaughlin and Slack 2003:120; Lichter, Roscigno and Condron 2003:99).

Several notable factors differentiate the rural poor. The rural poor have higher rates of labor force participation and are slightly more likely to be working full-time compared to the urban poor (Jensen, McLaughlin and Slack 2003). In 1984, two thirds of impoverished rural households contained at least one worker compared with just over half of all impoverished urban households (Duncan and Tickameyer 1988). Additionally, working more hours has less of an effect on the reduction of poverty in rural areas, although recent contradictory findings have been noted (Weber et. al 2005; Cotter 2002). Low-income and impoverished households in rural areas are more likely to be white, live in traditional nuclear families, and be elderly (Cotter 2002). Although whites comprise the greatest absolute number of rural poor, minorities are statistically more likely to be poor in nonmetro than metro areas (Cotter 2002). Proportionately, there are fewer female-headed households in rural areas, although as discussed above, this trend is changing in recent years (Duncan and Tickamyer 1988).

Rural single-mother households, a growing segment of the rural population, often find themselves doubly disadvantaged by their gender and rurality. The relationship of single mother households to poverty is already well-documented (Ananat and Michaels

2008; Lieb and Thistle 2006; Thomas and Sawhill 2002; Seccombe 2000; Bianchi 1994, 1999). Rural mothers experience higher rates of poverty and lower wages than their metro counterparts. Even when controlling for education level, marital history, race and number of children, rural mothers do not experience the same amount of economic benefit from full-time work as compared to urban mothers (Brown and Lichter 2004). Correspondingly, rural mothers also have higher income-to-poverty ratios and higher rates of poverty by the official poverty line measure when compared to their metropolitan counterparts (Brown and Lichter 2004).

The persistence of rural poverty is influenced by shifts in the rural economy, low levels of educational attainment and the limited and differential effectiveness and use of social welfare programs. A shortage of living wage jobs and the social isolation of many rural communities have created “rural ghettos,” much in the same nature as Wilson’s (1987) urban work discusses (Duncan 2000). Rural children lag behind national standards on standardized tests and experience substantial high school dropout rates (Lichter, Roscigno and Condon 2003). As of 2000, the urban-rural gap in high school completion rates had all but closed, although no progress has been made in closing the gap on baccalaureate-and-higher degree attainment (Beaulieu, Israel and Wimberley 2003). A high school diploma continues to be the modal degree achievement in rural areas (Beaulieu, Israel and Wimberley 2003).

The rural particularities of public assistance and social welfare programs likely add to the prevalence of poverty. Rural families have different patterns of engagement and take-up rates with social services, including historically lower rates of cash assistance

receipt (Grinstein-Weiss, Curley and Charles 2007), but higher rates of child support from noncustodial fathers (Bartfield and Meyer 2001 in Lichter, Roscigno and Condrón 2003). Although rural families' rate of welfare receipt is now approaching the rate of receipt by urban families, rural families typically receive lower amounts of cash assistance due to states' differential generosity in welfare benefits (O'Hare 2009). Furthermore, although many rural households would qualify for various kinds of social assistance programs, a lack of public transportation may prohibit households from reaching the county office to apply for services in the first place (O'Hare 2009).

Despite rural areas' much smaller absolute population size, the array of changes and challenges affecting rural places makes them an interesting and necessary subject of study. Although poverty seems to be one of the few constants faced by rural areas, there is a surprising dearth of rural poverty research compared with the tremendous body of work investigating urban poverty. Research has increasingly addressed rural areas, yet an urban bias continues to dominate poverty and welfare scholarship (Duncan and Tickamyer 1988; Cotter 2002). Due to the particular limitations of the rural economy and the isolated nature of some rural communities, rural low-income families face resource challenges that comparable urban families do not.

For these reasons, it is important to understand how rural families, especially those who are low-income and resource-poor, make sense of their changing rural communities. Research incorporating their everyday experiences is needed, as are solutions to the challenges rural populations face (Lewis 2000; Katras, Zuiker and Bauer 2004). Through the examination of qualitative, longitudinal data from low-income

families in central Pennsylvania and eastern North Carolina, this dissertation will explore and evaluate how nonmetro families are “making do” with their contemporary economic prospects in their respective, transforming rural environments.

Given the above discussion of the rural social landscape, it is also important to note the particular nuances of the two regions investigated in these analyses – three counties each in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. Although it is useful to categorize the patterns and trends of rural places, it would be irresponsible not to acknowledge the regional contexts that make these places unique to each other. In the words of one scholar, “When you’ve seen *one* rural community, you’ve seen *one* rural community” (emphasis in original) (Daryl Hobbes in Swanson and Brown 2003:397). The next section will briefly discuss the contemporary economic and demographic context of Central Pennsylvania and North Carolina, followed by a discussion of the Family Life Project and participants.

2.4 The Family Life Project Study Setting

Both Pennsylvania and North Carolina have experienced shifts in their primary economic industries over the past several decades. In western and central Pennsylvania, local economies have transitioned from traditional agriculture, resource extraction and manufacturing to more serviced-based occupations. Coal mining, for which western Pennsylvania and other parts of Appalachia are partially infamous (Tickamyer and Henderson 2003), has declined and given way to the dominance of other industries including education, healthcare, retail trade, manufacturing and construction. North Carolina has experienced a similar transition, suffering decline in some sectors of

agriculture, namely tobacco production, and in manufacturing. For example, central North Carolina has experienced sizeable declines in furniture and textile manufacturing, but continues to experience notable growth in hog farming and biotechnologies (Denniston 2006). Figures 1 and 2 below depict the Family Life Project counties within in their respective states.

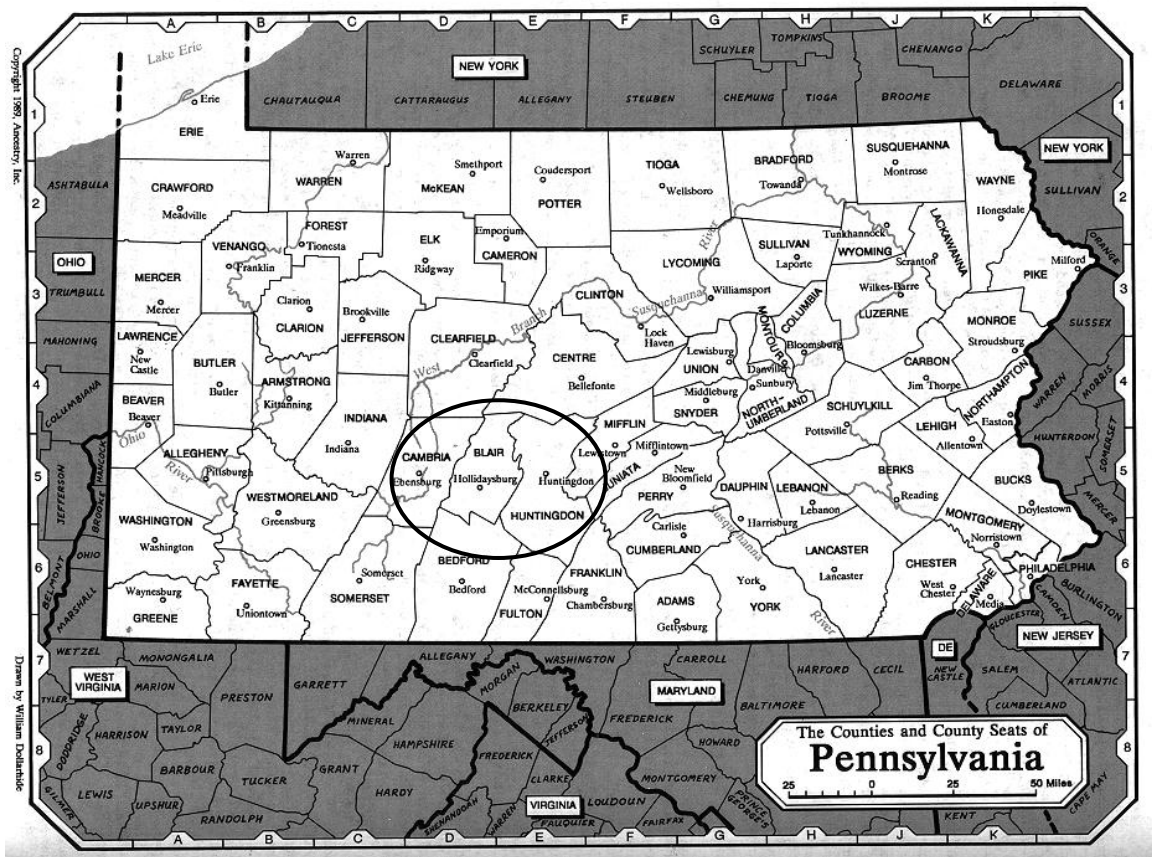


Figure 1: Pennsylvania Study Counties

Throughout the Pennsylvania study counties – Blair, Cambria and Huntingdon – and their micropolitan areas, educational services, healthcare and social assistance

comprise the predominant sector, accounting for about one quarter of total industry type (ACS 2011). At approximately 12 percent, retail trade is the second most dominant industry in in Blair and Cambria counties, with manufacturing maintaining a close third. In Huntingdon County, manufacturing is the second most prominent industry, with construction and retail trade vying for third. Manufacturing presence in these counties includes the production of paper, woodcraft and paperboard products, circuit boards, forged steel products and food items, among other goods. Traditional sectors including agriculture and mining account for less than 2 percent of industry in Cambria and Blair counties. The agricultural sector accounts for 4 percent in Huntingdon. Unlike the other two PA counties, Huntingdon does not contain a micropolitan center.

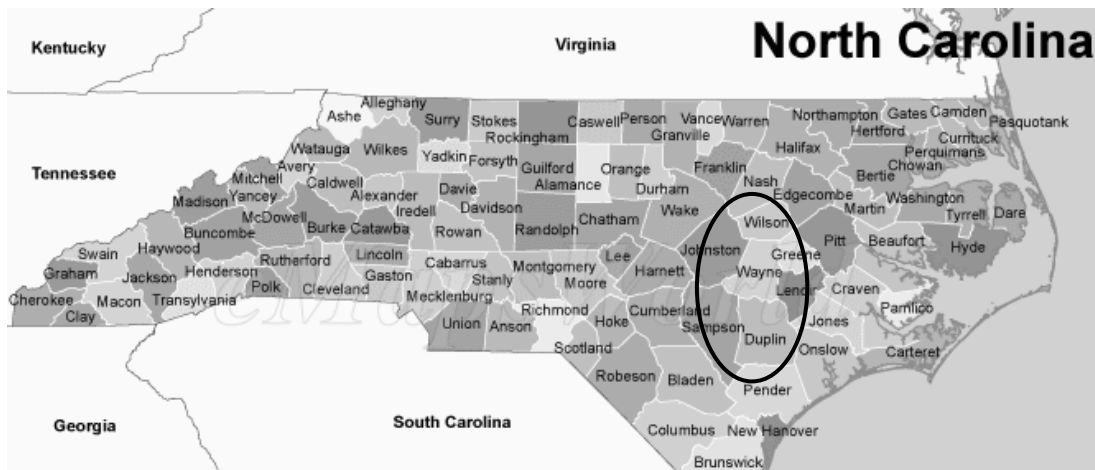


Figure 2: North Carolina Study Counties

The North Carolina counties embody a slightly different composition of economic sectors. Across Wayne, Wilson and Sampson counties, educational services, healthcare

and social assistance account for one quarter to one fifth of all economic sectors (ACS 2011). In a slight departure from the general Pennsylvania county pattern, manufacturing is the second largest sector in each of the three NC counties and micropolitan areas. With the exception of Wayne county and its micropolitan area, Goldsboro, the margin between these first- and second- most dominant industries is approximately 21 percent compared to approximately 17 percent, respectively. Manufacturing in these NC counties includes metal stamping and manufacture of metal products, fiberglass and wood products, rubber tires and food products (most notably of hot sauce, pickles and Coca Cola bottling). Retail maintains a position as the third most dominant industry across all three NC counties. Sampson – like Huntingdon County in PA – does not have a micropolitan center and maintains a relatively high presence of agriculture at 11 percent.³

Both Pennsylvania and North Carolina display some interesting contemporary demographic patterns which are, in some cases, notably different from national characteristics. Table 1 below contains some of these statistics.

Table 1: County Characteristics and U.S. Comparison – US, State & County American Community Survey (ACS 2005-2007) Estimates

US	PA Blair	PA Cambria	PA Huntingdon	NC Wayne	NC Wilson	NC Sampson
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³ Two food processing companies – including the infamous producer of pork products, Smithfield Foods – claimed to be responsible for 12 percent of Sampson County’s workforce in 2009-2012 (Sampson County Economic Development Commission 2012).

Population	301,621,157	125,527	144,995	45,556	113,590	76,754	63,641
%Population Change*	7.2	-2.8	-5.0	-0.1	0.2	4.0	5.8
%<5 years	6.9	5.7	5.1	4.7	7.7	7.0	7.3
%<18 years	24.5	21.2	19.4	19.4	26.0	25.0	25.9
%65 years & >	12.6	17.1	18.7	15.7	12.5	13.4	13.0
%Female	50.7	51.8	51.1	47.5	51.4	52.1	50.6
% White	80.0	97.2	95.2	93.3	64.7	58.8	67.9
%Black	12.8	1.6	3.4	5.6	32.9	39.4	28.8
%Hispanic Origin	15.1	0.7	1.1	1.3	6.8	8.6	15.5
%H.S. Grads 25+	84.0	87.6	85.7	85.1	80.2	75.2	73.2
%Bachelors 25+	27.0	16.7	17.2	13.6	15.6	16.8	11.4
% w/Disability ages 5years+	15.1	19.4	20.1	20.1	21.0	18.2	21.8
%Persons Below Poverty	13.3	12.7	12.4	10.6	17.4	19.3	20.1
Median Household Income (\$)	50,007	40,196	37,030	39,044	39,316	36,740	33,331

*From the period April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2007

Across the six counties, only three – Blair and Cambria in PA and Wayne in NC – have a population surpassing 100,000 persons.⁴ The three remaining counties have

⁴ In an effort to be contemporaneous with the Family Life Project data collection period, these data come from the 2005-2007 American Community Survey (ACS). These data do not provide information from any one point in time. Rather, the ACS estimates provide average characteristics over the years in question. In

populations roughly half the size of the three largest counties. The Pennsylvania counties' possible tendency toward an aging population is evidenced by their comparatively lower proportions of children and higher percentage of older residents. All three PA counties have proportions of children under 5 and children under 18 slightly lower than the national average, and the percent of the population aged 65 and older is approximately 5 percentage points greater than the national average. In contrast, all three NC counties have youth and elderly populations on par with the national average. These patterns may reflect larger trends in regional population change, as the three PA counties experienced population loss from the period 2000 to 2007 while the NC counties experienced substantial population growth (ACS 2009). Population change ranges from 5 percent population loss in Cambria County, PA to nearly 6 percent growth in Sampson County, NC.

According to population density measures, all six counties are classified as nonmetro (Rural PA 2003; NC Rural Center 2009), although their respondents live in towns of sizes ranging from several hundred to approximately 46,000 persons (ACS 2011). None of the largest towns in each of the six counties surpasses the 50,000-person metropolitan population criteria. However, Blair and Cambria in PA and Wayne and Wilson counties in NC contain at least one micropolitan area with sizes ranging from

some cases, which will be noted, data are only available from the 2005-2009 ACS. Due to the recent and rapid demographic change in these regions, the ACS estimates provide more timely area characteristics than either the 2000 or 2010 Census.

22,000 persons (Johnstown, Cambria County, PA) to 46,000 (Wilson, Wilson County, NC).

In terms of their racial composition, all three Pennsylvania counties exhibit a white population proportionately larger than the national average and have a lower than average proportion of African-Americans and Latinos. The North Carolina counties exhibit the opposite pattern. Due to a potential undercount of Mexican migrants in particular, the proportion of Latino persons may be significantly underestimated in North Carolina. The most striking difference between the Pennsylvania and North Carolina counties is the lack of racial diversity across the Pennsylvania counties.

As discussed above, rural areas generally have lower levels of educational attainment. Interestingly, the three PA counties display high school completion rates on par with the national average. However, the proportion of the NC population completing high school across these three counties ranges from 4 to nearly 11 points lower than the national average (73.2 – 80.2 versus 84 percent). Compared to the national average at 27 percent, much lower proportions of PA and NC residents have completed their 4-year degree. Completion percentages range from a low of 11 in Sampson County to 17.2 in Cambria County. College completion rates remain low across these counties' micropolitan centers as well, the city of Wilson being the one exception.⁵ These counties' college-completion rates are comparable to rates across the nonmetropolitan U.S. (O'Hare 2009). Although gains have been made in high school completion rates, rural

⁵ According to the 2005-2009 ACS, 21 percent of Wilson residents have baccalaureate degrees, which is the highest proportion across the entire sample.

areas have not yet achieved college-completion rates comparable to urban areas. Educational attainment across the PA and NC counties reflect this regional observation. Furthermore, although educational attainment trends are similar across all rural areas, some rural places maintain exceptionally low levels of education, including the Black Belt and Appalachia (McGranahan 2003).

Median household income in these counties is modest, on average about \$12,000 less than the 2005-2007 national median household income. Across Pennsylvania, the percentage of impoverished individuals for each county falls slightly below the comparable figure for the U.S., around 12 and 13 percent, respectively. In contrast, impoverished individuals comprise nearly a fifth of the population in each of the three North Carolina counties. Poverty rates appear to be relatively similar across the counties and their largest micropolitan areas, although micropolitan areas display slightly higher proportions of individual poverty for 2005-2009 (ACS 2011). Notably, all six counties report a much higher proportion of disabled individuals, approximately 25 percent larger than compared to the overall U.S. percentage.

In sum, the FLP study counties in Pennsylvania and North Carolina follow similar patterns in terms of their economies, population sizes and most demographic characteristics. Both PA and NC have experienced shifts in their respective economies such that educational services, healthcare and social assistance, manufacturing and retail sales are the most prevalent sectors. The six counties share similar population patterns and sizes. Two out of each state's three counties have micropolitan centers. These counties' residents also have similar levels of educational achievement, with high school

being the modal degree obtained. Household incomes are generally similar across both sets of counties, ranging from a high of ~\$40,000 in Blair County to \$33,000 in Sampson County (in 2012 dollars, about \$48,000 and \$40,000, respectively).

However, Pennsylvania and North Carolina differ on some demographic indicators. In terms of racial/ethnic composition, the NC counties display minority population composition comparable to or proportionately larger than national figures. In contrast, the racial majority in PA is by a far margin, white. The NC counties' percentage of the population in poverty falls several points above both the PA counties' and the national average. All three PA counties exhibit an older population and negative population growth, while the NC counties have positive growth trajectories and youth and elderly populations on par with national proportions.

Given these characteristics, the residents in Blair, Cambria and Huntingdon counties are likely to be employed in service, retail, or manufacturing, have a high school diploma, are white and are live in households with gross annual incomes under \$47,000/year.⁶ Residents of Wayne, Wilson and Sampson counties are likely to be employed in service, manufacturing or retail, and are slightly less likely than PA residents to have a high school diploma. They are also more likely to be Black or Latino, be impoverished, and live in households with annual incomes at or under \$42,500. Details regarding the Family Life Project families, their characteristics and how they were selected from these counties follow below.

⁶ Throughout all chapters, all dollar amounts are reported in 2012 dollars and have been adjusted for inflation unless otherwise indicated.

2.5 The Family Life Project Participants

Data for this dissertation come from the ethnographic component of the Family Life Project (FLP). The FLP is a 5-year longitudinal, multi-site, multi-method study conducted in partnership by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and The Pennsylvania State University at University Park. The FLP's primary goal is to develop a better understanding of how community, employment, family economic resources, family contexts, parent-child relationships and individual differences among children influence development and competencies in children during their first five years. To this end, the FLP consists of two parts: a study of children's lives and development via a series of home visits, childcare visits, and phone calls (n=1200) and an ethnographic component (n=93) of families distributed evenly across the six study counties.

Both components of the FLP aim to assuage the deficit of nonmetropolitan data that exists with respect to the influence of environmental factors and family dynamics on child development. Most comparative data is collected in urban areas (Evans & English 2002), although studies are increasingly collecting more rural data (Brody et al. 2002).⁷ Although the FLP included two components, this dissertation utilizes the ethnographic data only. The ethnographic component was established to inform the larger component of cultural beliefs and practices in rural areas, as well as any unanticipated complexities associated with small-town and rural life (Burton and Skinner 2005).

⁷ Please see Appendix B for a comparison of FLP respondent characteristics to those in comparable, urban studies.

Recruitment for the ethnographic component began in the spring of 2003 and continued throughout the spring of 2006. Participants in this component matched participants in the larger component on some, but not all, demographic characteristics. However, participation in one portion of the study permanently prohibited participation in the other component. Respondents for the larger component were recruited exclusively in NC and PA county hospitals shortly after giving birth, while respondents in the qualitative portion were typically recruited when 5-8 months pregnant. Qualitative interviewers recruited respondents at grocery stores, WIC offices, social services offices, and by posting flyers and handouts in the same locations.⁸ Snowball sampling was also utilized to recruit respondents in selected instances, such as to add racial diversity to the study sample. Unlike the larger study's sample, all of the qualitative respondents could be classified as low-income, with reported earnings and income at 200% of the poverty level or below.

The combination of longitudinal design and monthly interview frequency is a particular advantage of these data.⁹ Interviews continued on a monthly basis until all interview protocols were completed, although some families withdrew prior to the completion of all protocols due to scheduling issues or other conflicts.¹⁰ Due to this and to the variable timing of families' recruitment to the study, the data collection period per

⁸ The interviewers combined recruitment strategies in order to increase the likelihood of identifying potential respondents. These strategies also included passing out project information to patrons of local establishments and asking even visibly pregnant women if they knew anyone currently 5-8 months pregnant who might be interested in participating in the FLP.

⁹ The FLP data offer distinct advantages over comparable, longitudinal studies such as Fragile Families, as FLP interviews were conducted on a monthly, rather than yearly or tri-yearly basis (Fragile Families 2009).

¹⁰ A comprehensive list of interview protocols appears in Appendix C.

household ranges from several months to several years [please see Appendix D for descriptive statistics regarding data collection].¹¹ In addition to the demographic data collected for each family at the intake interview, every monthly family interview includes the interviewer's fieldnotes and a transcript (verbatim or targeted) of any audio-recorded material.

Most interviews were digitally recorded, the exception being when respondents did not consent to the tape recording, or due to sporadic recorder malfunction or interviewer error. Interviewers also provided fieldnotes describing neighborhood characteristics and any participant observations with the families such as doctor appointments, social services visits, on grocery shopping trips and to family events such as weddings and baptisms. Other forms of data collected for some families include family photos and GIS coordinates or maps of important family landmarks (childhood homes, schools, and the like).

Because of the sampling strategy used to recruit respondents, the FLP ethnographic sample is not statistically representative of the county, state or rural U.S. population. Although respondents range in age from late teens to late thirties, the mean age of the FLP sample is nearly 20 years lower than the average age of any of the study counties, and is over ten years below the national average (ACS 2011). Despite targeted efforts to recruit Black and Latino respondents in PA, the racial composition of PA respondents largely reflects the predominately-white composition of those counties. In

¹¹ For this reason, a traditional attrition measure is difficult to calculate. Although some respondents drop out of the study prematurely, their "incomplete" data are still incorporated into the overall analyses. Grounded theory methodology, discussed in Chapter 3 below, appropriately addresses this issue.

terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents have completed high school or a GED equivalent. The ethnographic sample has a higher proportion without a high school diploma and a much lower proportion of college graduates than the regional or national populations.¹² Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the PA and NC respondents.

Table 2: Selected Family Life Project Demographic Characteristics (Ethnographic Sample Only)

	FLP – PA	FLP – NC
	N=50	N=43
Age*	(n=42)	(n=42)
Mean	23.6	24.5
Median	23	25
Range	18-35	16-39
Race/Ethnicity		
Black (%)	10.0	45.2
Latino (%)	12.0	14.3
White (%)	76.0^	40.5
Education*		
Some college (%)	24.0	45.2
High School/GED Only (%)	30.0	28.6

¹² A high proportion of study respondents have attended college or secondary school, but did not hold the respective terminal degrees at the time of their participation in the study. It is possible respondents went on to complete these degrees outside of the study observation period, although a notable amount of respondents had already withdrawn from their programs during their participation in the FLP.

Less than high school (%)	22.0	26.2
Unknown (%)	24.0	--
Work Status (Age >18)*		
Not working or in school (%)	44.0	34.9
Working (%)	42.0	60.5
Unknown (%)	14.0	4.7
Marital Status*		
Single/unmarried (%)	64.0	60.5
Married (%)	22.0	25.6
Divorced (%)	4.0	6.9
Separated (%)	2.0	4.6
Widowed (%)	2.0	0.0
Unknown (%)	6.0	2.3

*Reflects respondent status at intake.

^Total does not add to 100%, as there is one Native-American respondent not included in the listed racial categories.

In terms of family composition, a quarter of the respondents are currently married, compared with roughly 50 percent in the U.S. and county populations. Cohabitation across the FLP mothers in both states is both high and inconsistent over time. The respondents' younger average age may help account for the high incidence of non-marriage in the sample. As respondents were recruited while pregnant, it is also important to consider how the presence of young children in these families might influence their economic and employment decisions. In addition to respondents' average age and marital status, their status as the parents of young children and/or infants distinguishes them from older families and individuals. Still, due to the 20-year age range of FLP respondents and the variation in household composition across the sample, these data can speak to a variety of rural families. The sample includes young, first-time single mothers and older married- or partnered- households with multiple children. Additionally, some FLP families' living arrangements include multiple generations and/or extended kin. In these

ways, the FLP sample reflects past and present trends in the composition of nonmetropolitan households.

What makes the FLP families unique is their limited residential mobility and their status as “stayers”, or individuals who do not move out of or far from their childhood communities. In their discussion of the “brain drain” taking place across small town USA, Carr and Kefalas (2009) establish a set of criteria that set “stayers” apart from those young individuals who leave and achieve away from their rural hometowns. For example, “stayers” are more likely than their counterparts to actively maintain hometown pride and be unwilling or unable to leave their family and the familiarity of their childhood homeplace (Carr and Kefalas 2009). Stayers prioritize the traditional notion of family, often forgoing an extended period of independent young adulthood to marry and/or begin their own families (Carr and Kefalas 2009). Stayers are also likely to have amassed extensive work experience while still in high school, which may contribute to preferring full-time employment over post-secondary education.

In addition to these personal characteristics and priorities, Carr and Kefalas also identify a series of processes maintained by community elders, educators and parents that specifically promote the mobility of academically gifted students and high status youth. The authors conclude that the differential encouragement of high-achieving youth causes them to leave their rural communities while discouraged, under-achieving high school dropouts stay behind. These processes thus contribute to the “brain drain” of these communities (Carr and Kefalas 2009) and the lower educational achievement of the remaining youth. Carr and Kefalas suggest this combination of personal characteristics

and years of influence from community members produces a group of young people who “simply wouldn’t be happy ‘making do’ ” in their home communities (2009:50).

Given the differential experiences and characteristics of “stayers” and “leavers”, it is important to note the FLP respondents are, in large part, “stayers” who remain in or close to their home communities. The FLP families exhibit some of the same characteristics and experiences as the families in Carr and Kefalas’s study, including similar patterns of engagement with school, work, family and homeplace. Thus, the FLP respondents are likely to have more characteristics in common with other “stayers” than their “leaver” and “achiever” counterparts. However, despite the particular demographic characteristics displayed by the FLP ethnographic sample, these data provide an advantageous, detailed, longitudinal view into how low-income rural families are “making do” with their current and future economic prospects.

3. The Employment of Low-Income Nonmetropolitan Families: Five Dimensions of Job Quality

In recent decades, social welfare programs for low-income families have been reoriented to emphasize self-sufficiency through employment. From the late 1980s to 1996, federal spending increased dramatically for programs meant to support and incentivize employment such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) (Ellwood 2000). Spurred on through Welfare Reform, employment likewise became a policy priority for families receiving public assistance. Social service offices promoted employment with banners bearing slogans such as, “Life Works if You Work First”, and encouraged caseworkers to go for “100 percent employment” among their clients (Gias, Nathan,

Lurie and Kaplan 2001:46). Correctly or not, this shift in social policies has been credited with making progress against poverty, most notably through a reduction in the number of families seeking cash assistance (Loprest 1999; Ellwood 2000; Haskins 2001; Lichter and Crowley 2004). This tremendous decrease in welfare caseloads is accompanied by a well-documented increase in rates of employment among unmarried mothers (Lichter and Jayakody 2002) and single mother households (London, Scott, Edin and Hunter 2004; Destro and Brady 2011).

However, the dubious quality of employment available to low-income families has caused many researchers to question the real success of this policy shift. Despite growth in rates of employment among low-income mothers, families' relative economic circumstances have not improved since 1980, particularly for female-headed households and families in non-metro areas (Snyder and McLaughlin 2004). Because as many poor children live in married-couple households as do not (Lichter and Crowley 2004:388), the effectiveness of employment as anti-poverty strategy seems to be in question. Due in part to the declining availability of "good" jobs (Loveman and Tilly 1988; Tilly 1996; Kalleberg 2011) and the consistently low educational attainment of low-income households, the jobs impoverished families can obtain often do not provide economic security (Raver 2003). Many families remain entrenched at or below the poverty line despite transitioning from welfare to work (Lichter and Jayakody 2002). Additionally, evaluations of workforce intermediary programs find that low-income individuals continue to face barriers to stable, high-paying employment (Poppe, Strawn and Martinson 2004).

Such challenges of a social policy context focused on employment have prompted scholars to pay more attention to the type and quality of jobs available to low-income families. In order to gauge job quality, researchers use specific criteria to distinguish “good” jobs from “bad” ones. Currently, these evaluations are dominated by objective indicators of jobs’ financial rewards such as wage amount, wage growth and full- or part-time status (Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson 2000; Lein, Schexnayder, Douglas and Schroeder 2007). Under this rubric, “good” jobs offer higher wages, consistent full-time, non-seasonal schedules and potentially include retirement, medical or other insurance benefits (Kalleberg 2011). Certain “good” job characteristics are robust, such as benefits, opportunities for autonomy and intrinsic rewards, which maintain their salience regardless of workers’ age (Kalleberg and Vaisey 2005). In contrast, “bad” jobs provide little or no stability and limited benefits, and offer wages at or under approximately \$9.64/hour (or \$7/hour in 1999) (Poppe, Strawn and Martinson 2004; Kalleberg 2011).

Evaluating jobs exclusively by their economic rewards provides some information about which job types, sectors, or characteristics are more likely to provide high quality employment. For example, part-time workers cannot anticipate much if any wage growth at their jobs, even if they maintain these jobs over time (Poppe et. al 2004). Some economic sectors uniformly provide workers with lower wages (i.e. service versus manufacturing) meaning there are less “good” jobs in those sectors regardless of the characteristics of workers who occupy the positions (Loveman and Tilly 1988). Scrutinizing low-income families’ work experiences across these particular criteria indicates which jobs do and do not provide families with earnings sufficient to bring them

out of poverty. However, despite the advantages of objectively evaluating employment, these criteria fail to fully distinguish levels of job quality from the perspective of low-income workers.

Low-income families face a variety of unique constraints that present them with distinct work-family challenges. Given such constraints, it is reasonable to anticipate these families will find different configurations of work beneficial despite their economic reward. For example, low-income families have limited affordable childcare options compared to higher income families, and must often negotiate childcare to coincide with irregular and non-standard work schedules (Henly & Lyons 2000). Low-income families disproportionately rely on informal or familial resources to meet their childcare needs, which may in turn be tenuous or otherwise unreliable (Henly & Lyons 2000).

Additionally, low-income families face schedule constraints unique to their impoverished contexts (Roy, Tubbs and Burton 2004). Low-income families reliant on public health or social services must conform to those institutions' hours of availability in order to meet their required appointments, rather than rely on more accommodating private service providers (Roy, Tubbs and Burton 2004). Although families at all income levels increasingly face constraints on their "free" and "family" time, low-income families especially lack the discretionary income necessary to create these opportunities (Tubbs, Roy and Burton 2005). With some exceptions (e.g. London et. al 2004), few employment quality evaluations have sought to incorporate low-income families' values, motives or perceived needs. Incorporating families' subjective assessments of work in addition to objective metrics may provide a deeper, more accurate and more complete

understanding of employment and, subsequently, families' economic outcomes. One way to generate additional insights like these is through qualitative research and data collection.

This paper contributes to prior work on low-income families' employment, economic mobility and self-sufficiency through the analysis of qualitative, longitudinal data from the Family Life Project (FLP). These analyses utilize data from interviews with 71 households in 6 nonmetropolitan counties across North Carolina and Pennsylvania.¹ Using a modified grounded theory approach, the analyses identify and classify families' experiences with employment throughout their participation in the study.

The analyses generate five dimensions – affirmation, consistency, rewards, costs and trajectory – that interpret families' work criteria into scholarly metrics. These five dimensions provide a novel framework for evaluating the quality of low-income families' employment, as they combine subjective and objective metrics. Before proceeding to a discussion of the five dimensions, I will first review existing research in the area of low-income work and employment evaluation. Second, I will describe the FLP data and grounded theory methodology. I will follow with a presentation of the results and a

¹ These analyses restrict the overall sample (n=93) to African-American and white respondents only. The FLP ethnographic sample also includes Latino/a households (n=13) and one Native American household. These families are omitted from the analyses for several reasons. First, there are striking differences in Latino/a families across both states due to respondents' migration status and country of origin. NC Latino/a families were much more likely to be first generation migrants from Central America. In contrast, PA Latino/a families were longer-term or native-born US residents. Additionally, these families' data collection was not contemporaneous with that of white and African-American families' data and extended beyond the 2006 timeline. Future analysis will address the particularities of these households' data. Additionally, I have excluded families from the analyses if they dropped out of the study before any work data could be collected (n=8).

discussion of the five dimensions listed above. Finally, I will offer implications of these analyses.

3.1 Relevant Characteristics of Low-Wage Work

Because low-income families' employment is typically limited by their educational attainment, it is useful to understand the major characteristics of low-wage work. The following section will discuss characteristics of low-wage work as they pertain to low-income families, including how these jobs potentially limit families' long-term economic prospects.

Low-income households make up one quarter of the U.S. population, have median hourly wages of \$7.29 and median family incomes just under \$15,000 (reported as 2006 dollars) (Blank, Danziger and Schoeni 2006).² Despite public and scholarly attention to single mother poverty, there are more than twice as many people in working poor households in the U.S. (Brady, Fullerton and Moren Cross 2010). The presence of the working poor is both demographically and theoretically salient. Work is often posited as a means to escaping or preventing poverty, so the fact that poverty would accompany employment "represents a critical puzzle" (Brady, Fullerton and Moren Cross 2010:560). Due to lower levels of educational attainment, low-income families' employment options are often constrained to low-wage jobs within the service sector that do not require higher degree attainment or specialized skills. Such jobs include work in retail such as stocking

² Approximately \$8.30/hour and \$17,075 in 2012.

or clerking, fast food or restaurant work such as food preparation and serving, jobs in medical transcription, clerical work, farm-based labor, and construction.

Low-wage jobs exhibit high levels of job instability, high variability in schedules, nonstandard work hours, little to no medical or retirement benefits, and little job security (Secombe 2000). Even when employed full-time, the low wages offered by these types of employment are often not enough to pull families out of poverty (Lambert 1999, Kazis and Miller 1991). Thus, to make ends meet, families often combine earnings from low-wage work with the receipt of social services such as welfare and Medicaid, or with informal support from familial networks providing money, housing or childcare (Edin and Lein 1997; Henly 2002). Researchers also note vast amounts of stress in low-wage work environments that result from the demands of a fast-paced, highly-monitored workplace (Buchanan 2002) and lack of any autonomy in creating one's own schedule (Lambert 1999). Although economic mobility opportunities in these jobs are not always limited, wage growth is often stagnant or very low (Buchanan 2002).

In addition to the relatively low stability and wage sustainability offered in these types of employment, job availability within certain sectors of low-wage work have become increasingly limited.³ Despite the growing demand for unskilled work relative to jobs requiring intermediate skills and training (Sassen 2002), low-wage workers may face difficulties keeping or even finding available positions (Lambert 1999; Newman 1999; 2006). For example, studies of low-income teenagers in California and New York,

³ Recent research suggests the important role of institutional context, such as a country's level of unionization, for determining working poverty (Brady, Baker and Finnigan in progress).

respectively, noted that a few openings for minimum-wage work at a fast food restaurant elicited hundreds of applications (Stack 2002; Newman 2006).

Low-wage work also exhibits high variability in terms of the number of hours offered per worker per week (Duncan et. al 1984). Despite having one or more stable employers, low-wage workers' hours are subject to weekly or monthly fluctuations, ultimately resulting in inconsistent expected earnings and less hours of work than desired (Duncan et. al 1984). As a result, unreliable and part-time employment options require families to change their jobs frequently, sometimes on a daily basis (Venkatesh 2006, 2008). Additionally, part-time and temporary work opportunities are growing at a faster rate than full-time employment (Sassen 2002).

As an adaptive strategy to the challenges of low-wage jobs, workers may adopt the "jack of all trades approach", combining many different kinds of work opportunities to generate sufficient income (Harvey 1993). Other research finds low-income workers adopt expectations of employment as simply "work" rather than "career" (Stack 2002). Low-income workers may maintain low wages for many years because of the extended period of time required to find an available higher-paying job (Harvey 1993).

In sum, low-wage work offers several challenges to low-income families, including high levels of schedule instability, low wages and wage growth and stressful, authoritarian work environments with little control over one's work schedule or hours. Combined with family stress and the need to couple low wages with other resources to make ends meet, the types of employment low-income families obtain rarely offer sustainable and sufficient economic resources. Also, despite the growth of low-skilled

jobs relative to other types of employment in recent decades, low-wage job openings can be limited, leaving low-income families without access to any employment at all.

3.2 Evaluating Employment for Low-Income Families

Evaluating employment quality has become a means to assess the effectiveness of employment as an anti-poverty, self-sufficiency strategy for low-income families. An established set of objective, economic criteria including wage amount, the presence of health, retirement and/or other benefits, and hours worked per week allows researchers to assess whether jobs are of “good” or “bad” quality (Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson 2000; Lein et. al 2007). The modal finding of these studies is that high wages and consistent work schedules are often concurrent (Loveman and Tilly 1988; Strawn, Greenberg and Savner 2001), meaning families should have higher quality employment experiences if they find a full-time job offering a consistent weekly schedule. Additionally, objective measures of job prestige, such as those used in the General Social Survey, have been used to gauge how menial – and thus how high or low quality – jobs are (Raver 2003).

Other research has addressed job quality from a longitudinal perspective. Evaluations of employment trajectories, common to longitudinal studies of employment, are also based on objective criteria. These studies combine measures such as wage amount, wage growth, tenure of employment, number of jobs held and full/part-time status over time to produce a range of economic outcomes or employment pathways (Newman 2006, Yoshikawa et. al 2006). For example, Newman’s (2006) follow-up study of teenaged low-wage workers in New York categorizes workers into three types of trajectories based on their economic stability and wage success over a period of nearly

ten years. Yoshikawa and colleagues (2006) take a similar approach, noting various combinations of hours, job lengths, wages and wage growth to produce a set of “work pathways”.

Longitudinal studies of low-income employment find significant heterogeneity across the economic mobility of low-income workers. There is a clear correlation between upwardly mobile trajectories and full-time work status, education and participation in programs like New Hope (Yoshikawa et. al 2006). However, even low-income workers with the most promising work trajectories fail to report annual incomes above the poverty level, as their wages remain relatively low (Newman 2006). Because low-wage workers continue to earn low wages even while experiencing upward economic mobility, it is important to consider what other job evaluation criteria may be directing families’ choices to engage with or disengage from the labor market.

Although these objective metrics contribute quite a lot to understanding what kinds of job characteristics make up a “good” or “high-quality” job, these evaluations mostly neglect families’ own values, concerns and subjective viewpoints. Due to the constraints low-income families face with respect to finding and maintaining employment, it is reasonable to ask how families make employment decisions based on subjective criteria in addition to the objective employment measures used in current employment evaluations. Thus, there may be important and consequential differences between “good” jobs as defined by scholarly, objective standards and a family’s subjective judgment regarding what makes a job a good one.

Low-wage employment presents conflicts particularly among low-income single mothers, as their work options fail to meet both their household's financial requirements and caregiving schedules (London et. al 2004). Difficulty locating safe, reliable, affordable childcare and scheduling work around conflicts arising from child-care responsibilities often undermines single-mothers' ability to maintain employment (Harris 1993:1996; McCrate and Smith 1998; Corcoran 2001; Hennessy 2005; Lein et. al 2007).

Studies of low-income, single mother households note women who return to public assistance from work do so because they are unable to negotiate the costs of their work environments given their family responsibilities (Raver 2003). Thus, low-income single mothers evaluate potential employment circumstances with a particular set of subjective criteria that might not be encompassed by scholarly measures. For instance, London and colleagues (2004) provide an example of low-income single mothers' assessments of the costs and benefits of work. Rather than adhere to objective criteria such as wages or potential for promotion, mothers evaluated work in terms of the degree to which it altered the household routine, their ability to effectively parent and their children's behavior (London et al. 2004).

Despite the apparent need for a broader perspective, with few exceptions, quality assessments of low-income family employment are exclusively economic and objective. Although longitudinal studies of employment often include data from in-depth, qualitative interviews, these family narratives are not systematically incorporated into job evaluations. For example, Yoshikawa and colleagues (2006) discuss the importance of "prior characteristics" such as personal attributes and neighborhoods for determining a

family's likelihood to follow one particular work pathway or another. Yet, these characteristics are not included in their construction of employment pathways. Other studies use ethnographic data to describe the high degree of variability across families' comparable work experiences (Lein, Benjamin, McManus and Roy 2006). Again, these data are not integrated with objective employment measures. Systematically incorporating subjective and objective metrics would enhance the understanding of families' employment outcomes and trajectories.

Altogether, two key limitations to existing research on low-income family employment exist. First, most evaluations of low-income family employment consist of strictly objective, economic criteria such as wage or full/part-time status. Thus, evaluations of employment quality are made without consideration of families' subjective judgments, values, prior characteristics or the environmental context. Second, ethnographic and qualitative data are often present in longitudinal studies, but are underutilized. Qualitative data offer insight into the range of experiences families have when making decisions about employment and of the costs and benefits they weigh, but this material has not been incorporated into objective evaluations of employment. This chapter will present a means of addressing these particular limitations, and will incorporate both objective and subjective measures into employment evaluations. The analyses below will address the following questions – How do nonmetro low-income families evaluate their past, current and potential employment options? What kinds of criteria do families discuss, and how do those criteria differ or resemble scholarly

evaluation metrics? Finally, what is the degree of variability between individual families' employment experiences given these job evaluation criteria?

3.3 Data and Method

Data for these analyses come from the ethnographic component of the Family Life Project (FLP). [Please see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of the study population, participant recruitment and study setting/context]. Qualitative, longitudinal data like those available through the FLP provide the level of detail necessary for understanding how daily processes and challenges influence a household's employment and related matters. As this analysis seeks to understand the heterogeneity of low-income families' experiences with employment, qualitative data provide a distinct advantage over quantitative data and longitudinal data collected on a less-frequent basis.

Because the range, quality and breadth of data depend on the interviewer's relationship with the family as well as on how long a family participated in the study, some individual families have richer and more comprehensive data than others. Due to the gradual process of discovery (Burton, Purvin, and Garrett-Peters 2009) that exists in ethnographic data collection, particularly complicated family circumstances often take months to emerge, meaning interviewers were unable to holistically document some families' complexities. Also, because the data collected are not consistent across families (i.e. some families did not complete the full range of interview protocols), systematic data analysis techniques would be limited by missing data. However, the advantage of qualitative data collection is that it maintains comprehensiveness and depth despite variable interview schedules across respondents. Although some families have richer data

than others, quality of data does not correlate perfectly to length of tenure in the study.

Grounded theory methodology, discussed below, appropriately addresses the particularities of qualitative data. Grounded theory also allows for the use of missing or “incomplete” household data, as it systematically and holistically addresses the comprehensive set of available data.

3.3.1 Grounded Theory

In order to arrive at the analysis criteria for families’ employment, this paper uses a modified version of grounded theory methodology to guide preliminary and subsequent rounds of open and axial coding. This analysis seeks to understand employment trajectories in the context of the interactions between household members and their employment circumstances rather than categorizing a person or job by and of itself. Rather than define and categorize families’ employment quality for them, these categories and criteria emerge from the family interview data. Data consist of interview transcripts and fieldnotes for 71 families in the FLP. Families were retained in the sample if they were unemployed, even for the entire duration of their participation in the study. Whenever possible, I attempted to include families in the analyses in order to achieve a more representative picture of the FLP families overall. However, eight families from the original sample of 79 were excluded from the analysis, as they quickly dropped out of the study without any un/employment information given.

Grounded theory analysis focuses on developing theory from data rather than empirically testing hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006). Traditional grounded theorists maintain scientists should refrain from reviewing existing literature

before beginning research and analysis, as that allows them to enter these settings “with as few preconceived notions as possible” (Glaser 1978:3 in LaRossa 2005). More recent grounded theory traditions (Charmaz 2005; 2006) take a less stringent approach and allow literature to inform the researcher’s relationship to the data without dominating theory-creation. More important than completely shunning any previous literature is the researcher’s commitment to a constructivist way of addressing data. Constructivism dictates that the researcher be aware that they have a role in data creation, that they are interpreting data and not merely relaying facts, and that the research process should be one of reflexivity (Charmaz 2006). Ideally, the reflexive process should include simultaneous analysis and data collection, so any questions that arise during analysis can be clarified through further field research (Charmaz 2005).

Recent grounded theory traditions emphasize attention to certain key analysis principles and practices that focus on phenomena and process rather than describing a series of covariates (LaRossa 2005; Charmaz 2006). Analysis begins with several rounds of data coding. Initial coding involves assigning codes to interview text and fieldnotes by section, line, or segment (Charmaz 2006). The first round of coding should be as open as possible, as codes should and can be refined as the process is repeated. Subsequent rounds of open coding should achieve more refined codes and should assign codes using the language of the respondent as much as possible.

LaRossa (2005) identifies two stages of coding: open coding, which consists of variable creation, and axial coding, which establishes relationships between variables. Coding should gradually become more relational, then theoretical (Charmaz 2006). Final

stages of coding should emphasize the coding of actions, not themes, and should keep in mind relationships between variables. Charmaz (2005; 2006) recommends the incorporation of memo writing as a complementary means of analysis, as a researcher's memos to oneself help to facilitate reflexive thoughts about the data and make connections between emergent codes. The endpoint of coding is theoretical saturation, which is not merely the categorization of codes into a set number of patterns. Theoretical saturation happens when no new coding options emerge (LaRossa 2005; Charmaz 2006). Grounded theory analysis's end goal is to produce theory that is generalizable yet specific (Charmaz 2006) and can be applied to other social contexts (LaRossa 2005). Well-constructed grounded theory should ideally also have credibility, originality, resonance, and be useful (Charmaz 2006:182-3).

These analyses adopt this modified version of grounded theory analysis in order to address families' subjective criteria for evaluating past, present and potential employment. My approach is different from traditional grounded theory analysis in that data collection has been completed. However, I participated in data collection for two years, was involved in data analysis and team meetings during the data collection period, and have been involved in ongoing analysis and processing of the FLP data. First, rather than avoid use of existing literature throughout the data collection and analysis as per Glaser and Strauss, I have relied on existing literature to guide my analysis of the data. Although I participated in data collection as an FLP ethnographer, I am also engaged in secondary data analysis years removed from my time in the field. I have also continued to navigate my role as an "insider" and product of one of the Pennsylvania study counties.

Thus, I have employed a constructivist approach to the analysis – although I am largely involved in secondary data analysis, I am also aware of my role in data creation and recognize I am interpreting data and not merely relaying facts. Rather than employ reflexivity in data collection and analysis, I maintain a reflexive relationship between analyses and theory.

My analyses principally include verbatim and targeted transcripts as well as the ethnographers' fieldnotes. I have also relied on analytical and summary documents for guidance during the coding process. These documents were created by members of the FLP ethnographic research team, including myself, and include detailed and abbreviated overviews of families (family profiles and narratives, respectively) as well as family tree and household diagrams.

3.4 Results: The Five Dimensions of Job Quality

Following this modified grounded theory approach, I exhaustively coded household interview data including fieldnotes, interview transcripts, context notes, family profiles and other summary documents. First, I identified portions of text containing any employment-related topic and applied subject codes to each text unit. Examples include but are not limited to current work, work environment, work history, looking for work, coworkers, job loss, availability of work, reported wages, presence of benefits and the like. After completing this “open” coding, I engaged in several rounds of “axial” coding, where I applied more specific subject codes to the topics present in the open-coded text. I also identified respondents' feelings and sentiments, categorizing those as positive,

negative or neutral, i.e. “reported lack of employment options + respondent frustration”, “job acquisition + respondent indifference”, “increased hours + respondent happiness”.

Following several rounds of axial coding and consideration of themes present in prior literature, I categorized the coded data into five separate dimensions: affirmation, consistency, rewards, costs and trajectory.⁴ These five dimensions are briefly outlined here and in Table 4, but are discussed in detail below. Affirmation refers to the degree to which families express feelings of empowerment, validation and enthusiasm, or conversely, have feelings of despair, indifference and frustration regarding employment. Consistency reflects the relative stability of families’ employment circumstances throughout their participation in the study. Rewards and costs refer to the benefits or lack thereof, monetary and otherwise, families identify when discussing their past, current and potential employment. Finally, trajectory signifies families’ overall economic mobility given their employment experiences over the period of their participation in the study. Through the incorporation of the most prevalent themes present in the coded data, these dimensions include some important ways families evaluate employment. However, these dimensions also rely on evaluation criteria already established in the literature such as wage amount, wage growth, length of employment tenure and full- or part-time status, which are also criteria families use to assess and evaluate their employment options. These five dimensions incorporate a comprehensive set of measures for assessing employment quality among low-income families.

⁴ Again, families’ employment data come primarily from mothers’ reports. In some cases, other household members participated in interviews and field observations, but the data reported here are largely from mothers and their interviewers only.

Table 3: The Five Dimensions (Axial Coding)

<u>Affirmation</u>	<u>Consistency</u>	<u>Rewards</u>	<u>Costs</u>	<u>Trajectory</u>
High	High	High	High	Upward
Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Downward
	Low	Low	Low	No Change

In order to capture the heterogeneity of families’ employment, each of the five dimensions is further categorized to capture the heterogeneity of families’ experiences. I discuss each dimension and its subcategories in detail, drawing from the data to exemplify each category. For each dimension, I provide its definition, variation, patterns, and examples. Table 4 lists each dimension by state, with the modal occurrence highlighted and in bold text.

Table 4: The Five Dimensions by State & Subcategory

	PA	NC	#Total Families
	36	35	71
	Affirmation		
High	8	5	13
Low	27	26	53
N/A (unemployed)	1	4	5
	Consistency		
High	17	11	28
Med	9	10	19
Low	10	14	24
	Rewards		
High	11	9	20
Med	13	16	29
Low	10	5	15

N/A (unemployed)	2	4	6
Unreported	0	1	1
Costs			
High	2	3	5
Med	7	13	20
Low	26	16	42
N/A (unemployed)	1	3	4
Trajectory			
Upward	8	11	19
Downward	7	5	12
No Change	21	19	40

Additionally, each dimension differs in how objectively or subjectively it was derived. For example, *affirmation* is the most subjectively oriented, as it is defined primarily from emergent themes identified by axial coding. In contrast to *affirmation*, *trajectory* and *consistency* are informed by objective job quality metrics present in the evaluation literature. *Trajectory* and *consistency* measures include a composite of families' monthly employment conditions which represents their overall frequency of employment and level of economic mobility within the study timeframe. Falling in the middle of the spectrum, *rewards* and *costs* are influenced both by objective criteria and as well as emergent themes found in the data. Incorporating objective and subjective perspectives into job evaluation criteria prioritizes the viewpoints of low-income families while maintaining a standard of evaluation present in existing scholarship. Thus, these five dimensions provide a set of job evaluation criteria that contain comparative elements, yet also include additional, more nuanced aspects of employment that are important to low-income families. A more detailed discussion of the five themes follows.

3.4.1 Affirmation

The affirmation dimension relies heavily on the range of respondents' sentiments regarding their employment or unemployment circumstances. Affirmation addresses the degree to which jobs provide feelings of self-actualization and satisfaction. Affirmation does not include jobs' perceived financial benefits, but is instead confined to self-esteem, self-worth and other intangibles. Affirmation is further categorized into high affirmation and low affirmation, as the coded data revealed two distinct types of experiences with respect to respondents' employment. Details regarding these categories, including examples from the data, are described below.

Employment experiences included in the high affirmation category provided respondents with positive, non-monetary, benefits including but not limited to feelings of self-worth, achievement or autonomy. Respondents with employment experiences in this category feel empowered by their jobs rather than constrained, hopeless or restricted. Employment is coded as high affirming when the respondent and/or others in the household discuss their employment in a positive light, including feelings of pride, encouragement and/or excitement about working or the workplace. This categorization is also applied when respondents discuss preferring their current employment status over past or potential other kinds of employment.

Conversely, axial coding revealed additional experiences which can be categorized as low affirmation employment. Respondents with employment in this subcategory referred to their work and/or work opportunities as demoralizing, limiting or offering little to no positive emotional returns for the time invested. Families in low

affirmation scenarios report high levels of stress and/or anxiety as a direct result of their work or lack thereof. The low affirmation designation also includes respondents who express feeling underwhelmed by their work or indifferent to opportunities available to them.

Across both PA and NC families, the vast majority of families experience low-affirming employment (n=53). Thirteen families comprise the high affirmation category. Five households are excluded from the affirmation measure due to unemployment throughout duration of the study.⁵ However, the experiences and sentiments of unemployed families (and of unemployed family members within employed families) were also coded, and they inform the construction of the overall affirmation measure.

The advantage of the *affirmation* metric lies in its emergent nature. Rather than provide respondents with a list of employment quality items, or ask respondents to rank which aspects of employment they most value (Kalleberg 1977), affirmation concepts emerged from interviews covering a variety of topics including but not limited to employment. The presence of affirmation sentiments in the interview data suggests it may be an important employment evaluation criterion for low-income families, particularly for families negotiating exclusively between low-wage employment options.

⁵ These five households were unemployed for the entire duration of their participation in the study. Additionally, two of these households were enrolled in workforce development programs through social services, one went to jail, and one received disability payments.

The following paragraphs discuss high and low affirmation, including a brief overview of themes present in the interview data.⁶

Only thirteen families across both states' samples consistently report high affirming employment, which is perhaps unsurprising given the employment context of these nonmetropolitan places. However, employment data coded as high affirmation offers some important insights regarding the ways low-income families evaluate their employment and navigate the limited range of jobs available to them given their transportation, childcare and other types of constraints. In particular, families in this category display two adaptive strategies for obtaining high-affirming employment: becoming self-employed or locating workplaces that respondents refer to as “family” or “like family”.

Several families illustrate the critical role of self-employment for providing high-affirmation employment. Howard, aged 26, and Roxanne, 28, are a white, Pennsylvania family with one child born during the study. Howard is self-employed, as he and several friends began their own house-building business a few years ago. Howard maintains that this is the best job he has ever had, and he says, “[I] actually enjoy going to work”.⁷ Money can be “tight” for the family during the winter when work slows down, and Howard has expressed surprise and concern over the amount of taxes he has owed in the past. Yet, due to Howard’s income, Roxanne is able to stay at home with their daughter

⁶ Because the range of families’ employment experiences cross-coded with affirmation warrants a more extensive analysis, the affirmation dimension is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

⁷ In the sections that follow, all italicized text reflects actual respondent quotes taken from fieldnotes and interview transcripts. Non italicized, quoted material reflects the ethnographers’ observations.

rather than go back to working full-time at a local convenience store. Additionally, because Howard is self-employed, he is able to control the amount of hours he works per week. He is also able to plan ahead for slower work periods by working more at other times and proactively saving money. Howard's self-employment provides the family with adequate economic resources and gives Howard a source of pride, enjoyment and sufficient control over his work schedule.

Other respondents likewise express a willingness to negotiate the legal and financial responsibilities of self-employment in order to work in the environment of their choice and have self-regulated hours and schedules. Anna and her husband Roman, one of the few college-educated couples in the study, live in PA with two children under age three. With the financial support of her husband who works full-time for a parcel delivery service, Anna successfully opens a school of massage therapy. Although Anna is derailed several times by issues with renting a space for the school and by the process of licensing and certification the state requires, she manages to open her school and successfully enrolls a class of five students in her first semester.⁸

Despite Anna's college education, which makes her more employable than many of her study counterparts, Anna instead opts for self-employment. The ethnographer reports Anna is often "brimming with enthusiasm" when she talks about massage therapy, its benefits and what she hopes to offer the community through her newly-opened institution. She sounds "flattered" to receive calls from local organizations inquiring

⁸ Anna's class sizes have since grown to a maximum of 14 students. By the time the end their study participation, Anna and Roman have added a third child to their family as well.

about the school's services. Anna has also written an article for a local magazine aimed at senior citizens about the benefits of massage for seniors with arthritis. Anna's pride and accomplishment about opening her school and offering "valuable" services to the community is evident throughout Anna's engagement with the FLP.

Self-employment, however, is not the only type of work often accompanied by high affirmation sentiments. Reminiscent of Carol Stack's (1974) discussion of the importance of kin and kin-like support in a Midwestern African-American community, the FLP families positively refer to coworkers and workplaces that are "like family". Angela, aged 26, and her husband Carl, 31, both work for the same family-owned business in their town in NC. Angela stopped attending college to work full-time for the husband-and-wife-owned business. Angela speaks very highly of her bosses, whom she has worked for "*since I was a kid...since I was 18.*" Angela expresses a strong sense of respect for her male boss, and alludes to the family-like relationship they have, "*I mean he has helped me move out of my house and get my own, you know, move out of my mother's house and get my own car and do this and that and that sort of thing*".

Angela and her ethnographer both report that Angela's bosses seem more like mentors, as they encourage Angela to get involved in civic organizations, and are "grooming" Angela and her husband to take over the business when they retire. Angela reports that her husband loves his job there, and Angela expects she will stay with the company "*for the long haul, pretty much*". Despite the fact that graphic design was something Angela "*[didn't] really enjoy...[but] just happened to be good at,*" Angela's relationship with her employers and positive sentiments for her workplace as somewhere

she would like to stay enable Angela to maintain her job for many years before and throughout the duration of the study. Kin-like ties and their accompanying social support and non-monetary resources provide Angela and her family with employment that is both high-affirming and works with her families' needs.

Working in a family business or where coworkers are “like family” is a theme that appears in the Pennsylvania sample as well. The brother of Tamara, a PA respondent, works full-time for a family-owned bakery. Although he does not receive benefits because his employer is “too small” of a business to provide them, he “really likes working for this family” and classifies it as a “better experience than working somewhere he didn’t have a relationship with the owners of the company”. As Tamara’s brother seems to express, jobs that are “like family” have an attractive and meaningful advantage over otherwise comparable employment options. Jamie, a white PA respondent in her twenties whose husband is an apprentice union electrician, has been working with a steakhouse chain at a local mall for several years. When asked what she thinks about her job at the steakhouse during her first interview, Jamie says:

Yeah, I've been there long enough. I think that's why I stay there. It's like, I don't know, it's family there. It's nice...I just feel comfortable there. I don't love it there. Like I know I need to get something new but it's the comfort factor I think is why I stay there.

Later in the study, Jamie visits her old workplace even after being let go by new management. She continues to refer to the steakhouse environment as “like family”, even as she begins a “less chaotic” job at another restaurant. Jamie returns to her original

position at the steakhouse months later. She tells the ethnographer that this job is a “*good job*” for her.

Respondents link high affirmation and enjoyment of one’s work to self-employment and family-like workplaces. Additionally, respondents cite more traditional aspects of good jobs such as high wages, autonomy in the workplace and employer-provided health benefits when discussing what makes work enjoyable.⁹ Yet, others eschew monetary rewards entirely. Rachael, a partnered, cohabiting, white 27-year-old mother of three young boys from PA, is enrolled in college classes and is working toward a degree in Health and Human Development at Penn State University. Although she is not employed for the duration of her participation in the study, Rachael touches upon themes of high affirmation when discussing becoming employed in the future:

I want a job I would be happy with. I don’t want to get this job and think, oh God I hate this and live my life hating something you know what I mean? It ain’t for me. I mean [if] I don’t like it enough, no thank you...Um, like I don’t have a problem being in a job...a dead-end job as long as I like doing what I’m doing. If I don’t like what I’m doing, I don’t want to stay in something I’m not going to enjoy.

Rachael expresses the need to feel validated by her future employment, even at the expense of wage growth or promotion. Respondents whose employment evaluation is categorized as high affirmation express the need for personal satisfaction in their jobs, and sometimes value this over other, more objective criteria.

⁹ See Chapter 4 for a more extensive discussion and examples of this.

In contrast, families with low affirmation experiences feel invalidated, disrespected or otherwise demoralized when discussing employment.¹⁰ These families' sentiments can be further categorized into two main themes: incidences of disrespect via actors in the workplace, or stemming from a particular type of work or workplace. Brenda and Ron, a white, married PA couple in their 30s, provided many instances through which their employment circumstances were low-affirming. Both Brenda and Ron speak disparagingly about Ron's boss at his job, a shed-building company. Brenda calls the boss "a jerk", and Ron often describes being treated unfairly compared to his coworkers. During their involvement in the study, Ron was demoted and then laid off immediately following a pay raise to \$10.58/hour. Ron's boss offered to hire Brenda to clean his office at an under-the-table rate of \$11.75/hour, which caused Ron to feel even more animosity toward his employer, as he was being paid less per hour. However, Brenda quickly quit this job after receiving a personal check from Ron's boss paying her at a rate of only \$8/hour, as this was not the promised rate and was no longer "worth" the work effort. Because Brenda was making \$6.50/hour at a comparable housekeeping job right before her involvement with the study, it seems Brenda's motivation to quit concerned dishonesty and a broken promise rather than the rate of pay itself. In this case, the extra \$1.50/hour Brenda would have received for cleaning Ron's boss's office did not

¹⁰ Although having low-affirming work circumstances could be construed as carrying emotional costs, I define the affirmation dimension as distinct from costs (see below). Costs include the financial expenses associated with work, such as paying for transportation and childcare, or the potential economic repercussions of work, such as would result from sustaining an injury on the job or negotiating poor health in order to work.

outweigh the demoralizing experience of being lied to about her pay. Instead, Brenda opts for no income at all.

In other cases, the degree of disrespect families reported feeling from their employers caused them to leave their current jobs for lower-paying ones. Bonnie, a 21-year-old partnered, cohabiting, white mother of one from NC, quits her job at an independent pharmacy to take a comparable job at a chain grocery store pharmacy. Despite the chain store's higher pay and employer-provided health insurance benefits, Bonnie stays only two days before turning in her notice to quit yet again. Bonnie reports, "*Management was bad*", and the supervisor who was supposed to train her on her first day showed up two hours late. Bonnie returns to the independent pharmacy every day to ask for her job back, which she eventually gets. Bonnie says she will "*never quit [her original job] again*".

Reported disrespect in the workplace was not limited to treatment by management, bosses or supervisors, but also included a more generalized lack of support from co-workers and clients alike. Alicia, a mother of three from PA in her mid-twenties, works full-time as a certified nursing assistant at a nearby nursing home. Alicia complains about not being paid enough to work as hard as she does, as the nursing home is understaffed. While pregnant with her third child, Alicia says her coworkers are purposely helping her out less than they should. She also withstands physical and emotional assaults from residents of the nursing home. The ethnographer reports, "One of the women Alicia takes care of at the nursing home calls Alicia's children racist names". Alicia, who is white, has biracial children. Another resident "hit Alicia in the stomach twice and asked if she was

'knocked up'". In this case, the source of Alicia's disrespect comes less from one individual or boss and more from the general work environment.

Although respondents do not explicitly describe low affirmation employment in terms of family- or kin-like relationships as discussed above, families in low-affirmation jobs describe a distinct lack of support at work. Jaclyn, a 20-year-old single mother of an infant, is often frustrated by her coworkers. Jaclyn is a server at a major restaurant chain near a small college in NC. She reports working so much that she never has time to herself, yet her coworkers ask her to take their shifts all the time. The ethnographer constantly notes how "exhausted" and emaciated Jaclyn looks. Jaclyn responds, "*I punched my time card the other day and it was 43 [hours] and that was like in the middle of the week.*" Jaclyn tells the ethnographer about having to cancel an appointment with her doctor due to covering her coworker's shift. She describes another scenario, which summarizes the cause and extent of her work-life stressors:

And then I thought I was going to be able to rest all day yesterday and I got a phone call probably about 2:30pm, 'Can you come into work?' I was like, 'No, today is my day off,' I haven't had a day off in three weeks.

Jaclyn relays that she is upset because she feels her coworkers do not take work as seriously as she does. There is steady and frequent staff turnover at her job, perhaps due to overscheduling and the grueling nature of the work, but undoubtedly because the restaurant seasonally employs college students.¹¹ Jaclyn is eventually fired from this job

¹¹ High staff turnover is pretty indicative of the restaurant industry writ large. Jamie, a PA respondent likewise employed at a chain restaurant says she does not call her newest coworkers by their real names.

and begins work as a server at another chain restaurant. Jaclyn tells the ethnographer she prefers this job, despite lower tips, because there was “too much drama” at the other place. In contrast to high affirmation employment, the perceived in/actions of bosses, coworkers and others in low affirmation workplaces generally fail to provide respondents with respect, support and a sense of self-worth.

In addition to disrespect and lack of support in the workplace, families also allude to feeling demoralized by the limited and undesirable work options available to them. Yvonne, a twenty year-old African-American single mother in NC, is fired from her job at the local Wal-Mart. Despite saying she wouldn't “*stoop low*” to return there, Yvonne is once again employed by Wal-Mart close to the end of her study participation, as she is expecting her second child. Kathleen, a white NC mother of six plus a newborn infant, was employed at a local grocery store chain, but was forced to take time off to have her baby. When she returned to work, she was told they were overstaffed and no longer had a spot for her. Kathleen was “so desperate to work” that she told her supervisor she would “*work anywhere in the store*”. After applying unsuccessfully to other places such as a Lowe's chain hardware store, Kathleen told the ethnographer she is “going to have to work, even if it is [at] McDonalds”. Kathleen and Yvonne clearly express limits about where they aren't willing to work. They feel working at certain types of establishments – Wal-Mart, fast food – negatively affects their status or self-esteem, and these options are

She calls everyone “hun” until she is sure they will stay long enough to have made the effort of remembering their names worthwhile.

a last resort. Yvonne is unfortunately unable to maintain her ideals and returns to Wal-Mart to continue to support her family.

Fast food and retail were not uniformly regarded as low-affirming, as other respondents expressed satisfaction with working in the very same establishments Kathleen and Yvonne sought to avoid. Tonya, a 25 year-old, partnered, cohabiting, African-American mother of two, tells her ethnographer that she loves her job, “*Although a lot of people say ‘Oh I wouldn’t work at McDonalds’...to me it’s a paycheck [and] it’s more than I was getting when I was just sitting home*”. She admits “*dealing with the public*” can be challenging, and cites several instances of racism in her interactions with customers, but maintains, “*I really do enjoy it*”.

Lana, a 34-year-old single African-American mother of two who lives with her parents in NC, becomes very emotional when discussing her new job at Wal-Mart. Lana spends much of her participation in the study discussing how badly she hopes to find employment. She discusses the circumstances that led her to finally become employed after months of looking for work:

Well I had been in there before and filled the application out, but this time when I filled it out I called them every day and asked them to pull my application. And it just so happens that Wednesday last...I called and the lady that did the hiring answered the phone and set my interview up right then. And I just about cried, I’m serious. It meant that much to me.

Ethnographer: Why, why did you cry?

Lana: Because I completed so many applications and nobody actually ever gave me an interview. I was praying, please don’t make me have to go to Bojangles [a fast food restaurant]...I feel like I’m beyond that. I think I told you that before, that I didn’t

want anything to do with that. I didn't even want a convenience store, but God has looked out once again for me and oh, it's a blessing. I feel good about it.

In this case, Lana is happy to have a job at the very same employer another respondent feels she'd be "stooping" to work at. Lana, however, still draws limitations about working at a fast food establishment, and feels a job at Wal-Mart is "*a blessing*" in comparison. Through low affirmation sentiments, it is clear families feel the negative toll of compromising their values and pride in light of certain employment options, even when they are also "desperate" to work.

Low affirmation employment is also signified by respondents' indifference, disillusionment or the lack of enthusiasm, pride or satisfaction regarding their jobs or work options. Rather than express outright opposition to certain job prospects, respondents are jaded or discouraged with their employment options. For example, Tamara and her live-in boyfriend, Randy, are typically upbeat when talking about their hopes and dreams for the future, even when they describe the obstacles they face. Yet, when discussing Randy's job working under-the-table for a construction contractor in PA, Tamara, aged 18, sighed, "*It's something anyway...*" Both she and Randy, 21, are unemployed for the bulk of the study, although Tamara is working toward her associate degree in business. Tamara is consistently excited about her future employment prospects. Both she and Randy expect her to have many "good job" offers ahead of her. The couple's disappointment with Randy's attempt at under-the-table employment is palpable in comparison.

Disillusionment and disappointment with employment prospects manifest themselves in more subtle ways as well. Nicole, a 23-year-old, African-American, never-married mother of two living in PA, holds several jobs over her 28 months in the FLP. Her ethnographer notes that Nicole seems to renew interest in her personal appearance after landing a new job, but maintains a lack of enthusiasm about her work. The ethnographer speculates Nicole's lack of excitement about her job(s) is contingent on her receiving a less-than-desired amount of hours. Nicole says in order for a job to be a "good" one, she'd have to be paid at least \$8/hour and get 40 hours per week on her schedule. However, when the ethnographer discovers Nicole has received a clerical job working for the local YMCA that seemingly meets her good job requirements, Nicole refuses to elaborate beyond telling her the job is "*nothing important*". Nicole's lack of enthusiasm about even her "ideal" job is evident.

Affirmation is an important job quality dimension, as it attests to how the FLP families think about and select between the jobs available to them across these six nonmetropolitan counties. Families are able to achieve high-affirming employment through self-employment, or by identifying coworkers and workplaces that provide kin- or family-like relationships and social support. Families also identify enjoyment as a key aspect of a job that will be a "good" job for them. Conversely, low-affirming workplaces present respondents and their families with circumstances of disrespect, frustration and apathy, which can stem either from coworkers, or from the nature or type of work itself. The inclusion of the affirmation dimension provides a more comprehensive assessment of job quality, especially as high and low affirmation can provide families with the

necessary impetus to opt in or out of employment. A more extensive discussion of affirmation, including its interplay with the rewards dimension and its subsequent role in families' decisions about employment, follows in Chapter 4. This chapter will also address families' experiences with two high affirmation job types: self-employment and workplaces that are "like-family".

3.4.2 Consistency

Although consistency is a less emergent measure of employment quality than affirmation, it allows for comparison with other analyses and provides a more detailed and relative understanding of what constitutes consistent employment in low-income, nonmetropolitan environments. This composite measure reflects the degree to which respondents and other adults in the household change their employment circumstances. Consistency is comprised of two elements – un/employment status and length of job tenure – both of which have been used in previous literature to assess job quality. The FLP data provide the advantage of a monthly interview tempo, so this consistency measure captures monthly changes in employment status.¹² Thus, a family's employment consistency is determined by family members' monthly employment status as well as how long they hold the same job and how frequently they change jobs. Absences in respondents' employment due to the birth of the focal child do not count against families'

¹² Ethnographers visited families on a monthly or bimonthly basis and reviewed changes to the families' employment status if larger gaps occurred. Gaps of 6 months or longer routinely occurred between families' final follow-up interviews.

employment records, as pregnancy was a recruitment criterion for the FLP. Therefore, all families experience some employment disruption due to the focal child's birth.

As is the case with affirmation, the consistency metric has a range of variability. Due to the monthly interview tempo, the data capture more changes in employment status as they occur, rather than missing those changes due to more infrequent data collection. Therefore, high, medium and low levels of consistency are defined relative to each other and reflect the characteristics of the FLP sample. For example, families demonstrating completely stable employment – absolutely no transitions or changes during the interview period – are extremely rare. In order to more adequately reflect the typical consistency for FLP families, the high consistency designation actually includes several typologies. Included in this category are families with consistent tenure at one place of employment, or consistent unemployment, on the part of all earners in the household (adjusted for single and multiple-earner households). This category also includes those households making only one shift in their employment status such as from unemployment to one consistent job, changing jobs once or for having a job and then becoming unemployed for the duration of their participation in the study. High consistency also includes variable hours or schedules within the same occupation, as well as job transitions that involve returning to a formerly-held occupation, such as in the instance of formal or informal maternity leave.

Because the consistency dimension is meant to capture families' overall employment stability, high consistency families display employment experiences with the least amount of transitions and a low total number of different jobs held. Families within

the medium consistency category include families with slightly more job transitions. This category also includes families who have a member each in the high and low consistency category. Medium consistency families experience approximately two more transitions and hold two more jobs over the period of study than do high consistency families. Low consistency households experience very limited stability with respect to the source of employment. These families have higher numbers of total jobs worked and often do not experience the same employment status for more than a few months at a time.

Each of the three consistency categories contains an approximately equal proportion of families. The modal consistency configuration is high (n=28). Low consistency contains the second most families (n=24), followed by medium consistency (n=19). A total of five families maintain unemployment on the part of all employable adults for the study duration.¹³ The modal consistency in PA is high, whereas nearly equal numbers of families display medium and low consistency (see Table 4). Within the NC sample, relatively equal numbers of families display high, medium and low consistency configurations. The following examples illustrate typical family experiences across the three categories.

Low consistency households experience frequent employment transitions, high numbers of total jobs and shorter individual job tenure. Two respondents from the same

¹³ Although it is beyond the scope of these analyses, I will continue to explore the variation among families who maintain their unemployment throughout their participation in the FLP. One of these households, mentioned in more detail in the high consistency section below, receives disability payments on behalf of both adults in the household. Two NC families are enrolled in a workforce development program in order to qualify for public assistance. Another NC mother is also incarcerated during the study. The final unemployed household has very limited employment information, and the mother does not participate in the study for very long.

county in PA provide exemplars of variability within the low consistency category, due in part to their different levels of education and type of work desired. Allison, a white, PA mother in her early 20s, displays low consistency in employment throughout her 2½ year involvement with the FLP. When we meet her, Allison is pregnant and is working the third shift as security guard for a private company. She continues to work until she gives birth to her first and only child. Like many other study respondents, Allison then spends several months unemployed. When asked about her future plans for employment, she replies, *“I don’t know. I kinda like being at home, but sometimes I wish I was back at work. It all depends on how the day is going.”* Three months after the birth of her son, Allison takes a second-shift job at the front desk of a local resort. She works there for seven months, during which her schedule changes from 30 hours per week to full-time and back down to part-time as a result of the resort’s seasonal business.

Allison discusses finding temporary work due to the resort’s winter off-season. She takes a temporary job with a local manufacturing company, although this job only lasts a month because she can no longer work the second shift now that the father of her child also works this shift.¹⁴ Allison begins working for a chain housecleaning company, takes a part-time, evening job at a grocery store a few months later and another month later is not working at all. Before her involvement with the study concludes, Allison has taken a job as a cashier with a “Dollar Store”, quits this job less than two months later and begins to babysit out of her home for under-the-table pay. Although Allison’s partner

¹⁴ Although the child’s father consistently maintains a full-time job at a factory that manufactures pretzels, his company reassigns his shift (across first, second, and third shifts) several times over the course of the study.

displays relatively high employment consistency, save for having his shifts switched around, Allison changes jobs 6 times and is employed for 18 of the 31 months she participates in the FLP.

Desiree, a white, single-mother of two in her early 30s, also exhibits low consistency in her employment. Desiree, like Allison, goes through more than several jobs over her two-year involvement with the FLP. However, Desiree spends more time unemployed and actively looking for jobs than does Allison, perhaps because Desiree has specific criteria for the kinds of employment she will take. Desiree was able to find five jobs all within the medical office field, although three of these jobs were temporary assignments. Desiree voices her frustrations with looking for a job at almost every interview, saying she wants to work in the field for which she has trained. Prior to her involvement in the study, Desiree completed a year-long associates program that certified her as a medical office specialist. In order to remain eligible for her daycare subsidy while she is looking for employment, Desiree enrolls in a mandatory job-training program. Desiree has an on- and off-relationship with Thaddeus, the father of her second child. Thaddeus does not live in the same county as Desiree for half of the time that the household participates in the study. Thaddeus's sporadic employment and presence in Desiree's household also contribute to the household's low level of consistent employment.

Both Allison and Desiree display very low levels of employment consistency, as they change jobs at least five times over their involvement with the study. Yet Desiree's employment goals are stable, as she desires employment appropriate to her recently-

obtained educational credentials – her medical office certification. Allison, on the other hand, does not maintain a steady set of employment goals as she moves through various types of full- and part-time service sector employment. Allison expresses indecision when thinking about her employment goals, and ultimately chooses a job that will let her prioritize caregiving for her son. Thus, families with low consistency scenarios experience limited job longevity due to the negotiation of childcare schedules, the presence of inconsistent work schedules and other barriers noted in existing literature.

Yet, consistency can also be dictated by a respondent's desire for a particular type of job that meets their educational qualifications instead of or in addition to the job's schedule and hourly pay rate. The relative availability of employment also contributes to respondents' employment consistency. As Desiree's experience with job opportunities in medical offices illustrates, temporary work presented itself with the same relative frequency as permanent, full-time positions. Thus, lapses in Desiree's employment were driven by her desire for a consistent type of work that was not consistently available in the market.

High consistency employment, as discussed above, can apply to scenarios of employment or unemployment. Jessica and her partner Calvin, a white PA couple in their mid-30s, consistently receive disability payments for their anxiety and bipolar disorders, respectively, and do not pursue employment throughout the study. Jessica discusses the event that precipitated her anxiety diagnosis and subsequent disability receipt: she had a panic attack at work due to a long line of angry customers. Jessica worked at Wal-Mart prior to her participation in the study. Although she considers returning to work in her

conversations with the ethnographer, Jessica does not pursue employment during her tenure with the FLP. Calvin also remains unemployed, although he will occasionally drive people around in his car or perform an under-the-table house painting job for extra money. Calvin's mother also provides them with \$200/month. Despite the families' relatively low amount of income, they maintain a constant and consistent source of income.

Vera, a 28-year-old African-American mother of three living in NC, exemplifies one of the few stably employed, high consistency respondents in the FLP. She works at a major department store for the entirety of the two years she has participated in the study. Vera had already been employed with this department store for almost ten years when she begins interviews with the FLP, and she is one of the few study households to receive paid maternity leave.¹⁵ Vera is the sole income-earner for her household, and she often relies on her sister to pick up her children from school and daycare when she is scheduled for the second shift. Vera's extremely consistent employment does not come without sacrifice. Vera's thirteen year old daughter becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy during the study. Vera's daughter's father blames Vera's work schedule for keeping her out of the house when her daughter needed monitoring from acting "growny" with boys. Vera seems distraught over her daughter's pregnancy, as she maintains she thought she was doing "*everything to keep it from happening*". Vera's ethnographer writes,

¹⁵ The ethnographer reports that Vera did not expect to receive paid maternity leave from her job. She received 1/3 of her pay for the first six weeks after the birth of her daughter through a short-term disability at work.

“[Vera] blamed herself at first, but she said that she knew she needed to work to take care of the children.”

Other families maintain a high consistency categorization despite minor fluctuations in their employment status. Sarah, aged 20, and her partner William are the white, unmarried parents of three girls under age 5 in PA. Both Sarah and William each hold one job over the course of their participation in the study. William is stably employed by a local auto body shop, although his total hours worked fluctuated from week-to-week.¹⁶ Sarah is unemployed for most of the study, as she spends her days taking care of her children and, sometimes, her sister’s children, too. She takes a job at a fast food restaurant, but quits within weeks and does not become employed again for the remainder of the study. Sarah and William experience minimal changes to their employment status compared to other families, despite William’s fluctuating work hours and Sarah’s brief foray into fast food employment.

Households exhibiting medium levels of consistency experience more stability than families at low consistency levels, but have higher total jobs than families with high employment consistency. For example, Lena, a 39-year-old African-American mother, and her husband Martin, 46, hold a total of three jobs between them over the course of the study. At the beginning of the study, both are employed full-time by the NC Department of Transportation, although Martin’s work is a temporary assignment. After the birth of their son, the person Martin is filling in for returns to the position, and Martin

¹⁶ Sarah and William were difficult to categorize at first, as William was also spending part of his week helping his brother start his own car repair business. They could potentially be included in the medium consistency category with the inclusion of William’s “second job”.

begins working for a company that repairs and maintains ATM machines. Lena is eventually let go from her job for excessive absenteeism due to her infant son's many illnesses and ear infections. Lena continues to apply for jobs, but remains unemployed through the rest of the study. Martin continues to work for the same ATM repair company without any major interruption, although he sustains an injury at work that requires some time off for recovery. Lena and Martin's employment consistency is similarly stable to that of families' in the high consistency category, yet Lena and Martin hold a greater total number of jobs.

Other medium consistency households exhibit slightly more employment variation, yet do not display the extreme inconsistencies present in the low consistency category. Tonya, mentioned above, exhibits a relatively stable employment record, as she holds only two different jobs during her time in the FLP. Tonya is enrolled in community college and is unemployed until her partner, Cole, aged 40, loses his full time job with a construction company. Tonya then takes the job at McDonalds, which she keeps for 6 months. She remains unemployed for almost a year, and then begins working at her children's daycare center. She keeps this second job for at least eight months, as she is still working here at her last follow-up interview. Her partner Cole begins working two part-time jobs the month after he loses his first job. He quits one part-time job at an equipment rental store because he "felt he was being used by the company".¹⁷ Cole retains one part-time job at a local hardware store. Three months later, Tonya says Cole

¹⁷ Cole's sentiments reflect low affirmation. Not enough information is given to say with certainty that being taken advantage of is Cole's sole reason for resignation.

has been “working in the potato fields with migrant workers from Florida.” Two months later, Cole is out of the household after holding a total of four jobs in 13 months.

Tonya and Cole exhibit a medium level of consistency, as Tonya’s employment is relatively stable. Tonya transitions from months of employment to months of unemployment, and has only two jobs over 32 months. In contrast, her partner Cole exhibits much higher variation in employment. Although he is consistently employed, he moves through 4 different jobs in a little over a year. Taking both Tonya’s and Cole’s employment experiences into account, the household as a whole exhibits medium consistency.

The consistency dimension has important implications for understanding the role of job transitions for low-income families. First, prior literature indicates voluntary changes in employment are correlated with economic mobility, namely, families change jobs when another, higher paying employment option is available (Poppe, Strawn and Martinson 2004). This is not necessarily the case for families in the FLP, as some respondents elect to leave their jobs for reasons other than economic gain or “trading up” for a higher paying job. Instead, FLP respondents may choose to leave higher paying jobs for others offering a calmer work environment, better hours, preferred working location (i.e. indoors v. outdoors, closer to home) and other advantages.

The consistency dimension also helps capture the frequency with which families must change jobs to maintain a consistent income. Families’ work schedules are often subject to change by their employer, forcing families to move to a new employer when their hours are reduced or changed too drastically. Thus, families might not realize

upward economic mobility because they cannot ride out the volatility of these jobs long enough to accumulate the job tenure necessary for wage growth and promotion in lower-wage jobs (Andersson, Holzer and Lane 2005). The implications of these voluntary job transitions should be noted in future employment quality evaluations, as consistent employment in and of itself does not indicate high quality employment.

3.4.3 Rewards

The rewards dimension is a composite measure of the most frequently used objective criteria of employment quality – wages and the presence of healthcare, life insurance and other monetary benefits. The rewards dimension also includes additional criteria identified by families, such as the use of a company truck or reduced rates on products or services. In households with any employment transitions, particularly those with low or medium employment consistency, the rewards dimension reflects the average wage and benefit level of all jobs held throughout the study, thus adjusting for any job transitions. For example, if a respondent reports having a job with high rewards for only one month followed by a low reward job for the rest of the study, the high reward month does not count significantly toward the household's overall reward level. Conversely, the average reward amount is taken for households holding multiple different jobs for similar durations of time. Employment rewards are distinct from affirmation, as rewards are limited to financial, monetary, cash-like and in-kind benefits and resources.

The high rewards category includes jobs with hourly wages surpassing \$8 in 2006 dollars (about \$9.11/hour in 2012) a relatively high wage given the characteristics of the

FLP sample.¹⁸ High rewards jobs may also offer employer-provided health insurance, life insurance, paid vacation time or additional benefits. Medium rewards categories include jobs with median salaries of \$6 to 8/hr (\$6.83 to \$9.11 in 2012). These jobs may offer benefits as well. Low rewards jobs include salaries below \$6/hour, i.e., minimum wage or less without any additional health insurance or other benefits. Again, Table 4 displays the results by state. Most households are classified into the medium rewards category (n=29), followed by high (n=20) and low (n=15) rewards. The following paragraphs address the variation and patterns present in the data.

Families reporting high rewards employment tend to fall into one of two categories. Either they have obtained jobs that resemble “good” jobs according to standard evaluation metrics, or have become entrepreneurial in order to create opportunities for themselves. Families holding high reward jobs tended to work at hospitals, as craftspeople, or in construction. An example of a “good” job, high reward family, Jane, 29, and Rick, 35, are the white, married parents of two children aged 10 and 2. Jane works full-time as an intake administrative assistant in the ER at a local hospital. Her husband supervises inmates at a PA state prison. They both have jobs that offer health benefits and reported salaries of approximately \$15.79/hour.¹⁹ Jane sometimes works more than full-time because the hospital is understaffed.²⁰ Jane’s and Rick’s monthly household income is one of the highest reported in the FLP, and they are also

¹⁸This is in part because the recruitment criteria for the ethnographic sample restricted household incomes to 200% of the poverty level or below.

¹⁹ Jane and Rick technically exceeded the recruitment criteria of the FLP.

²⁰ Due to budget cuts, the hospital fired some of its staff. Jane is often called in to work again as soon as she gets home from a scheduled shift.

one of the few households with completely stable employment throughout the entire period of the study.

Jobs in construction or landscaping also put families into the high reward category, although these jobs did not uniformly offer health or life insurance benefits. Although Lisa, 22, is not employed, her partner Greg, 23, is consistently employed throughout the study and provides financial support to Lisa and their three children. Greg holds a total of three jobs in the construction field in 37 months, and each pays at least \$10/hour. Greg's second job also provides health benefits.²¹

High reward families also identified additional financial benefits that made some jobs better options than others. Darlene, a white mother of three in NC, does not work, but her boyfriend is employed as a construction supervisor. The ethnographer reports Darlene is "very proud" of her boyfriend's job, as it offers him use of a company truck and phone. Darlene's boyfriend's former job was located over an hour's drive away. Her boyfriend was also not compensated for gas or wear-and-tear on his personal vehicle. His new job is only a 20 minute drive away and he no longer has to use his personal vehicle. Although financial rewards like company vehicles are not counted in objective employment evaluations, these in-kind benefits clearly influence families' choice of employment.

Some high reward families had a more entrepreneurial approach to employment and created high-paying opportunities for themselves. Darlene and her partner, mentioned

²¹ Greg quits this job because it is an indoor job and he prefers working outside.

above, began selling salvaged materials from his work's construction site to make additional money.²² Sharon, a 30 year-old married African-American mother of a son, used her skills as a massage therapist to provide her family with financial stability while she pursued her nursing degree. Shortly after beginning interviews with the FLP, Sharon had secured a job as a nurse at a hospital in NC. She prides herself in being the breadwinner and thinks her husband is "getting credit he does not deserve" in terms of being the provider.²³ Sharon put herself through full-time nursing school with little reported help from her husband. She holds a massage therapy certification and practiced massage therapy part-time while attending school. When asked why she decided to become a massage therapist, Sharon replies:

I always wanted to be a nurse, but when I first got out of school I went to Urgent Care and volunteered one day and I saw so much blood and gore and guts and stuff and I got sick. It just made me really sick and I said, 'I don't think I can be a nurse.'

In Sharon's case, her skills as a massage therapist allowed her to maintain a source of income while she trained (and otherwise prepared herself) for a more specialized, high reward career.²⁴

²² The family appears to be doing well financially as a result of this additional income, as the ethnographer notes the purchase of at least two cars during the family's participation in the FLP.

²³ Sharon makes this clear through multiple stories. She shares that her husband will invite his extended family out to dinner, but he neglects to bring his wallet. Instead, he will reach under the table and have Sharon give him money to pay for the meal. Sharon also mentions her husband's lack of support while she was working and in nursing school. She says, "I felt like I got, you know...kind of lip service [from her husband], like, 'I hope you do good on your test tomorrow – can you bring me my plate?'" (laughs) you know."

²⁴ Sharon reported making at least \$60/hour as a massage therapist. This rate is firmly at the lower end of the spectrum for massage therapy services, which may indicate the restrictive role of geography in Sharon's ability to competitively price this service.

Creating one's own career opportunities is also a theme in Patty and Christopher's employment story. The married parents of three children in PA, Patty and Christopher enjoy a traditional, male-breadwinner arrangement with Patty homeschooling the couple's oldest daughter. Christopher is a successful and self-employed electrician who advertises his services in the local telephone book and on the radio. Prior to this career, Christopher worked several jobs he disliked or required that he drive home several hours every night if he wanted to see his family. Patty recounts Christopher's employment before becoming an electrician:

He used to work in the steel mill in Johnstown. He hated it so bad. I felt so bad for him, because he was depressed. He'd come home every night like walking slumped over and just all... So I prayed, you know I'd pray about it and said Lord, help to find something or be free of this job, or something, find something else. And then he got laid off, and we're thinking... Maybe we shouldn't have asked for that, but a week later they called and said he could go to school for free.

Because Christopher was laid off by a steel mill closing, he qualified for "\$20,000 worth of free education" at a local technical school in order to learn a new trade. In marked contrast to his job in the steel mill, Christopher's enthusiasm for this career is evident through his branding of himself as "The Christian Electrician". The ethnographer notes Christopher's work truck is decorated in a motif appropriate to this moniker, and Christopher jokes about providing a "free baptism with every service".²⁵

Medium rewards families, in contrast, have salaries of approximately \$6-8/hour (\$7 to \$9.50 in 2012 dollars) and may, in some cases, receive health or other types of

²⁵ Christopher's job is also classified in the high-affirming category.

benefits. Medium rewards employment was the modal type of employment for FLP families in general. Within NC, medium rewards families are almost twice as prevalent (n=16) as the next largest category (high rewards, n=9).²⁶ Medium rewards families hold employment in nursing homes, fast food restaurants, at convenience and retail stores and on farms.

Andrea, an African-American mother of five in NC, holds several occupations typical of medium rewards families. Over 27 months, Andrea works in part- and full-time capacity as a nursing assistant for three different nursing homes. She also briefly works at a fast food restaurant and a childcare center. Andrea's average salary across her various jobs is \$7/hour. When asked about how hard it is to find a job in her county, Andrea replies:

It's kind of hard to find a job, but if you do find [one, it's] the pay. The pay is not good at all.

Ethnographer: What kind of pay do they get?

Andrea: Even like me, I work for this Health Care. They pay \$7 an hour, but you get 24 hours a week. Well you can get 24 hours. Sometimes it's just 18 and stuff like that. And with the children I have, that's nothing, you know...

Andrea maintains that most jobs in the area pay \$7 to 9/hour, but better paying jobs can be found near larger cities such as Fayetteville and Raleigh. Andrea mentions a cousin who makes over \$11/hour at a job comparable to hers in Fayetteville. At her last

²⁶ In comparison, PA is more or less evenly distributed between high, medium and low reward categories.

interview, Andrea is working two 12-hour shifts on the weekends as a CNA in Raleigh. She makes nearly \$14/hour and is planning a permanent move closer to work.

Families in PA and NC alike echo Andrea's sentiments regarding the deficit of higher-paying jobs available to them. Melissa, a 27-year old mother of a boy in PA says, *"Most of the jobs in this area are minimum wage or they'll pay you more but they won't give you the hours to give you benefits"*. Therese, an unemployed African-American mother of a daughter, is a Work First²⁷ program participant in NC. She agrees that most of the jobs in her area do not pay more than minimum wage, and then adds, *"That's a complaint all around the U.S., you know. Just pay people enough to support themselves and their families."* Maggie, a white PA mother of one in her early twenties says, *"There's no jobs here...I mean you have to have some kind of a degree to do anything anymore. Trying to find a job around here is like finding a needle in a haystack."*

According to Maggie, who began the study with a \$7.50/hour job working at factory, the jobs that are available offer wages too low to also warrant the difficulty of work required.

Families who are unable secure high rewards jobs in the local market or move to higher paying opportunities elsewhere often compensate by working longer shifts and/or multiple jobs. Shelby, an African-American, 20-year-old mother of a newborn son in NC, terminated her participation in the FLP after obtaining a job at a fast food restaurant.

Shelby tells the ethnographer she is working 6 days a week, and cannot find the time to

²⁷ Work First is North Carolina's version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Work First provides recipient parents with short-term training and other services to help them become employed and self-sufficient. This program imposes work requirements and a two-year eligibility limit on most recipients (NCDHHS 2012).

participate in the study as a result. Pamela, a white, 21-year-old PA mother of two, works in an assisted-living home for mentally and physically challenged adults. Pamela proudly tells the ethnographer she often works “overnights”, which are shifts upwards of 12 or 14 hours. Pamela makes \$7.90/hour, but mentions receiving “time and a half” for overtime pay.²⁸ Alivia, an African-American NC mother of 4, credits her second job as the reason she is able to “get the children most of what they wanted for Christmas”. Alivia works as a CNA during the week and then sells refreshments at a flea market from 9am to 6pm both weekend days. Alivia says having two jobs makes it difficult for her to spend any time with her family. She expresses the desire for a “better job with benefits...like office type work”, but says she needs to complete her GED before she is qualified for that kind of work.

Few FLP families maintain low rewards as defined here, as most families earn at least a \$6 wage. However, some families experience wage instabilities that keep them in the low rewards category. Additionally, low rewards families hold jobs that do not and will not offer health insurance or other benefits. Low reward families tend to work in food service, as home health care providers, in retail or convenience stores or as childcare providers in institutional settings or in private homes, including their own.

Two young Pennsylvania mothers illustrate the low reward circumstances of food-service employment. Glenda, an African American 19-year-old PA mother,

²⁸ Because she works full-time hours but per company policy is technically not considered a “full-time” employee, it is unclear whether Pamela actually receives any overtime pay. Full-time employees at her workplace also receive health benefits, and Pamela reports there are only ~7 such positions in the entire company. The ethnographer notes Pamela always seems to be working, especially overnights.

maintains responsibility for a household including her newborn son, her little sister, her boyfriend's young daughter and an unrelated teenaged girl. Like families in the medium rewards category, Glenda initially works two jobs to make ends meet, but quits one job at a children's toy store chain because, "*I never hated a job like this one*".²⁹ Glenda is also a server at a chain buffet restaurant. Glenda is technically paid a server's wage of \$2.83/hour and relies on tips to bring her salary up to minimum wage.³⁰ As the study progresses, Glenda reports she is gradually making less money, working less hours and "doesn't know how she's getting by" on her earnings. Glenda believes the restaurant is doing less business because the nearby Wal-Mart changed locations, so people are not coming in to eat before and after they shop. Another PA mother, Marcia, makes a little less than \$200/week at a local sandwich shop. According to her schedule, Marcia works 5 shifts per week, which puts her wage under \$7.29/hour. Marcia, who is white, 20-years-old and the mother of a newborn son, lives in her parents' trailer and relies on familial financial support and childcare to offset her expenses.

Families also experience low rewards employment within the retail sector. Joyce, who lives with her parents and siblings, is the 20 year-old mother of a daughter. Joyce is employed by a discount department store at a wage of \$6.25/hour. Joyce's schedule fluctuates with the seasons such that she works the most during the winter holidays and summers and less the rest of the year. Joyce eventually quits her job because she hears

²⁹ An example of the influence of low affirmation on voluntary job termination.

³⁰ Because Glenda works at a buffet restaurant, her server duties consist mainly of refilling drinks and taking away empty plates. Unfortunately, it is likely her customers tip quite modestly, as she does not take orders or deliver meals to the table and thus does not provide a "full service" dining experience.

rumors that her store is closing. She begins caregiving for a cousin's baby for four hours a day, and is paid \$120 under-the-table every two weeks. Other families transition from paid work out of the home to under-the-table, in home caregiving for friends and family. Amanda, a white 27-year-old mother of one in PA, moves through several low reward jobs before choosing to babysit for two clients for 20-30 hours per week.³¹ Paid childcare is an income-earning strategy for several mothers in the FLP, regardless of the employment status of others in their households. In-home, informal childcare work as an alternative to formal employment has been noted elsewhere in the literature (Venkatesh 2006). However, childcare work seems to be a sustainable strategy for short periods of time only, and not a permanent employment option. All reported childcare wages are well below the 2006 minimum wage.

Not unlike most other scholarly assessments of job quality, the rewards dimension considers jobs' wage per hour and the presence of employer-provided benefits. The rewards experiences of NC and PA families attest to the limited employment opportunities nonmetropolitan families face, as well as the alternative strategies families adopt to make ends meet. In 2003-2006, most FLP families earned wages between \$6-8 dollars per hour (\$7 and \$9.50/hour in 2012 dollars) and did not receive any employer-provided benefits. Higher-earning families relied on self-employment and entrepreneurial ventures, or secured scarce jobs in higher-paying industries such as construction. During

³¹ Amanda's live-in partner and father of her child is ten years older than her. He seems to be stably employed throughout the study, but no specific information about his employer is given.

the time of their participation in the study, a select few families experienced both high consistency and high rewards in their employment.

In order to close the gap between actual and desired income, respondents relied on alternative goods and benefits. Some FLP families also actively sought out jobs that provided “bonus” wages, such as opportunities for overtime or night shift wage premiums. In one exception to the inclusion of additional benefits, family members employed in food service, either as servers or in food preparation, did not include their shift meals or discounted food as additional perks of their employment. Although they mention utilizing free or discounted food at work, families think differently about these additional benefits. This is especially interesting given other research reveals a higher rate of food stamp program participation for eligible nonmetropolitan households as compared to their metro counterparts (McConnell and Ohls 2000). FLP households simply do not include food-associated benefits in the same category as other, cash-like resources. Alternatively, these benefits are of a secondary nature due to families’ food stamp receipt. Either way, they do not function as an employment incentive.

Nonetheless, existing measures of job quality should consider additional financial benefits such as use of company vehicles and cell phones or reduced pricing on goods or services (e.g. heating oil). These additional benefits help families defer expenses and

provide an added incentive for certain jobs, given the limited range of employment options and wages in these nonmetropolitan counties.³²

3.4.4 Costs

This dimension captures the perceived, potential and actual financial costs of employment, including expenditures associated with becoming employed such as childcare and transportation. Additionally, this dimension includes costs to household members' well-being, specifically their physical and mental health, and subsequent effects on households' economic stability. High costs include substantial, life-altering risks that have occurred or are probable. Medium costs include inconveniences that are problematic and potentially discouraging to families, but are not life-altering or life-threatening. Families classified within the low costs category do not identify any of the above. High costs appeared relatively infrequently in the sample (n=5), with the vast majority reporting medium (n=20) and low (n=42) costs. The majority of PA families report low costs, with only (n=9) families in the high and medium categories. In contrast, NC families were more evenly distributed across medium (n=13) and low (n=16) costs. Only three NC families reported high costs.

The vast majority of FLP households do not identify any risks or costs when discussing employment. Yet, five households encounter high cost scenarios. Although

³² As mentioned above, respondents in PA and NC frequently noted the scarcity of higher-paying jobs and of jobs in general. Notably, job scarcity has been identified by low-income families living in 10 urban areas post-Great Recession (and post- federal minimum wage increase) (Chaudry, Pedroza and Sandstrom 2012). The comparability of FLP families' experiences in 2003-2006 to urban families post-Great Recession attests to how limited nonmetropolitan families' employment options really are.

these cases are the exception and not the rule, these experiences are not isolated and may offer some insight into how work's costs motivate families to weigh their employment options. Lucy, a white PA mother of five in her late 30s, experiences several health-compromising events during her tenure with the FLP. Lucy's two most recent pregnancies were associated with blood clots in her legs and resulted in Lucy being put on blood thinning medication. Forced by her illness to quit jobs at a "dollar" store and, later, a fast food restaurant, financial need later forces Lucy back to work. She is hired back at the dollar store at a rate of \$6.25/hour despite her previous ten years of experience with the company. Lucy's husband is employed by several places simultaneously, including a factory that makes Easter grass, but he and Lucy together do not earn enough to put them over 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. Lucy continues to work, despite risks to her health and her life, because her husband loses part of his own income to a child support order for his teenaged daughter from a previous relationship.

Most families falling under the high risk category sustain mild and/or major injuries while on the job. A family from NC exemplifies one such scenario. Mary's 35-year-old husband is injured due to repetitive motion and lifting too much at work, and cannot take time off to heal. Mary reports she can see the knot in her husband's back, and she can tell he's in pain all the time. She says she worries about him because he's, "*...Not to the point where he is disabled, but he if he keeps going like he is, I'm afraid he's gonna be*". She says he takes ibuprofen to get through the day. Lena's husband Martin, mentioned above, sustains an injury when an ATM machine he was in the process of

repairing falls on top of him. Martin has to miss work for several weeks in order to recover.

Costs are not limited to physical health. Although reported to a lesser extent, employment directly affected respondents' mental health.³³ Jessica, mentioned above with her partner Calvin, is currently receiving SSDI for anxiety and hasn't worked since September of 2002. Though Jessica was once a self-proclaimed "excellent" employee at a major department store, a serious panic attack brought on by worker animosity and a line of customers has effectively removed Jessica from the work force. Although Jessica mentions trying to get off SSDI and get back to work, she hasn't taken any steps toward employment by the end of her participation in the study.

Other families live under constant threat that a severe physical or mental injury might occur. Abe, the boyfriend of Emma and father of Krissy, works at a plastics and chemical manufacturing plant in PA. He acknowledges the work is risky, but he says it is the highest paying job he can find in the area without having his high school diploma. During an interview, Abe discloses all of the workplace safety precautions in place to prevent chemical fires and explosions from happening. Abe discusses in detail coworkers who have gotten injured at work, including a man who did not realize something had spilled on him until he had third degree burns. During the course of this interview conversation, Emma tells the ethnographer that she only has to work part-time now that

³³ It is important to note the difference between employment-driven costs to respondents' mental health and low affirmation. Although a low affirmation job offers little to no emotional actualization, this is different than having an emotionally costly job. Jessica's case illustrates the direct cost of work – a panic attack resulting in a diagnosable, mental condition and her subsequent unemployment.

Abe has this better-paying job. Abe says he took this job because, “*I wanna excel and do good for the money and stuff.*” He lists paying off debt and purchasing a home as goals for the immediate future.

Medium costs include other types of discouraging or limiting circumstances that are identified by the household, but are not categorized as life-altering or life-threatening. The most frequently listed costs to employment in this category include the expenses of childcare and travel that result from employment. For example, Lauren, a white, single mother living with her parents in PA, applied for jobs located up to an hour’s drive away because they were the highest-paying jobs she could find. Lauren gets a job through a friend’s referral and takes this temporary job at a factory located a 40-minute drive away. She makes \$10/hour, but she stays at the job for only a month despite its relatively high hourly wage. For many families, the added expenses of gasoline and car upkeep are too prohibitive to warrant a long commute, even when wages are relatively high.

Katie, a white NC mother whose husband maintains consistent employment throughout the study, has a conversation with the ethnographer about the costs of returning to work:

I have thought about it and have figured up how much I would have to be paid to go back to work and there’s nowhere around here that will do that. I mean daycare, it would be \$200 a week...[my daughter]’s not [potty] trained, they charge me \$97, you might as well say \$100 and [for my older daughter] the same thing. And there’s no one around here that, if I were to go back to work making \$9 an hour, I’d bring home \$30 after paying daycare.

Samantha, a mother of three living in PA, echoes Katie's observation more generally. She explains the cost-benefit argument she has before she decides to take a job:

Like there are jobs around here and I could take em but by the time...I have to pay for gas and a babysitter, by the time I pay that and I pay my rent...I have no money...So it's like you can go get this job and have no money or you can just look and wait...for a job that you'll actually have money and just go through your little welfare classes to find a job.

Though she applied to start school two months after making the above statement, Samantha also applied for a Certified Nursing Assistant position at a hospital in her county. If she gets the job, she will still attend school on a part-time basis instead of full-time. The hospital will pay \$13/hour to start. Samantha explains her decision to apply for this job when she says, *"If you can find a job for \$15, or even \$11, you better take that job and run"*.

The costs families encounter throughout their employment experiences should be included in job quality evaluation criteria, as employment may pose risks to physical and mental health, household budgets or other indicators of families' well-being. As illustrated through the FLP households' experiences, families may either be motivated to maintain employment despite potentially high costs, or may forgo employment altogether because of the costs associated. In the case of physical or mental harm, the high risks associated with certain kinds of employment may also have adverse effects on families' long term earnings potential if and when severe injuries occur. Mary's household, for example, may suffer longer term economic risks if her husband's back injury becomes a disability. Because of a panic-attack-inducing experience at work and an ongoing anxiety

disorder, Jessica's employment options and earnings potential have been limited, at least for the foreseeable future. Accounting for the costs of employment, even as they pertain to families' negotiation of childcare or increased travel expenditures, may provide a more accurate measure of employment quality as these costs affect families' ability and willingness to retain individual jobs.

3.4.5 Trajectory

Longitudinal data provide important information about households' overall economic mobility as well as their longer-term patterns of workforce participation. The trajectory dimension explored here attempts to capitalize on the FLP's longitudinal data as well as provide a comparative dimension to other employment quality evaluation strategies. Thus, the trajectory measure includes an overall assessment of the household's longitudinal pattern of employment, unemployment and economic mobility. Three trajectories – upward, downward and no change – are considered. This section will provide an overview of each of the three trajectories. A more extensive discussion of the degree of variation and patterns present across upward and no change trajectories follows in Chapter 5. [Please also see Figures 4 & 5 below for additional information regarding trajectories by state and pattern].

Upward trajectories include households which experience increased earnings and/or report better employment circumstances over time. These households' overall economic outcomes can be categorized as moving in a positive direction, and no significant concerns about economic stability arise. Upward trajectories account for nearly 27% of the sample, indicating that many families find themselves on better

financial footing over time. Downward trajectory households experience a job loss or significant economic downgrade. Downward trajectories comprise 17% of the sample. No change trajectories involve two types of economic trajectories. Families in this category may experience no major alteration of their employment status or overall economic standing. Alternatively, households within the no change category may experience substantial shifts in employment and economic circumstances throughout the study, resulting in no net change despite gains and losses throughout the period of observation. The *no change* category is the single largest category, comprising over half of all families.³⁴ The following discussion addresses each subcategory and exemplar households.

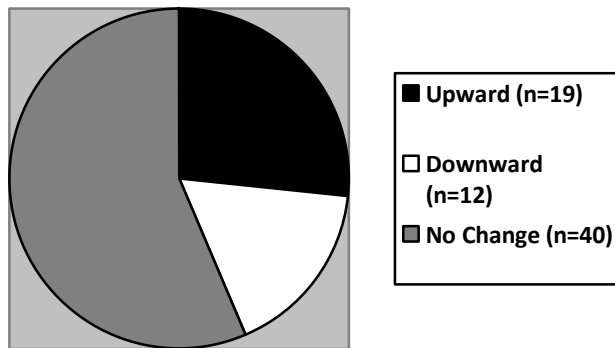


Figure 3: FLP Trajectories

³⁴ This dimension can be paired with the consistency dimension in order to distinguish between stable and oscillating no change trajectories for individual families. For example, a family with high consistency and a no change trajectory experienced employment stability over time, versus a family with low consistency and a no change trajectory.

Families experiencing upward economic trajectories did so by moving from unemployment to employment, locating a higher-paying job, or through a raise in pay or increase in their scheduled hours. Other families realized upward economic mobility by adding a second income to the household. Clarissa, a white 29 year-old unmarried mother, her boyfriend Cary, 35, and their three children had an upward trajectory due to the stability of Cary's employment and the addition of Clarissa's employment. Throughout the entirety of the study, Cary was employed with a company that installs electric and water lines, and his income supported the family. Clarissa worked to obtain her Commercial Driver's License (CDL) and began a part-time job as a substitute school bus driver. This kind of modest increase in income and subsequent economic well-being is a consistent theme in the upward trajectory families. Rather than experience exponential gains, many families found themselves on slightly better footing by the study's end.

Bobbi and her husband, Ryan, both white, also experienced a relatively steady upward trajectory, although this NC family's circumstances seem a little tenuous and on the brink of change by the study's end. Bobbi, who began the study at age 16, was already married to her husband, Ryan, four years her senior. Ryan begins the study working at an auto tune-up shop. He is laid off and collects unemployment for several months until he gets a new job at a local furniture store through family connections. Ryan's new job offers health benefits, overtime pay and paid vacation after 90 days. The couple and their children maintain residence with Bobbi's mother first, and then with Ryan's parents, where they have no responsibility for bills or rent. Bobbi, who is formally unemployed for the entirety of the study, reports making nearly \$1000/month

babysitting her cousin's son.³⁵ Bobbi says this arrangement will end soon, however, because the cousin wants to return to school and Bobbi refuses to watch the child beyond a certain range of hours.

Because Bobbi and Ryan have no financial responsibilities in their most current living arrangement and maintain steady incomes from their respective employment, they are at the known peak of their financial trajectory during their participation in the FLP. With the potential loss of Bonnie's income and Ryan's period of unemployment, the family's upward trajectory may actually look more like a variable trajectory over a longer period of observation.

Families in the downward trajectory designation include families with declining employment and economic circumstances throughout the period of observation. Again, these trajectories, like the other dimensions, are constrained to the scope of the FLP data. Thus, a family's trajectory might look very different given an additional year or ten. Joyce, the young mother included in the discussion of low rewards above, exemplifies a typical downward trajectory. Joyce exhibits medium consistency in her employment, as she experiences several employment transitions during her involvement with the study. She begins the study with a full-time job making almost \$9/hour, and "feels like she has a better job than most of her friends because they work at department stores and have no benefits". Joyce does not return to her original place of employment after the birth of her child, but instead takes a full-time cashier job which pays almost \$2 less per hour. Her

³⁵ Bobbi might be paid to watch the child by a social service agency. She also says she has custody of the child, whose biological parents are in the midst of a custody battle, so she may receive a stipend for serving as his foster parent.

hours are gradually reduced at this job until she decides to babysit for under-the-table cash instead.

Joyce's employment experiences reflect the vast majority of families' experiences in this category. Although families also experience downward trajectories due to complete unemployment, families are just as often underemployed, as they cannot rely on their current places of employment for a consistent amount of scheduled hours. Families' solicited definitions of "good" jobs reflect the volatility many of them face with respect to maintaining a consistent number of work hours in their weekly schedules. Nicole, for example, as mentioned in the low affirmation section above, insists a good job must consistently offer a full-time, 40 hour per week schedule in addition to modest minimum wage.

Other downward trajectories also include the complete loss of a job, or the loss of one earner's employment in a multiple-earner household. In Jaclyn's case – a NC mother also mentioned in the low affirmation discussion – lowered earnings from her serving job motivate her to find an additional source of income in the form of a second job. Jaclyn's experience represents another type of downward trajectory, having to work multiple jobs to maintain the same degree of earnings from a previous, single job.

No change families experience no net change in their economic status due either to relative stability or to periods of employment volatility. Of the forty families within this category, twenty seven display sign display stability while the remaining thirteen experience significant oscillations in their employment and economic status. Jane and Rick's household, previously mentioned, is an exemplar of the stable *no change*

trajectory. Both Jane and Rick retain the same jobs, hours and rate of pay throughout the entirety of the study. Jane and Rick also exhibit high consistency, as they hold their respective jobs at the hospital and a state prison throughout their participation in the study.

Families like Jane and Rick's maintain the same general employment configurations, hours and earnings throughout the entirety of their participation in the study. When accompanied by high reward and/or affirmation, this trajectory-type is favorable despite not being classified as upward. Thus employment that combines circumstances of high consistency, high reward and stable trajectory would indicate a very high quality job. However, families classified as stable, no change trajectory families are qualitatively different than families in the oscillating, no change category. Families falling into the latter category experience job and income transitions throughout their tenure with the FLP, and thus, experience more employment chaos than their counterparts.

The case of Mandi and her partner, Franklin – discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 5 – epitomizes a highly variable trajectory resulting in no net economic change. Although Mandi and Franklin's job status and economic standing are remarkably similar at the beginning and end of their participation in the study, Mandi experienced several job transitions and bouts of unemployment throughout this period. Mandi's trajectory seems to indicate a lack of consistency and, potentially, quality of employment. Jane and Rick, in comparison, do not have to manage any changes in employment or income and can anticipate their earnings from month to month. Thus, although families in the no change category have no net growth or loss in their employment or economic status,

variability in employment and/or earnings may have longer term impacts on families' economic mobility. Although it is beyond the scope of these data, a longer period of observation might lend the possibility to test for meaningful differences in these types of trajectories.

The trajectory dimension allows for a comparison of families' overall economic progress, or lack thereof, with similar approaches such as "work pathways" (Yoshikawa et. al 2006). However, the trajectory dimension is purposefully meant to be a simple, clear assessment of families' employment experiences in sum, as the period of observation for the FLP is only 24 months on average. The trajectory dimension should be assessed in conjunction with affirmation, consistency, rewards and costs in order to more holistically evaluate a particular family's employment narrative.

3.5 Discussion

Although scholars have learned a tremendous amount from existing approaches to evaluating job quality, these metrics can be improved – particularly for workers in low-income families – through the consideration of a broader and more comprehensive assessment. Previous scholarly evaluations of employment quality, including those using longitudinal, qualitative data, tend to focus on exclusively objective measures of jobs' economic rewards. Low-wage jobs in particular are typically not scrutinized beyond economic criteria, although non-economic criteria may be just as salient for the experiences of low-wage workers. Second, studies of job quality rely largely on predetermined metrics and quantitative, survey approaches. Scholars should expand

working definitions of job quality to include the subjective experiences of families and workers.

Jobs are also situated and embedded within family and other non-employment responsibilities. Due to a lack of discretionary income, workers in low-income families face considerable constraints when balancing work and family. The presence of such considerations as precarious childcare arrangements, mandatory appointments with social services and nonstandard work schedules, for example, may cause workers in low-income families to evaluate job quality with respect to these tradeoffs.

Nonmetropolitan environments also warrant special attention. The rural economy has experienced an expanding service industry resulting in a higher incidence of low-skill, low-wage jobs. Higher-wage jobs are more available in urban areas, which is problematic for nonmetro families without reliable transportation and lower levels of education. The characteristics of nonmetropolitan poverty are also noteworthy, as rural poverty tends to be more extreme and chronic than urban poverty, is coupled with a higher incidence of work within households, and afflicts traditional two parent households to the same degree as single parent households. Given the range of limitations nonmetropolitan low-income families face, families consider measures of employment quality that, at times, diverge from scholarly assessments.

Through a grounded theory examination of qualitative, longitudinal data from 71 nonmetropolitan families, these analyses provide a more accurate and comprehensive framework for evaluating job quality. The analyses identify five dimensions by which low-income families assess their specific employment needs, and in turn, the relative

quality of their jobs. A subjective, more emergent measure, *affirmation* reflects the degree to which families associate their employment with intangible benefits including empowerment, validation and enthusiasm. The majority of FLP families cite experiences that place their jobs in the low affirmation category: 27 out of 36 families in PA and 26 out of 35 in NC hold low-affirming jobs. However, families across both affirmation categories identify high affirmation themes when discussing the kinds of employment they would like to have. The affirmation dimension presents a useful means to evaluate the job quality of low-income families, particularly as affirmation plays an important role in families' decisions about work. Affirmation and its role in families' employment selection will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

Families across PA and NC alike experienced a range of outcomes with respect to their employment consistency. Out of the 71 families, 17 in PA and 12 in NC had employment in the high consistency category. These families held the same employment or had very few total employment changes throughout the study. However, nearly as many families (n=23) experienced low consistency, sometimes changing employment circumstances every couple of months. Because of the wide range in families' employment consistency, it is helpful to include this dimension to give context to families' overall employment quality. Yet, consistency should be considered with other dimensions in order to more comprehensively understand the limitations of and workers' decisions about employment.

In terms of employment rewards, a slight majority of families (n=29) reported jobs offering hourly wages between \$6-8 (\$7 to 9.50 in 2012 dollars). These jobs

typically did not include health insurance or other employer-provided benefits. Instead, many families utilized Medicaid (if they qualified), or opted to go without health insurance. Families identified additional incentives such as discounts on store merchandise or essentials such as heating oil, the use of company vehicles and cellular phones and other cash-like benefits. Families experiencing the highest level of rewards (n=20) made upwards of \$8/hour (\$9.50 in 2012 dollars), and these families were also slightly more likely to have health insurance or other employer-supplied benefits such as paid vacation, and in one case, paid maternity leave. Fifteen families across PA and NC earned wages at or close to the 2006 federal minimum wage. These families were likely to work in retail, food service or as under-the-table childcare workers.

Additionally, families created their own employment through informal entrepreneurship, including selling scrap materials or refurbished goods, and providing services like car repair and massage therapy out of their home. Although the economic characteristics of work continue to be of paramount importance to families and should continue to occupy scholarly assessments of job quality, we need a much broader definition of rewards to incorporate quasi-economic resources such as company-supplied transportation.

Although the greatest number of FLP families reported low costs, other families reported notable threats to their physical or mental health due to their particular jobs or work environments (n=5). Families also identified costs related to travel and childcare expenditures (n=20), which interestingly functioned as greater deterrents to employment than did high costs. Finally, with respect to families' overall economic trajectories, the

majority of families experienced no net change in their economic status throughout their participation in the study (n=40). However, some families experienced upward (n=19) and downward (n=12) trajectories which often included the addition or loss of a job within a household, as well as changes to families' weekly work hours and schedules.

Taken together, these five dimensions provide an alternative framework for job quality evaluation which specifically addresses the job characteristics important to low-income, non-metropolitan families. Incorporating families' subjective assessments into objective measures of job quality provides a better understanding of families' criteria for employment quality. Due to the emergent nature of the FLP interviews, families were allowed to discuss their employment circumstances in an unstructured but guided context. Families then identified the aspects of work that frustrated, satisfied or otherwise mattered to them at that time. These five dimensions systematically incorporate those additional criteria, giving a more accurate understanding of the way low-income families evaluate their limited employment choices. Yet, these dimensions are also in conversation with the conventional criteria of job quality evaluation, as they incorporate more objective markers of job quality such as wage amount and job tenure.

I further argue we can contribute to our larger understanding of job quality through the perspectives of low-income, non-metropolitan families. Over the past few decades, the American labor market has become increasingly defined by the growth of low-skill, low-wage, precarious work, alongside the growth of high-skill, high-wage work. These shifts, combined with the disappearance of low- and medium-skill "middle class" jobs such as those in the manufacturing sector, have resulted in the increasing

polarization of job quality, or the growing gap between “good” and “bad” jobs (Kalleberg 2011).

Nonmetro low-income families offer particular vantage into what constitutes a high quality job, if one exists, among low-wage jobs that would otherwise be categorized as “bad jobs” through existing definitions of job quality. Neither low-wage work nor workers are paid particular attention within this literature, although the increasing polarization of good and bad jobs may mean increased constraints on the employment choices of workers generally. The perspectives of families from the FLP lend insight into what good jobs look like when high-skill, high-wage jobs are few and far between.

4. The Role of Affirmation in Families' Decisions about Employment

The previous chapter presented five dimensions of job quality, which provide a more comprehensive understanding of the criteria by which low-income families evaluate their jobs. This chapter aims to understand how low-income workers weigh economic and non-economic criteria when making choices about employment. In addition to their economic hardship, low-income families experience difficulty balancing work and family needs alongside the negotiation of social services, reliable and affordable childcare and temporary or otherwise nonstandard work schedules. Due to geographical location and lower educational attainment, nonmetropolitan low-income families have access to a limited range of low-wage, service sector jobs. Given these complications and the likelihood that most jobs available to these families offer similarly low wages, it is an open question as to how highly these families prioritize a job's economic compensation over its other characteristics.

It is important to understand how much emphasis workers and their families place on economic versus non-economic criteria when choosing employment. Relatively little scholarship has explicitly addressed the import of non-economic work characteristics for low-income workers, and especially, how these characteristics influence an individual's job selection process. This chapter will explore how families make choices about employment through an extended discussion of families' experiences with affirmation. I contend that families consider affirmation to be nearly as important as rewards when deciding to remain employed, become unemployed or when generally navigating their

employment options. Thus, approaches which emphasize the economic compensation or rewards dimension of employment fail to fully account for the employment decisions of low-income workers and their households.

I will begin by revisiting the affirmation dimension and discuss its connection to the job satisfaction literature. Through a review of themes present in the FLP interviews, I will then describe how families define the relationship between affirmation and rewards. Next, I will discuss how the affirmation experiences of working families in the FLP inform their employment choices, paying special attention to self-employment and employers or jobs that are “like family”. I close with a discussion of potential theoretical contributions to low-income families’ measures of job satisfaction and decisions regarding employment.

4.1 Why Affirmation?

It is clear why a job’s rewards matter, especially to workers in low-income families, but why would affirmation? To review, affirmation is the degree to which a particular job enables a worker to experience feelings of self-actualization, self-esteem, self-worth and satisfaction. In contrast to a job’s rewards, affirmation involves the non-monetary, intangible aspects of employment. High affirmation employment includes when the respondent and/or others in the household discuss their employment in a positive sense, including feelings of pride, encouragement and excitement about working or the workplace. High affirmation work provides a high level of non-economic benefits including but not limited to feelings of self-worth, achievement and autonomy. Respondents with employment experiences in this category feel empowered by their jobs

rather than constrained, hopeless and restricted. This categorization is also applied when respondents discuss preferring their current employment status over past or potential other kinds of employment.

In contrast, respondents in low affirmation employment circumstances refer to their work or work opportunities as demoralizing, limiting and offering little to no positive emotional returns for the time invested. Families in low affirmation scenarios also report high levels of stress or anxiety as a direct result of their work or lack thereof. These work circumstances are not necessarily intrusive or damaging to self or family, yet are not categorized by positivity as in those families expressing high levels of affirmation. Respondents in this category also voiced being underwhelmed by their work or indifferent to opportunities available to them. A job's overall level of affirmation can be categorized as high or low, but the same job can also include both high and low affirmation experiences over time.¹

Although the affirmation dimension emerged from the analysis of FLP interviews, the dimension is in direct theoretical conversation with the concept of job satisfaction. Like job satisfaction, affirmation demonstrates an individual's affective sentiments toward their employment. However, the affirmation dimension may provide a more accurate assessment of job satisfaction, as this dimension is constructed from

¹ Whereas the previous chapter presented each family's average level of affirmation over the entirety of the study, this chapter will capitalize on the longitudinal data to discuss families' affirmation experiences in more detail.

respondents' frequent and mostly unsolicited attitudes about their jobs over time.²

Additionally, due to the longitudinal nature of the FLP data, it is possible to see how affirmative sentiments motivate families' work-related behaviors, namely the decision to quit or continue their jobs. The following section will review relevant literature regarding job satisfaction, particularly among low-wage workers.

4.1.1 Measuring Workers' Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is perhaps one of the most widely addressed concepts in the social sciences (Mortimer 1979 in Hodson 1991) and is approaching nearly eighty years of international academic scholarship and professional attention. Traditionally, job satisfaction provided social science and human resources scholars a means to assess the job experiences of workers in an industrial society (Kalleberg 1977; Hodson 1991). Although some scholars maintain the field has suffered from the "intellectual baggage" of those seeking only to drive worker productivity (Hodson 1991:272), it has since been motivated by alternative perspectives, such as providing workers with higher quality employment experiences and identifying work environments which facilitate work-life balance (Kalleberg 1977; Berg and Frost 2005; Hsu 2011).³ Some notable contributions of this literature include the differential relationship of job satisfaction across age

² Although FLP interview protocols included questions about respondents' employment and asked respondents to define good and bad jobs, respondents also frequently volunteered work-related information, especially their feelings, about their own jobs.

³ The intellectual baggage Hodson (1991) refers to includes the efforts of Frederick Winslow Taylor, the pioneer of scientific management. Taylor sought industrial efficiency, in part, by moving the loci of control from workers to managers. However, Rubin (2004) reminds us of the underlying tension between the Taylor school of management and the devotees of Chester Barnard, who viewed organizational success as contingent on co-operation between workers, management and executives.

(Kalleberg and Loscocco 1983) and gender (Clark 1997; Crosby 1982; Hodson 1989), as well as the connection between job satisfaction and workers' physical and mental health outside of the work context (Kalleberg 1977; Argyle 1989 in Vieira 2005).

Attesting to its scholarly longevity, measures of job satisfaction include an enormous range of variables and theoretical orientations. Many job satisfaction studies examine the correlation of workers' level of satisfaction with demographic variables including age, race, gender and level of education. For example, African-American workers are more likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs than are their white counterparts within the same profession, and this relationship is robust across a range of job types and sectors (Lundquist 2008). Other studies focus on the relationship of job satisfaction to job content factors or workplace characteristics including pay, degree of specialization, social factors (e.g. level of conflict among coworkers), promotional opportunities, management practices and organizational culture (Kalleberg 1977). These types of studies (e.g. Lund 2003) seek to causally relate job and organizational factors to workers' reported job satisfaction.

The above approach does not consider how individual workers privilege some job/workplace characteristics over others, as the determinants of job satisfaction may be quite different across individuals or types of workers. Nor are all job/workplace characteristics salient to workers' day-to-day workplace conduct (Hodson 1991). Worker satisfaction may also have more to do with whether or not an individual gleans satisfaction from work and not necessarily because their workplace offers a greater number of objectively satisfying attributes (Brief, Butcher, George and Link 1993).

Other approaches seek to mitigate these concerns by asking workers about their overall – or global – level of job satisfaction. Rather than ask workers to rate their satisfaction with specific dimensions of work, global job satisfaction measures solicit workers' overall affective orientation toward their jobs (Kalleberg 1977). Such measures of job satisfaction include direct (*How satisfied are you with your job?*) or indirect (*Would you recommend this job to a friend?*) inquiries (Kalleberg 1977:126). This approach allows each respondent to assess job satisfaction in reference to the work characteristics they implicitly believe to be most important, a distinct advantage over the above approach.

The most effective assessment of job satisfaction emphasizes the interplay between structural aspects of work and workers' social psychological characteristics, including their valuation of work and/or work characteristics relative to other things (Kalleberg and Loscocco 1983). To this end, job satisfaction measures include worker-workplace interactions and attributes, how closely the work environment meets workers' needs and the degree to which task attributes – such as jobs' level of autonomy and degree of variety – influence workers' job satisfaction (Kalleberg 1977; Stevens, Brief and Smith 2007). In other words, the job satisfaction question can be more accurately addressed by pairing objective work characteristics with the degree of meaning individuals impute to their work activities (Morse 1953 and Goldthorpe et al. 1968 in Kalleberg 1977:125).

Despite scholarly attempts to produce a generalizable, relative, yet holistic measure, the utility of job satisfaction remains heavily scrutinized for several reasons. First,

the job satisfaction field is dominated by the study of certain facets of work – pay, coworker relationships and tasks – which is likely due to their availability and ease of measurement (Stevens, Brief and Smith 2007). Second, the relationship between job satisfaction and work productivity is based on the theoretical assumption that satisfied workers are more productive (Hodson 1991). Job satisfaction has often failed to predict worker productivity and retention (Hodson 1991), although it is more strongly linked to workers’ thoughts of quitting, intentions to quit, absenteeism and intentions to search for a new job (Stevens, Brief and Smith 2007; Vidal 2008). Because most measures of job satisfaction focus on attitudes over behaviors, it follows that job satisfaction predicts workers’ attitudes better than their actions.⁴ Finally, although family well-being, work-family balance and job satisfaction are linked (Hsu 2011; Qu and Zhao 2012), scholarship neglects household-level measures of job satisfaction, focusing instead on the individual worker. Despite these limitations, job satisfaction scholarship has provided a broad understanding of the relationship of personality, demographic, job, organizational and workplace attributes to workers’ job satisfaction.

4.1.2 Job Satisfaction among Low-wage Workers

With a few exceptions, job satisfaction scholarship falls short with respect to understanding the job experiences of low-wage workers. Most job satisfaction studies merely include workers’ wage or rate of pay in a list of other covariates. Because the statistical relationship between wage and job satisfaction is unfailingly positive, it follows that low wage workers should universally be less or completely dissatisfied with

⁴ Although it is beyond the scope of this project, the field would benefit from an overtly behavioral model (Hodson 1991) to address the influence of work structures (such as the organization’s degree of bureaucracy or the hours, timing, and pacing of work) on workers’ actions (Rubin 2004).

their jobs, especially if job satisfaction measures were based on wage alone. However, wage accounts for only part of the variation in reported overall worker satisfaction (Vieira 2005).

Job satisfaction scholarship which specifically targets populations of low-wage workers has concentrated on the relationship of overall job satisfaction to workers' race, gender, unionization, education level and similar covariates. Additionally, these studies address the job satisfaction of low-wage workers across a range of specific measures indicating intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, short and long term rewards, social aspects of work and satisfaction with schedule or workload (Gruenberg 1980; Brown and McIntosh 2003).

Previous work has included low-wage workers in a range of sectors – food service, retail, information service and sales, tourism and hospitality, childcare, health care and temporary work – within the U.S. and Europe, and more recently, in China, Australia and beyond (Brown and McIntosh 2003; Berg and Frost 2005; Aletraris 2010; Chesters and Baxter 2011; Qu and Zhao 2012).

Across various populations of low-wage workers, wage and several non-economic resources are the most pertinent and frequently-occurring determinants of high job satisfaction. Unsurprisingly, job satisfaction is positively correlated with wages (Brown and McIntosh 2003). However, non-economic resources including time, schedule control, workplace autonomy and workplace social support are also correlated with higher levels of job satisfaction. For example, temporary workers have lower levels of job satisfaction as compared to permanent workers, although autonomy, job security and control over time and duration of work mediate this difference (Aletraris 2010). Among low-wage

workers in the food, hospitality and retail sectors, satisfaction with social relations at work and with workload also determined overall job satisfaction (Brown and McIntosh 2003). Care workers, including those in childcare and healthcare, identified control over weekly schedules and work hours as the most important factors predicting job satisfaction (Chesters and Baxter 2011). In a slight departure from traditional job satisfaction measures, a study of low-skilled food and healthcare workers in a sample of U.S. hospitals finds that pay, adequate levels of staffing and access to training are most closely associated with workers' sense of dignity on the job (Berg and Frost 2005).

In addition to the resources mentioned above, emotional supports and supportive relationships with coworkers and supervisors may also have important implications for job satisfaction among low-wage workers (Hodson 2001, 2004a, 2004b). Emotional supports may be particularly important within service sector work due to the level of emotional labor present in these types of occupations (Leidner 1993, 1999). For example, emotional support from coworkers and supervisors is positively correlated with job satisfaction among U.S. assisted living healthcare workers (Chou and Robert 2008).

What is debatable regarding job satisfaction and low-wage work is the extent to which a "love of the job" truly motivates workers in specific care work service occupations such as childcare and caretaking of the elderly. Because wages in these types of occupations are low, scholars speculate care workers' satisfaction may be motivated by intrinsic factors including the happiness such workers derive from helping others (Chesters and Baxter 2011; Chou 2012). This may or may not actually be the case, as "love of the job" in this context appears to vary by care work type. For example, a study of Australian care

workers found childcare workers were less satisfied with their jobs than were dental assistants, despite a greater proportion of the former nominating intrinsic reasons for entering this profession (Chesters and Baxter 2011). Thus, intrinsic factors may motivate individuals into care work, but do not hold out over other factors or jobs' shortcomings in the long term.

However, in some cases, care workers' personal relationship with clients may produce longer-term, high job satisfaction outcomes for workers (i.e. through resident-centered job satisfaction) (Chou 2012). A study of long-term care workers at assisted living facilities in the U.S. finds the "psychic income" of such work may offset care work's other shortcomings, resulting in increased employee retention (Chou 2012). Other research suggests workers' intrinsic sources of satisfaction have powerful effects on overall job satisfaction irrespective of workers' educational background or position in the occupational hierarchy (Gruenberg 1980). The degree to which intrinsic motivations produce positive, long-term and high affirming employment outcomes for care workers and other low-wage workers should be the subject of continued scholarly consideration.

4.1.3 Affirmation: A Different Way of Thinking About Low-wage Job Satisfaction

As the above examples demonstrate, low-wage workers experience higher levels of job satisfaction when their jobs are associated with higher pay and a host of non-economic resources including flexibility and control over one's hours or schedule. Because low-income families face constraints exacerbated by economic hardship, any increases in both economic and noneconomic resources likewise increase families'

control over day-to-day work experiences and facilitate work-family balance and job satisfaction. Additionally, due to the emotional labor and low wages of service sector and care work, respectively, workers in these occupations may derive job satisfaction from intrinsic factors such as positive emotional relationships with clients, coworkers and supervisors.

The affirmation dimension offers an informative supplement to existing job satisfaction measures. By its nature, affirmation provides respondents' affective evaluations of work, as it is based on how respondents feel about their jobs. To this end, affirmation is consistent with the goals of conventional measures of job satisfaction. However, because the affirmation dimension emerged through interviews with respondents, this dimension also captures a respondent-oriented assessment of work. Thus, the affirmation measure reflects the most salient aspects of work per each respondent, rather than providing predetermined job satisfaction measures and attributes. Additionally, affirmation reflects respondents' feelings about both global and specific characteristics of work. Finally, as the discussion below will show, in some cases respondents link affirmation to established, objective predictors of job satisfaction such as pay.

Affirmation also addresses some shortcomings of existing studies of job satisfaction. Although job satisfaction and family well-being are linked, job satisfaction is typically measured as an individual-level variable. Affirmation, in contrast, considers the work experiences of the household. Affirmation expands the existing definition of job satisfaction to include intrinsic factors of job satisfaction, such as emotional support from

coworkers or simply loving one's job. The affirmation dimension also contributes to an enhanced understanding of job satisfaction among low-wage workers and their families, as this measure scrutinizes the experiences of low-wage workers across a multitude of low wage sectors.⁵ Finally, because affirmation impacts families' choices about employment, this measure may provide the job satisfaction literature with a behavioral, rather than attitudinal, indicator. The following section proceeds with respondents' assessments of the relative importance of jobs' affirmation and rewards.

4.2 Indicating Job Quality: Beyond Rewards

The FLP data strongly suggest respondents consider more than a job's monetary benefits when choosing and evaluating their employment. When asked to discuss the attributes of good and bad jobs, respondents routinely mentioned affirmative qualities alongside wage and other financial benefits, suggesting the important role affirmation plays in job selection and retention. For example, much like a baseline hourly wage, basic enjoyment of one's job is also a criterion for a "good" job. Tracy, a 21-year-old cohabitating African-American mother of three has been promoted from seasonal employment to "full time" at a discount warehouse chain.⁶ When asked what people in her county consider a good job, Tracy responds, "*You like what you do and the people you work with and you have enough money to make ends meet or whatever, pay bills or whatever and some left over.*" Tracy also offers, "*There's no such thing as a bad job...I*

⁵ Please see Appendix E for a comprehensive list of families' occupations.

⁶ Although Tracy says she is employed full-time, the ethnographer clarifies that Tracy is typically scheduled for 30 hours per week.

think it's more the person that is doing the job." In a later interview, Tracy clarifies her definition of a bad job as one that gives a person a *"bad attitude....like you don't want to be there."* Tracy seems to include both rewards and affirmation dimensions in her "good" job criteria, but it is clear "bad" jobs have more to do with how they make workers feel.

Other mothers offer similar thoughts when discussing employment in the abstract and often pair enjoyment of one's job with "good" wages and employer-provided benefits. Sandra, a 25-year-old African-American mother of two, offers her take on a good job: *"Well I think [it's] a job with good pay [of \$8 per hour] and benefits and you have to like it I guess."* In contrast, Sandra maintains a bad job is, *"One that you don't like."* Mary, a white, 32-year-old married mother of three says a good job includes, *"Good pay, benefits – you know the insurance and the 401k – the good stuff and something you enjoy doing."* Lalita, a white 25-year-old mother of two, discusses employment when asked what she wants for her newborn son. Lalita says she hopes her baby gets a good-paying job where he actually enjoys going to work. Although Tracy and Sandra limit "bad" jobs to affirmative characteristics only, all of the women define "good" jobs as providing both high affirmation – in the form of enjoyment – and high rewards.

Although some mothers place the affirmative qualities of one's job on par with its economic rewards, others appear to prioritize affirmation. Rachael, an unemployed, 27-year old PA mother mentioned in the previous chapter, eschews pay and economic mobility entirely when she discusses her desired employment: *"I don't have a problem being in ...a dead-end job as long as I like doing what I'm doing."* Rachael expresses the

need for baseline enjoyment as a means to feel validated by her future employment, even at the expense of wage growth or promotion. When directly asked if the amount of an hourly wage factors into good jobs and bad jobs, Tracy, above, says, “*Well, not really*”. Although Tracy says good jobs are high-skill, high-wage jobs in the healthcare industry (“*nursing field, doctor*”), she also includes childcare in that categorization, which in comparison are low-skill, low-wage jobs. Respondents routinely include both the rewards and affirmation dimensions in their solicited definitions of good and bad jobs, although the degree to which they emphasize one dimension over the other may vary.

Though FLP respondents seem to consider affirmative qualities of jobs on par or greater than rewards in the abstract, how do respondents associate the rewards and affirmation dimensions of their own work experiences? Corinne, a 20-year-old African-American mother of one, works the graveyard shift at as an intake clerk at a hospital ER’s registration desk. Corinne, who left a NC state university as a sophomore, seems proud and excited about her job, which she obtains about halfway through her tenure with the FLP. Corinne’s ethnographer asks her what she likes about her new job, and Corinne responds:

The money [she chuckles]...I like the people I’m around, too, and I like being busy. I feel like I’m important...Because I have so many responsibilities at the job. And for me to be a new person, they’re saying I’m doing things that people who have been working there for 3 years haven’t done yet. So I feel important and I feel like I’m doing really well there.

Corinne’s response suggests this job provides her with a high level of affirmation beyond its economic reward.

Corinne maintains a positive orientation toward her job even when her supervisor accuses her of being negligent in her duties. Corinne tells the ethnographer about the incident and its resolution. Corinne processed the intake information of an Alzheimer's patient who couldn't recall her name and address accurately. Although Corinne wrote down the information she was given, it was later discovered to be erroneous. Corinne tells the ethnographer how she confidently handled this situation and provided her supervisor with copies of the intake forms. Corinne is pleased at the way she handled the situation, and she says her supervisor made no further complaints. Despite this incident and other downsides of her job such as the increased exposure to illness that comes with working in an ER, Corinne maintains, "*I love my job*". Despite a negative workplace interaction, the high affirming qualities of Corinne's job, and Corinne's pride and excitement regarding her job, result in her continued employment.

The experiences of these respondents suggest affirmation is an important job attribute and contributes to positive sentiments toward one's job. Additionally, respondents identify high affirming job characteristics, such as the basic enjoyment of a job, when discussing what people in their counties classify as a good job. Bad jobs, in contrast, include jobs that workers dislike, or encourage them to have a "bad attitude". Additionally, a job's affirmation can actually outweigh its rewards, as a respondent might prefer a lower-paying or "dead-end" job that offers an enjoyable work experience over a job that is higher paying but not enjoyable. The next section will illustrate how respondents navigate the relative importance of affirmation and rewards dimensions over time.

4.3 The Relative Weight of Affirmation & Rewards

Respondents include affirmation and rewards dimensions when asked to evaluate the characteristics of good and bad jobs in the abstract as well as when they evaluate their own jobs. But how do respondents use rewards and affirmation to evaluate and choose between jobs? Longitudinal interview data collected by the FLP ethnographic team allows for a more in-depth look at how respondents consider both affirmation and rewards dimensions over time. The work experiences of Sharon and her husband, a NC household, illustrate how respondents balance tradeoffs relevant to both dimensions when choosing work.

At first glance, Sharon seems to prioritize only her job's rewards.⁷ Sharon, a certified massage therapist, worked her way through nursing school and found full-time employment as an RN at a hospital in a neighboring county. Although her ideal employment would include "*working from home*", Sharon tells the ethnographer her main motivation to go to nursing school and become an RN was "*the money*". Sharon even persisted in her career path although she doubted she could stomach the "*blood and gore*" of being a nurse.

Yet, Sharon's evaluation of her employment includes more than money alone. Sharon describes the racial prejudice she experienced at her first nursing job, beginning with her initial disbelief:

Well, you know what, I knew um, the reputation that the town had, but how can a town have a reputation, do you know what I mean?

⁷ Sharon is also mentioned briefly in Chapter 3.

No, but for real, if the people who work at “X” County and live in “X” County are what, ten miles from the people who work and live here? So how can that town hold that kind of attitude when a town right next to it doesn’t?

During an interview with her ethnographer, Sharon discusses the experiences that caused her to quit her job.⁸ She explains the various forms of discrimination she encountered, including being passed over for and pushed off of her desired shifts. Sharon describes the general atmosphere of racism that precipitated her decision to leave her job, including schedule conflicts with her white coworkers, the outright use of racial slurs. She describes these incidents, including, *“Managers who wouldn’t even speak to you when you pass, just stuff like that, and I got tired of it.”*

Sharon finally decides to take another RN position in Labor and Delivery in a hospital in the county she lives in. Sharon describes her decision to take this job:

It’s a lot less money, it’s a whole lot less money, but I said you know what, God’s always provided for me, I’m going to take it cuz I’m going to be happier. It’s the position I wanted, it’s in town and it’s a black manager. After that I was just like, I want a black manager, I don’t care what I’ll be doing, I’ll scrub floors, so yeah.

Despite taking a sizeable pay cut, Sharon opts for the new job, which will presumably offer Sharon a better working environment and higher affirmation. Sadly, Sharon goes on to explain that her new workplace is not devoid of politics, tensions or racial discrimination, either:

I mean I’ve cleaned houses for a living, I’ve waited tables, I’ve done just a lot of regular jobs, I’ve never been in this ladder type, this is my first ladder type job, is what I call it, you know

⁸ This interview takes place in April 2004. Sharon began this job in October 2003.

when there's big dogs and the big people and the stuffed shirts and there's this...hierarchy of classes and I just, I didn't know it was like this.

Sharon describes how she feels like her new job is already “draining”:

When I say draining? Well when you're doing your job you feel like you have to just be super good at it because, well like so far I've had preceptors, girls who were teaching me and most of them, all but two of them have been white girls and they just kinda, like they tell you what to do and the next person comes in and they act like you've forgotten that quick. 'Don't forget you got to do such and such.' And it's like-

Ethnographer: They act like you're a moron.

Sharon: Yeah, so I feel like I've got to overachieve, and then it's like, whoa, she's an overachiever, you know, that comment I got this week, you know, 'Well, she's got to do everything.' You know, and it's not that.

When Sharon and her ethnographer meet for a follow-up interview, Sharon tells the ethnographer that she has changed jobs again, and is now working for a county hospital in another, neighboring county (also an FLP county).⁹ Sharon explains she left her old job because she couldn't get enough hours on her schedule. Again, she says “the main thing that attracted her to the job” was “the money”:

I loved Labor and Delivery, but I was always getting called out. I only worked 32 hours per week because that's all that they had space for, and then every other week I was getting called out. It just wasn't working for us...I went to school to be a nurse for the money. I love Labor and Delivery, but I don't go to work for what I love, I go to make a living and I'm not making a living [t]here.

⁹ Sharon is now working as an RN in the hospital's Medical/Surgical unit. She began this job sometime between July 2005 and Dec 2005, when this follow-up interview takes place. Sharon says she had to wait until she had 2 years' experience to apply for her current job, which would've been in October 2005. So, at the time of the interview, she has probably held her current job for a little over a month.

Sharon's new workplace also provides her with high affirmation. Sharon says that her new workplace offers a more racially progressive and positive environment than she's used to. Sharon says she sees people of different races employed at all levels, including nursing and administration. Sharon says even the hospital's billboard advertisements "*have black women on [them]*".

Sharon notes that her new place of employment is one that presents her with potential upward mobility and increased occupational growth and responsibility, should she choose to seek it out. Sharon explains, "*Well I don't ever want to manage anybody or anything like that, but just knowing that, that if you did get like an inkling to do something special, that you could. It makes you want to do a good job with what you do, you know.*" Although Sharon maintains one still "*need[s] to be able to pay their bills at the end of the day*" no matter how much enjoyment one gets from the job, she is motivated by both rewards and affirmation when choosing her workplace. In addition to offering the kinds of rewards she seeks from a job in her chosen profession, Sharon's most current workplace also provides her with what the others did not – a more highly-affirming, racially progressive and respectful workplace.

In contrast, Sharon's husband seems principally motivated by the affirmative qualities of work. Sharon's husband opts out of jobs offering greater rewards because he prioritizes affirmation criteria instead.¹⁰ Sharon's husband has been employed by the same company for six years, a wood manufacturing company that produces pallets and

¹⁰ Sharon's husband may also prioritize consistency in employment. Please see the discussion section below.

other industrial wood products. Sharon's assessment of the job is akin to more conventional assessments of "bad jobs": *"I think in the time he's worked there he might have gotten like a 50 cent raise and that's it.* Her husband is also without health insurance: *"If he gets sick, he's on his own."* Her husband appears to have a "bad" job, as he doesn't have paid sick time or health benefits, and hasn't received a raise in years.

Sharon admits to trying to motivate her husband to find a "better" job with higher pay and health benefits, and has investigated some options that would require he obtain additional education. She has also admitted to applying for jobs for him online through the Employment Securities Commission, but complains that her husband will not interview for the jobs if his application is selected. His response to her is, *"Well, I don't think that's something I'd like to do"*. Regardless of what her husband thinks about his job, Sharon clearly thinks it is a bad one. For Sharon, a job's rewards are paramount, and she processes the quality of her husband's job accordingly – through its low pay and lack of fringe benefits.

Affirmation is still secondary to rewards as Sharon makes decisions about her husband's employment, although she considers other criteria beyond rewards as she moves through her own employment trajectory. Sharon's employment path illustrates the relative weight she gives to rewards and affirmation as these dimensions take turns motivating her decision to look for a new job. Although she maintains she selected the nursing field for "the money", she quits her first job because its low-affirming environs did not outweigh its rewards. Not satisfied by either the affirmation or rewards of her second job, Sharon finds a nursing job in yet another county that finally offers her the

level of reward she needs. Sharon benefits additionally from the improved racial environment of this workplace as well, as she expresses excitement at the hospital's racial diversity across various departments and positions. Sharon's narrative provides a general understanding of the interplay of rewards and affirmation.

4.3.1 Linking Affirmation to Rewards

Despite most respondents' treatment of affirmation as being additional to rewards, in some other cases, respondents' perceptions of affirmation are explicitly linked to various aspects of the rewards dimension. Low rewards can signify lack of investment in employees, which then leads to low affirming experiences of respondents. For example, Therese, the 26-year old Work First participant from NC, maintains that employers would get good workers if they pay good wages. She continues to describe how employers have unrealistic expectations of their workers – they treat them like *“badly-paid machines,”* provide no emotional recognition, yet expect workers to want to work hard. She says, *“Low pay is a problem all over the U.S....It's real cut and dry to me, just pay people enough to take care of their families.”* Two other respondents specifically cite teaching as an example of a bad job, as teachers are “not paid enough to do what they do”. This sentiment is not limited to pay alone. Lena, married to Martin, says, *“Even if you like your job, a job without insurance is a bad job.”*

FLP families often pair affirmation and rewards dimensions to navigate their employment options, sometimes linking the two together explicitly. The next section will explore a specific subset of high affirmation experiences in particular – how self-

employment and workplaces that are “like family” influence work choices among nonmetropolitan low-income families.

4.4 Self-Employment

As briefly addressed in the previous chapter, self-employed respondents typically express high levels of affirmation. Self-employment is relatively rare in this sample, as only four PA families and one NC family depend on self-employment as their sole or majority source of income. However, several families across NC and PA use income from self-employment to supplement their income from regular employment, such as Darlene’s partner mentioned above. Despite their relative scarcity in the sample, self-employed families provide insight into how self-employment is a viable strategy for meeting the work-family needs of low-income families while also providing workers with high levels of affirmation. Self-employment provides families with control over their work schedules and hours, thus facilitating the autonomy and flexibility associated with high work-family balance and job satisfaction among low-income workers (Chesters and Baxter 2011). Additionally, self-employed FLP workers express exceptionally high affirmation sentiments, including and not limited to preferring their current work over anything else.

Howard and Roxanne, previously mentioned in Chapter 3, rely solely on Howard’s income from the business he co-owns with his friends. Howard is a construction contractor, and he and his friends build houses in the surrounding area. Because Howard is self-employed, he can choose how to pace his work-week as well as how many hours he will work per week. Howard tells the ethnographer he works 35-50

hours per week, in some part due to the seasonal nature of construction.¹¹ To attempt to keep their workload steady, Howard and his coworkers will “get the exteriors of homes built during the fall, and then work on interiors during winter months”. Howard smiles when he says, “[This plan] doesn’t always happen, especially once owners see the outer shell of their home...they are in a hurry to have the interior work done quicker...and the home finished”. Indeed, Howard works long hours in the summer months. On several interview occasions, the ethnographer notes Howard is just getting home around 6:30pm, which means he works approximately 12 hour days. During other interviews, however, Howard comes home much earlier in the afternoon.

Despite the sometimes long hours and the confusion and worry that accompany paying self-employment taxes, Howard clearly loves his work. Howard discusses how the skills he uses at work are helpful for fixing things around their home. Howard is also able to scrutinize the state of repair of potential homes when he and Roxanne look into buying their own home. Before their daughter was born, Howard would even read to her from his various workbooks, including a volume titled “*Wiring Lights*”.

In addition to the high affirmation that Howard feels regarding his work, self-employment also allows both him and Roxanne to balance work-family needs. When their daughter is born, Howard is able to take the rest of the week off work to help Roxanne care for her. Although Roxanne used to work as a clerk at a convenience store, she does not return to her job after the birth of their child. Roxanne maintains childcare is

¹¹ Especially in the mountains of Pennsylvania, where winters are often unforgiving.

too expensive to warrant returning to that job, as she would barely break even after paying for daycare.

Roxanne makes clear she wants to prioritize her family over a career at this moment in time and she is able to do so because of Howard's job. Roxanne tells Howard she can always find a night job if needed, and discusses wanting to find a "better" job eventually. Roxanne says, "*But it's hard because I wanna have more kids, you know, I want to be there for them, so it's like I'm stuck [not working].*" Roxanne values being able to concentrate on her family. She says she can schedule doctor visits and WIC¹² appointments at times that are best for her infant daughter's routine. Despite the benefits of this employment arrangement, the flexibility of Howard's schedule would not matter unless the family was able to make ends meet on his income only.¹³

Another PA family mentioned above has benefitted from self-employment both in terms of high affirmation and achieving work-family balance. Christopher, the "Christian Electrician" was laid off from his former job at a steel mill. Chapter 3 discussed how the steel mill job was such a source of negativity and depression for Christopher that his wife, Patty, prayed something would happen to allow Christopher to stop working there. Soon after, the mill closed and Christopher was laid off. A week later, Christopher was

¹² Women, Infants and Children is a federally-funded program that allows states to provide supplemental foods, health care referrals and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk (WIC 2012).

¹³ Roxanne and Howard's longer term economic trajectory may have suffered greatly from the 2008 Housing Crisis. In 2004, Howard mentions that lowered interest rates on housing loans improved the state of the housing market and increased his ability to get work. Roxanne may have returned to the workforce earlier than anticipated, and out of necessity rather than desire. Additionally, Howard's pre-Recession income was such that the family met the income requirements for the Habitat for Humanity program and were actually selected to receive a home through the program in 2005.

notified he could attend school for free. As Patty explains it, because the government put his mill out of business, they were willing to provide Christopher the opportunity to learn a new trade and reenter the workforce.

Although his new business venture as a self-employed electrician is in its early stages, Christopher's income is sufficient enough to enable Patty to stay at home with their three kids. Christopher's clients include private individuals as well as private businesses, such as coal mining contractors. Christopher advertises his business in local phonebooks. He also had a radio commercial made, which advertises him as "The Christian Electrician" and ends with the one-liner, "A free baptism with every service."¹⁴ Christopher's work van is also newly-lettered and advertises his business.

Patty vividly discusses how Christopher's lay off and subsequent new career is "a blessing". She says, "*And [Christopher]'s so happy, he says, 'I love this!' He's the happiest I've ever seen him in his life!*" Patty has known her husband since he was 18 years old; he's now 36. When the ethnographer asks Patty what her husband finds appealing about his new job, she says, "*He likes meeting people, going to their homes and helping them out*". It is obvious through Christopher's actions and Patty's descriptions how much happiness Christopher's work as an electrician brings him. Patty and her family seem to have affirming experiences, too, on Christopher's behalf. Patty is proud of and happy for her husband. She says, "*He's a good guy, that's why I keep hopin that this [job] works out for him. It's his dream*".

¹⁴ The ethnographer says the commercial is humorous, which seems to suit Christopher's friendly and good-natured personality.

Christopher's excitement about his new job is even clearer in the context of his former employment. In addition to the steel mill job, Christopher formerly worked as a maintenance supervisor for a crane company in Maryland. Christopher commuted home from Maryland on the weekends to spend time with his family. Patty says he would arrive home at 2am Friday night/Saturday morning, then would leave for work on Monday mornings at 3am and go straight into work. This company eventually fired him, but only after transferring him to Pittsburgh, a commute which took at least three hours and sometimes more with traffic. Patty describes how Christopher got fired: "*His [coworkers] treated him very badly in Pittsburgh. They did not want him there...they did not tell him anything about any customers, they didn't fill him in on any information.*" Christopher's Pittsburgh employers wanted to fire him, so the company eliminated the position entirely, leaving the remaining employees with Christopher's workload, too. Patty has contempt in her voice as she says, "*By being jerks, they pretty much cut their own [nose to spite their face]... 'cuz now they had to do his job.*"

In addition to being high affirming, Christopher's self-employment provides Patty with the flexibility to stay at home with their three children. She used to work at a bank, but quit her job when Christopher completed school and made the transition to being an electrician. She says, "*I wouldn't have to work and come home and do all this myself, you know, and plus he was making good money.*" She and Christopher are able to balance each other's needs for space this way, too. She describes how Christopher will come home tired from working, but "*I know that he needs his space, I'm like, 'Go lay down honey' ...I give him his space for an hour and then I'm like, 'Come down here and deal*

with these kids and let me have some time'". Patty also provides business support for her husband, as she uses the skills she acquired while working at a bank to help Christopher budget and otherwise financially manage his business. Christopher's self-employment meets the financial needs of his family as well as provides Christopher and Patty with a source of pride and self-fulfillment.

Perhaps the most extreme example of a respondent finding pride and fulfillment through self-employment is Anna, first mentioned in Chapter 3. During her tenure with the FLP, Anna successfully opens a school of massage therapy in PA. The school offers affordable massage therapy to clients in the surrounding area as well as a comprehensive training program in therapeutic massage. Anna's pride and enthusiasm for her pending school is always evident, even as she faces difficulty renting a space for the school and applying for the necessary licenses from the state.¹⁵ Anna's husband Roman seems as proud of Anna's accomplishments as she is. He says he and Anna, "*Are more enterprising than other people*", and discusses at length the obstacles Anna overcame to open the school.

Anna's accomplishments were made possible in part by Roman's support, and because Roman's current job at a parcel delivery service "is the perfect job for him". Roman has a job that offers him "autonomy during the workday with someone else to carry concern for things like taxes and insurance", which is what makes this job ideal for him. His income was also sufficient to support the family even before the massage school

¹⁵ Please see Anna and Roman's story in Chapter 3 as well.

became self-supporting financially, thus allowing Anna the flexibility she needed to get things done for the school. Without a “good job”, Roman may not have been able to support his wife’s school, which is now in its seventh year.

The high affirmation experiences of FLP families, especially those experienced by the self-employed families in the sample, offer important insights about what good jobs really look like for families facing the constraints of a low-wage, nonmetropolitan labor market. These families’ experiences provide an example of what work is like when workers in these families can go beyond even the basic enjoyment of their jobs. These self-employed families in particular have jobs that provide them with more extreme high affirmation experiences, namely a source of self-respect, self-fulfillment, happiness and achievement.

4.5 “Like Family”

The conflict between work and family is perhaps the single most identified barrier to low-income families’ job stability and economic mobility, as the demands of work and family are constantly opposed for low-income families. Negotiating nonstandard schedules and low wages alongside family needs is especially problematic for low-wage, single-income families or families without a financial buffer. Because work and family are so often at odds, do workplaces that are “like family” offer respondents a distinct advantage for balancing the work-family conflict? Or is it an adaptive and effective tactic to think of one’s employers as family? Longitudinal interview data offer an opportunity to see how these respondents’ “like family” affirmation experiences affected their employment evaluation and subsequent choices about employment.

Sandra's employment history provides some context for the range of jobs that workers in nonmetro low-income families are likely to encounter.¹⁶ Sandra is an African-American, 25 year-old mother of two children under two years old. Although she is currently unemployed, Sandra reveals she has been working since she was 15 years old. Her work experience includes several stints as a cashier, stocker and deli associate at multiple grocery stores. In addition, Sandra has worked intermittently in a local nursing home as Nurse Aid Assistant and later, as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA).

Although she initially worked in grocery stores and nursing homes for similar periods of time, Sandra seems committed to a longer term career in the nursing field. After working at a nursing home as a non-credentialed Nurse Aid Assistant, Sandra paired a job in a chain grocery store deli with night classes and returned to her former nursing home employer 6 months later with a CNA certification. When reflecting on all of her jobs, Sandra provides comparatively more details regarding her experience working at the nursing home. She agrees with the ethnographer's description of her as a "people-person", and says, "*It made me feel good as long as I was helping somebody and making them feel good.*" Sandra reflects on her work with one elderly woman in particular. She would spend time sitting with and reading the newspaper to this woman, as the woman didn't have a lot of family "*that cared to come see [her]*". Sandra reflects, "*I loved the residents. I miss them, too...I miss my people*".

¹⁶ Sandra and her employment experiences were also introduced in Chapter 3.

Despite Sandra's range of jobs, she was most motivated to continue in the healthcare field and took classes to obtain further certification in nursing. Sandra's positively affirming experiences working as a CNA seem also to have inspired her future education and employment. When the study follows up with Sandra in 2006, she has completed her degree in nursing and is employed as a RN at the regional hospital. Sandra works full-time and will have comprehensive benefits – health insurance, dental, 401k – after 90 days on the job. Sandra's preference for the nursing field may have additionally been motivated by salary, as nursing is an oft-cited example of a “good job” in terms of its rewards. However, the nursing field also provides Sandra with high affirmation tied in part to seeing her patients as “*her people*”, and offering her a way to use her skills as a “people person”.

Job environments described as “like family” also seem to drive respondents' employment stability net of other dimensions. For example, Tamara's brother, who is mentioned in the previous chapter, works for a family-owned bakery in PA. Although he does not receive benefits because his employer is too small a business to afford them, he “really likes” working for this family and classifies it as a “better experience than working somewhere he didn't have a relationship with the owners of the company”. Thus, the personal relationship Tamara's brother has with his employer serves as motivation for him to continue his employment there in lieu of health insurance.

Employees who think of their workplaces as “like family” may make long-term commitments in exchange for their employer's real or perceived investment in their well-being. For example, Angela's close, family-like relationship with her employer also

drives her employment preferences and contributes to her stable employment history. Also mentioned in Chapter 3, Angela, aged 26, and her husband, aged 31, work for family-owned business in NC. Angela has been working with this business for eight years and actually stopped attending college when the opportunity to work full-time became available. Regarding her history with the company, she says, *“I just stuck around and it’s a very small business. They latched on to me and I latched on to them. That’s just kinda how it worked.”* Both she and her ethnographer describe the ways her employers have invested in her. The ethnographer reports Angela’s employers have encouraged her to “join civic associations as representatives of the business, and are indeed “grooming Angela and her husband to take over the business when [her employers] retire”.

In fact, Angela’s employers’ investment in her outweighs the fact that she fundamentally doesn’t enjoy the tasks of her job. She says, *“I do not like computers. I still don’t like computers. I just happen to be good at it. I don’t like computers at all.”*¹⁷ Angela says both she and her husband possess attributes that are needed by the company, yet they have no interest in what the other person does and thus, make a good team. She says she’s not a “numbers-person”, but, *“He wants to do all the ordering and books and numbers, that’s fine.”* Angela reports that her husband loves his job there, and Angela expects she will stay with the company *“for the long haul, pretty much”*.

Having a workplace that is “like family” also leads to a long-term work commitment from Jamie, although the investment on the part of Jamie’s employer may

¹⁷ Angela’s name features prominently on the business’s website for a local award (website accessed April 4, 2012).

be more perceived than real. When Jamie joins the FLP study, she has been waiting tables for five years at a steakhouse chain located in a shopping mall. Although Jamie admits she “*doesn’t love*” her job, it offers her a measure of comfort that keeps her there. Jamie says she likes her coworkers more than she likes the job itself, and her ideal job would involve just going into work to talk to her coworkers and customers alike. She says she’s actually “bored” with the work itself, and although she feels like she’s “capable of doing more”, working at the restaurant is comfortable “*like your favorite pair of jeans*”. She continues to say the restaurant will work with her “*on everything*”, meaning they will always meet her requests if she decides to take another job or needs a change to her schedule.

Later in the study, the restaurant is taken over by new management, and Jamie is let go for missing a shift. The restaurant’s kitchen manager tells Jamie she was made an example of. Jamie ignores, forgives or rationalizes being fired and continues to make visits to her old coworkers. She continues to refer to the steakhouse environment as “like family”, even as she begins a “less chaotic” job at another restaurant that gives her “better hours”. Jamie eventually returns to her original position at the steakhouse months later. She tells the ethnographer that this job is a “good job” for her.

Like Angela, Jamie and Tamara’s brother, respondents who have jobs that are “like family” tend to prioritize these jobs over other potential sources of employment, even when their jobs are less-than-optimal by more objective standards. Although Angela doesn’t even like her day-to-day job duties, she has already spent eight years in her job and maintains that she will stay at this job “*for the long haul*”. Tamara’s brother would

rather work for his current employer and forgo health benefits because he likes the relationship he has with the bakery's owners. Jamie maintains loyalty to the restaurant job she "doesn't love", even after they fire her for missing a shift, and even quits a comparable job at another restaurant to return to the steakhouse. The "like family" attribute of low-income families workplaces seems to signify high affirmation, or at least workplace investment.

4.5.1 When "Family" Fails

Despite the loyalty and high affirmation they glean from some respondents, workplaces or employers that are perceived as "like family" do not produce universally satisfied, high affirming workers. In some cases, workplaces that respondents identify as "like family" actually work against respondents' interests and can have detrimental effects on families' economic stability and well-being. In the same way that family members themselves vary in terms of their supportiveness, workplaces and employers can also be a source of negative social support. A mismatch between workers' and employers' expectations can result in unfavorable or low affirming employment experiences for the worker. Unmet expectations can be especially devastating to families who treat their employers "like family" but do not receive like treatment or support in return. Hence, "like family" workplaces can present environments of stability or volatility, much like regular family relationships. The following respondents' experiences represent the low affirming side – and consequences – of "like family" employment.

Despite her efforts to place her family on better financial footing, Adele follows a variable employment trajectory with no net change in her economic well-being, in part

due to her negative employment experiences. Adele is a white, married, 25-year-old NC mother of one who clearly illustrates the struggle families face when balancing work with unforeseen family obligations. Adele's narrative is especially interesting, as she shares the same employer as another respondent – Angela. Adele quits her job at an insurance company after the birth of her son and shortly after begins working for the same business as Angela and her husband.¹⁸ Adele expressed that she wanted a better job and would “like to have benefits if she wasn't going to make much money”. Adele says she “loves the job and loves the people”, and states that she prefers this “more physical” job to the one she previously held.

However, shortly after Adele begins this new job, her 7-month-old son becomes very ill with a respiratory viral infection (RSV) and is hospitalized. Adele is distressed over her son's illness and the possibility that he might never recover. Adele's employer appears to be supportive of her despite her absence from work. The ethnographer summarizes the employer's response to Adele's predicament:

[The store's owners] called and talked with Adele on Monday and told her how concerned they were for [her son]. Adele really appreciates their caring for her family. She said if she were at her old job all she'd expect to get is, '*When are you coming back?*'

Adele's initial appreciation for her bosses and her job begins to deteriorate as she struggles to balance caring for her son's health with work. Her son contracts another bout of RSV and has other respiratory problems. Adele has difficulty getting her insurance to

¹⁸ During their previous interview, Adele asked the ethnographer if she knew of any available jobs. The ethnographer passed along information she'd received from a friend about the job opening, and Adele applied for – and was offered – the job.

cover her son's treatment because he was prematurely diagnosed with asthma, which now appears as a pre-existing condition for a period of one year. She discusses an incident where her boss suggested she take her son to a pediatric practice in town instead of the one Adele currently uses located 15 miles outside of town. The ethnographer writes, "Adele did not like [her boss's suggestion] and has no intention of changing pediatric practices".

As her son's health issues continue, Adele also continues to face difficulties balancing his care with work. At one point, Adele's co-worker asked her why her husband couldn't take time from his job instead care for the child. Adele discusses this incident, which led directly to her decision to quit her job:

So, I was going to take [my son] to the doctor. And [my coworker] was like, 'His daddy can't do it?' And, it was not the first time I was made to feel like this. Choose your job over your child...anyway it was – and, I thought to myself, 'You know what? Never again will I put my child second.' And so, I expressed my opinion on that.

Part of Adele's decision to quit the job she initially "loved" seems to come from believing her employer forced her to choose between work and her family. Their initial concern for her son's health may have left Adele with the expectation that her bosses would always allow her to take time away from work to care for her son.

Adele's own changing expectations about work in general also seem to have contributed to her decision to quit working. Initially, Adele identifies work as an integral part of her identity: "*Personally...I have to go to work. I have a job, you know, so I try to plan my things around my job, you know, cause it's one of my main priorities...I'm a*

worker.” However, in a discussion about her past work experiences, Adele makes clear the limits she places on work in favor of having time for her family. Adele used to work at a manufacturing plant where she “*got paid really good, but I was never home*”. Adele says she would work 12 hour shifts from 5pm to 5am and would have to rush home to see her husband before he left for work. Adele says, “*And you know money is nice but it ain’t all that. I mean what’s the point if I can’t see the people I care about? So I just went back to being poor and living life.*”

Adele’s decision to quit working is informed by her preexisting unwillingness to sacrifice too much of her family in favor of work. When her son becomes ill and her employers’ response changes from support to dissent, Adele once again perceives she has to make a choice between work and family. Adele’s thoughts about her role in the household provide even more insight into her decision:

You know I’m all about women’s lib and a woman can do the same amount of things a man can do and get the same pay. I’m all about that, but then I’m also going back to old school where a woman is supposed to take care of her man. It is [my husband]’s job to get his tail out of bed and go work hard and bring money in this house and it is my job to make sure he has supper on the table and clean clothes and it is my job to make sure my baby is cleaned and fed and loved and both of ‘em are taken care of. That’s the way I see it.

Unsurprisingly, Adele has found a new job when the ethnographer visits her 6 months later. She is working for a cousin, waiting tables at a restaurant. Adele figured this would be a good job because she is being paid under the table. At the next follow-up interview, Adele is 8 months pregnant with her second child. Her ethnographer writes, “Adele does not plan to return to the restaurant [after the birth of her second child]. She seems to

regret leaving her former job.” The ethnographer mentions Adele’s future hopes for employment: a job at the Clerk of Court’s office, but only if her candidate wins the upcoming election. Given Adele’s past employment experiences, it is reasonable to expect she will continue to prioritize her family should any future work-family conflict arise.

In and of themselves, workplaces that are “like family” are not sufficient to produce high affirmation experience. These same environments also produce low affirmation experiences for families. Adele works for same employer as Angela and Carl, but has a much different experience and trajectory. Unlike Angela, who is featured on the business’s website for her achievements, Adele quits her job during her tenure with the FLP because she feels she was made to choose between family and work. Rather than maintain a supportive, familial relationship with her employer, she felt as though her work and family were at odds. Experiences like Adele’s provide insight about the extent to which work and family can be in conflict with each other. Work-family conflict can extend beyond time management to a compromise of ideals.

Ramona has a similar experience with her employer, as her image of her supportive, family-like workplace falls apart when a supervisor accuses her of misconduct. Ramona is a white, 18-year-old married mother of an infant girl who lives in NC. She and her husband work for a company called Brand New Day,¹⁹ which helps rehabilitate people with severe brain injuries. When Ramona is first interviewed, she

¹⁹ A pseudonym.

speaks favorably of her job: “*Work’s what I’ve always wanted to do. It’s not really work. It’s more like leaving the house for a little while.*” Ramona only takes two weeks off following the birth of her daughter before she is back at work. Ramona refers to her workplace in ways that imply she thinks and is thought of by her coworkers as like family. She describes her workplace:

It’s just like working with a lot of sweet people. They become a part of your family by the time you’ve worked with them for like a month – you know my husband works out there so everybody knows [him]. And even though we work at two separate parts of the facility – every time I go to work it’s like, ‘Where’s [he]? How’s the baby?’ We’ve got pictures and they really love being family-like.

Ramona refers to her newborn daughter as a “*Brand New Day baby*”, and says everyone at work is happy to see her. Ramona expresses a desire for a higher-paying job and discusses a potential job opportunity for her husband which would pay \$12.50 per hour as opposed to the \$7.50 they make at Brand New Day. Ramona says, “*I told him it was up to him because we’re comfortable. We don’t have to have all the money in the world. We make enough now to make it if we want to.*” When asked to define a good job, Ramona seems to describe her own occupation:

[A good job is] a place you can go and you feel comfortable, where you know what you’re doing, you don’t get nervous while you’re around other people, you know your employees, you know who you’re working with. You know who you can trust, you know you can trust the person standing beside you to stand by you if something goes down, ‘cause in my profession, one wrong move and you’re screwed... I ain’t gotta be stressed and come home wanting to bang my head against a wall...I don’t care if the pay sucks as long as I know I’m making it good enough to support my family, then I look for a job that is fun, that I like what I’m doing.

Unfortunately, Ramona's work situation unravels only two months after her promotion to night-shift supervisor. At the next interview, the ethnographer makes it a point to say Ramona "was sad and fighting back tears...I had never seen her in anything but a positive upbeat mood before". Ramona describes an incident with a supervisor at work who had been spreading rumors about Ramona behaving indecently while at work. Ramona is outraged, betrayed and is ready to quit as soon as she finds a new job. She describes at length how this incident has affected her:

At first it was really stressful. I would come straight home and do what I had to do and I'd stay in bed. I didn't know what else to do. I guess you'd say I was hurt because I've always seen myself at Brand New Day...I would never leave that company. That's somewhere I would stay. It's hard to know now that I've got to find another job 'cause I'm so used to it. I've been there almost 2.5yrs and that's been my main job. I've always counted on them and always relied on them. They've always been there. My old supervisor married me. It's close. It's like a close knit place. That's why it's so bad when the president really thinks that you're a ho' 'cause you're so close to someone like that. It not only makes you feel bad 'cause you work, but you bring it home with you 'cause the people you work with always end up being your family.

Ramona's disappointment at being slandered and let down by a place she considered like family is evident. Ramona's long-term plans have been halted by this development, as Brand New Life was a place she saw herself committing to for a long time.

For the respondents in the FLP, workplaces and employers that are "like family" potentially offer families certain valuable aspects despite these jobs' low pay and lack of fringe benefits or schedule flexibility. When families perceive their employers have

invested in them, they likewise express their loyalty and eschew other job opportunities, even if better job offers might be available elsewhere.

However, these employment arrangements can also backfire, namely if there is a misunderstanding about the level of support an employer is willing to give. Adele's inability to balance work and family health issues and the accompanying shift in her employers' leniency regarding work absences resulted in Adele feeling forced to choose family at the expense of work. Ramona experienced feelings of betrayal when accused of improper conduct at work, as she considered her coworkers and clients to be like family. Ramona was initially planning to stay with her employer for the foreseeable future, but she does not recover from the incident and quits her job. Despite the opportunities for employment stability "like family" workplaces offer, these familial relationships can also have the opposite effect, causing respondents to navigate unexpected and undesired periods of unemployment.

4.6 Discussion

Longitudinal data from the FLP offer insight regarding low-income families' work experiences, job satisfaction and the role of economic and noneconomic criteria in such families' decisions about work. First, this chapter has established the various ways respondents couple economic and noneconomic aspects when defining good and bad jobs. When asked how other people in their county delineate good jobs from bad, respondents explicitly include the enjoyment or love of one's job as an important aspect of a "good" job. Additionally, "bad" jobs include ones that give the worker a bad attitude, or that would make one feel miserable. Thus, when thinking about the attributes of good and bad

jobs, respondents privilege work's potential for affirmation alongside the job's wages and benefits.

In addition to including affirmation and rewards in general discussions about good and bad jobs, respondents also invoke the importance of affirmation when they reflect on their own employment experiences. In an example discussed above, Corinne excitedly discusses how she “loves” her new job in the hospital ER, and provides her ethnographer with stories and detailed illustrations of her success and particular suitability for this job. Although Corinne is making a decent wage that places her in the high rewards category (which includes her night-shift premium of one additional dollar per hour) the economic benefits of her job do not seem to motivate her as much as her pride and excitement about her being good at this job.

It seems surprising that workers facing economic duress would put affirmation on par with rewards when considering their employment options. However, given the findings of previous work on the job satisfaction of low-wage workers in particular, it is clear that resources besides wages matter, especially as those resources enable families to exercise control over their daily schedules and workloads. In response to the range of available “bad” jobs which provide low wages and little autonomy, schedule control or flexibility, FLP families rely on self-employment opportunities and workplaces that are “like family” to provide work that allows them to maintain a balance of work-family needs.

As other scholars have noted, self-employment can be the best bet in a bad job situation, particularly in nonmetropolitan environments where access to good jobs are

scarce and upward trajectories limited (Harvey 1993). Self-employed families benefit from autonomy and control over their work hours and schedules – work characteristics closely linked to job satisfaction among low-wage workers. For example, like other self-employed partners in the study, Howard’s work enables Roxanne to stay at home and provide childcare for their newborn child.

Yet, it should be noted that self-employment might not be a sufficient strategy in and of itself, as low-wage job satisfaction is contingent on both economic and non-economic resources. Howard and Roxanne would not be able to enjoy the flexibility of Howard’s job and resulting work-family balance unless his job also paid enough for them to get by on his earnings alone. Alternatively, families may opt for jobs that are “like family”, which offer forgiving and informally flexible workplaces alongside coworkers who provide kin-like levels of social support. However, as Adele’s and Ramona’s experiences illustrate, these employment arrangements may also present families with scenarios of work-family conflict, as the expectations of employers and employees may not correspond over time.

The affirmation experiences of families also attest to the significance of including the whole household in measurements of job satisfaction. For example, Patty’s well-being is intimately tied to her husband’s job satisfaction. In her discussions about her husband’s job history, Patty makes clear how his transition to self-employment has positively affected the entire household. As previous literature has discussed, job satisfaction among low-wage workers is perhaps even more contingent on work-family balance. If job satisfaction and well-being are also connected, then employment

circumstances which facilitate work-family balance are particularly important for low-income families' ability to maintain a positive family environment.

Finally, families' affirmation experiences reveal low-wage workers' desire for work that provides intrinsic benefits. Despite literature which suggests low-wage workers are principally motivated by employment's extrinsic rewards, the affirmation experiences of FLP families show intrinsic benefits continue to be quite important to families.

Perhaps the most striking example of this is Anna, who successfully opens a school of therapeutic massage in her county in PA. Anna and her husband, Roman, express great pride in doing something that the whole community can benefit from. Sandra, the NC nursing assistant who returned to school and eventually landed a full-time RN job, also attests to the importance of the intrinsic rewards of work for low-wage workers. Sandra's family-like experiences with the elderly residents at her former employer motivated her to continue her education and seek a higher paying career still within the nursing field. The priority low-income families place on affirmation provides an important counter to the notion that low-income workers do not value work or believe there is no dignity in working hard (Murray 1984, 1994). Instead, nonmetropolitan low-income workers desire pride and status in their (low-wage) work.

4.6.1 Employment Decisions of Low-Wage Workers

The FLP data also provide an opportunity to observe how a job's level of affirmation motivates families' decisions about work. In direct contrast with findings from existing literature which indicate voluntary changes in employment are correlated with upward economic mobility (Poppe, Strawn and Martinson 2004), some families

select “better” jobs that actually pay less. Take, for example, Brenda, the 35-year old PA mother mentioned in the previous chapter. Brenda quits an under-the-table job because the pay she receives isn’t the amount she was promised. Brenda’s wage at a former job was even more modest than the under-the-table rate, yet she opts out of work (and income) altogether due to her husband’s boss’s deception. Bonnie, also mentioned above, leaves a chain grocery store pharmacy job with a better wage and benefits for her old job at a smaller pharmacy. She cites the unprofessional attitude of the chain store pharmacy supervisor as the reason for her abrupt decision, and vows to get her old job back and never leave it again.

Despite attention by previous literature to the importance of some aspects of affirmation, such as the detrimental role of corrupt or incompetent supervision (Hodson 2001), scholars should fully consider the affirmation dimension when addressing the employment choices of low-wage workers in low-income families. As demonstrated above, such families incorporate both affirmation and rewards when transitioning through work, and both rewards and affirmation motivate families’ decisions. Sharon illustrates how rewards, rather than “love of the job”, motivated her into a care work occupation. Rewards, however, were not her sole motivation for changing her employment circumstances, as Sharon discusses the importance of having a positively affirming workplace throughout her participation in the study. Luckily, Sharon is able to locate a workplace offering both rewards and high affirmation, although she has to move through three positions at three different workplaces over the course of two years in order to do so. Without understanding the interplay of rewards and affirmation, it would be

impossible to fully understand Sharon's actions and employment choices, and the like actions of other nonmetropolitan families navigating similar options.

Thinking more broadly about the five dimensions, families on the whole prioritize rewards, followed quite closely by affirmation, although there is considerable heterogeneity even among the 71 FLP families. Although this chapter focuses on families who strongly consider affirmation, many other families prioritize rewards above all other dimensions. Abe, a PA father mentioned in the previous chapter, maintains a potentially dangerous job at a chemical plant because he believes it is the highest-paying job he can find given his level of education. If a safer job of an equivalent reward level became available, it is very possible Abe would choose the safer job and experience the best of both worlds, but for the time being it is clear the rewards of employment are his – and his family's – priority.

Families in this study also consider other dimensions when thinking about their employment. Katie and Samantha weigh the potential costs of employment against their known reward, and decide to refrain from entering the workforce until the level of reward makes the expenditure of going to work worthwhile (or until daycare is no longer a prohibitive expense). Despite Sharon's emphasis on rewards and affirmation when selecting her own employment, Sharon's husband maintains the importance of affirmation and keeping his job despite other, higher-paying options. As he has stayed at the same workplace for six years, it seems he may also prioritize consistency of employment above rewards.

Given the longitudinal nature of the study and the ability to follow families' actions as well as attitudes, this work informs how poor people make choices. Assuming the economic rewards of employment are most important to nonmetropolitan low-income families does not adequately capture the range of job characteristics important to workers in these families. Without knowing what criteria are important to families from both objective and affective standpoints, it is impossible to understand what types of employment will work for them, or how families are able to make "bad jobs" into good employment arrangements.

It also seems that low wage workers and their families do not adhere to a specific theory of decision making. Both the rational choice and moral economy perspectives partially inform how such workers make choices. For example, families are rational actors in that they identify clear values, such as high economic reward, and then select employment options to meet those criteria. Some families also exercise risk aversion in that they prefer tradition over innovation (Scott 1977). Take for example both Abe and Sharon's husband, who maintain dangerous and low-paying jobs, respectively, while also recognizing the limitations of their current level of education. Abe and Sharon's husband seem to prefer their jobs' rewards and consistency, again respectively. If both men were to improve their educational credentials, they might be able to find jobs with better attributes across the full range of dimensions.

Conversely, other families deprioritize job continuity in favor of other dimensions, such as rewards, which does not adhere strictly to a moral economy paradigm. Perhaps, then, the most informative consideration when thinking about the

“choices” of low-income families is reality of choice under conditions of constraint. Low-income nonmetropolitan families are faced with pervasive limitations in terms of the types of jobs available to them, as most available jobs offer prohibitively low wages and few non-economic rewards.²⁰ Workers in these households may also be reacting to the growth of noncomparable risk in the workplace, in which risk-sharing between employers and employees has ceased (O’Rand 2011). Instead, employees’ workplace insecurities have become par for the course as employers fail to prioritize worker security in lieu of flexibility (Shuey and O’Rand 2004).

An individual’s awareness of economic constraints may encourage them to take unnecessary risks and maintain a dangerous, stressful or harmful employment arrangement for fear they will not be able to secure another job. Economic constraints may also cause others to opt out of work, as low wages are literally “not worth it” given childcare expenses. As low-wage work trends upward, it is possible more workers, including those living in metropolitan places, will have to make similar choices under similar constraints.

Although the FLP data do not provide a sample of higher-income workers for comparison purposes, affirmation may be especially important in this population for several reasons. Like the typical worker addressed in the job satisfaction literature, low-wage workers value work’s extrinsic and intrinsic aspects. However, with few exceptions, the range of employment options available to these families is comprised of jobs with low

²⁰ Again, please see Appendix E for the comprehensive list of FLP families’ occupations.

economic rewards. Thus, families cannot achieve self-esteem and gratification through their earnings, especially in comparison to higher-wage reference groups. Affirmation at work might provide a key source of achievement, happiness and well-being, especially given these families will most likely never experience a period of high earnings.²¹

High affirming jobs can also allow families to experience success and differentiate themselves from other low-income households. Self-employment and ownership of one's own business signifies high status, even in the absence of correspondingly high earnings.²² Workplaces that are "like family" also offer more than extra-forgiving social support. Being able to call a coworker or boss "family" signifies the personal investment of employers in their workers, especially given the lack of more traditional worker investments like high wages, health care, retirement plans, paid vacation and company stock. Nonmetropolitan workers are in a position to have noticed changes in worker investment across all levels of job prestige given the transformation of the rural economy, and so may seek out "like family" workplaces for these reasons.

Finally, affirmation simply may function as a sustaining mechanism for low-wage workers as they face long periods of low wages, constrained economic mobility and chaotic family circumstances. Even though low-wage workers recognize their jobs are not ideal, workers transform opportunities of self-employment and having workplaces that are "like family" into good enough jobs for them. The affirmation dimension is an

²¹ As the next chapter will discuss, most FLP families experience static economic trajectories.

²² Howard, who owns the construction business with his friends in PA, suggests this when he mentions he actually doesn't make as much money as people seem to think he does. Thus, Howard, and other similarly-employed workers, may benefit from others' perceptions of their success in lieu of actual economic success.

integral addition to understanding which jobs constitute “good” ones even among the limited work options of nonmetropolitan, low-wage workers.

5. “*My Ladder’s Broke*”: How Nonmetropolitan Low-Income Families Experience Economic Immobility

Low-income families’ pathways out of poverty have been the subject of intense interdisciplinary research. Sociologists and public policy scholars alike have exhaustively examined rates of poverty exit among impoverished families (Nolan and Erikson 2007; Mangum et al. 2003). Scholars have established that changes in social support or marital, educational and employment status will most likely enable families to transition out of poverty (Pandey and Kim 2008; Simmons et al. 2007; Mauldin and Mimura 2007). Some research has shown that a more sustained exit from poverty is possible for families who add income to the household through employment or the addition of an employed member, save their earnings and eventually begin to build equity through the purchase of a home or other interest-bearing investment. However, other research strongly suggests that poverty exit is severely limited for a smaller proportion of families (Bane and Ellwood 1986) due to economic, educational and other circumstances (Nolan and Erikson 2007). Repeated cycles of poverty and welfare dependence are also noted in the literature (Bane and Ellwood 1986; Harris 1996; Stevens 1999).

Given the prevalence and nature of poverty in nonmetropolitan places in particular, it is possible that families in these places experience an even more daunting challenge when attempting to exit poverty. Thus, it is first important to understand the degree to which impoverished and low-income nonmetropolitan families are able to experience meaningful and sustained upward economic trajectories. Second, changes in nonmetropolitan households’ social support and marital, educational or employment

status may not provide the same impetus for upward economic mobility as evidenced in existing literature regarding the urban poor. Although obtaining employment is a central facet of upward economic mobility, the act of simply finding a job does not automatically induce stable future employment or result in breaching one's poverty or low-income status. The analyses below will address how work-related instabilities among nonmetropolitan households complicate employment's effectiveness for facilitating economic mobility. Finally, due to the aforementioned range of environmental and educational constraints on families' employment outcomes, nonmetropolitan families may have developed alternative economic goals and/or definitions of economic success that subsequently shape families' ideals or behaviors. The FLP data provide the unique opportunity to study economic mobility from the family perspective, through households' subjective thoughts about their poverty and economic im/mobility.

Following a review of previous research regarding household-level economic mobility, this chapter will illustrate the variability in the short-term economic outcomes of FLP families, concentrating on upward and no change trajectories.¹ The chapter will then briefly address families' perceptions of their economic mobility, including families' dreams, aspirations and expectations for their long-term financial futures. Finally, the chapter will conclude with the implications of nonmetropolitan low-income families' constrained short-term economic mobility.

¹ An explicit discussion of downward trajectories has been excluded here in favor of a focus on the more predominant trajectory types. Downward trajectories are the least prevalent trajectories in the sample, and in all but two cases, they result from the households' job loss or a reduction in work hours.

5.1 Intergenerational Mobility and Reproduction of Poverty

Sociological stratification research has a rich tradition of the study of economic mobility, beginning with father-to-son occupational mobility and status attainment in the 1960s (Duncan 1965; Blau and Duncan 1967; Ganzeboom, Treiman, and Ultee 1991). Such scholarship has attempted to explain the transmission of poverty,² as well as establish the longer-term effects of parents' poverty on their children's subsequent marital status, household composition, fertility, occupation, educational attainment (Chase-Landsale and Brooks-Gunn 1995; Duncan et al. 1998) and economic outcomes (Chase-Landsale and Brooks-Gunn 1995; Corcoran 1995).

Although the majority of poor children escape poverty as adults, poor children are much more likely to be poor in adulthood as compared to nonpoor children (Corcoran 2001). This occurs in part because impoverished parents experience non-intact family compositions which disadvantage children's future employment prospects and income (Corcoran 1995). Despite evidence which suggests there is as much intergenerational economic mobility as there is persistence, most mobility occurs across adjacent income quintiles rather than across the greater income spectrum (Corcoran 2001).

5.1.1 Poverty Spells and Welfare Exits

Persistence in intergenerational economic attainment may be explained in part through the prevalence of poverty spells, particularly as spells differentially and

² Blau and Duncan investigated – and rejected – the notion of a “vicious cycle of poverty”, i.e. cultural deficiencies passed on from parents to children resulting in a permanent economic and social underclass (Blau and Duncan 1967:199, as noted in Corcoran 1995).

chronically occur to a subsector of impoverished households. Although poverty spells are relatively temporary for the majority of the poor and are not likely to have permanent effects on future economic success or general well-being (Corcoran et al. 1985), studies have noted some variability in terms of the length, number of and resulting effects of poverty spells.³ Poverty spells last longer when the reason for their beginning is birth to a female household head, and children born into poverty experience the longest spells (Bane and Ellwood 1986). Individuals who spend longer periods of time in poverty are more likely to stay there or return to poverty status within the relatively near future (Corcoran et al. 1985; Duncan et al. 1984; Stevens 1999; Oh 2001). A smaller relative proportion of the population experiences chronic poverty or durations of poverty lasting 10 years or more (Haveman 1994; Oh 2001).⁴ Thus, despite the fact that the majority of the impoverished exit poverty after a relatively short period of time, a smaller proportion of the population experiences extended spells of poverty.

Numerous studies addressing rates of welfare receipt by single-parent, female-headed households (Pierce 1978; Duncan et al. 1984; Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986; Antel 1992; Harris 1996) also contribute to the body of knowledge regarding poverty spells. In fact, due to public and scholarly concerns about the effectiveness of welfare

³ For example, data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) estimated 25 percent of the U.S. population were poor for at least one year during the period 1969 to 1978. Only 2 percent were poor during 8 or more years of the same period (Corcoran et al. 1985).

⁴ In a ten-year study of the PSID, although 25 percent of respondents spent at least one year in poverty, less than 1 percent experienced persistent poverty lasting eight of the ten years (Duncan et al. 1984). Bane and Ellwood (1986) estimate 12 percent of poverty spells last 10 years or more. An internationally comparative study of chronic poverty notes 50 percent of all person years of absolute poverty in the US are experienced by 6 percent of the population (Yaquib 2002).

reform, most studies of “poverty mobility” actually address formerly welfare-reliant families who have transitioned from the rolls.⁵ This literature, which really addresses the discontinuation of welfare receipt rather than poverty exit, emphasizes the relationship between welfare receipt and work status, child support receipt, educational attainment and marital status as well how changes in the above statuses influence the likelihood of getting off and staying off welfare.

In similar manner to the poverty spell literature mentioned above, researchers have identified several categories of welfare recipients, including short-term, long-term and chronic welfare cyclers. These definitions are contingent on the length of welfare receipt (Duncan et al. 1984; Bergmark and Backman 2004) and whether or not the respondent has experienced recurrent spells of welfare receipt (Harris 1996). These typologies have implications for permanent transitions off welfare, as long-term and short-term recipients and welfare cyclers have differential educational attainment, gender, family status, race and social capital (Bergmark and Backman 2004). Educational and employment outcomes for children also differ depending on whether or not their parents were short-term or long-term welfare recipients (Duncan et al. 1984).⁶

Employment and marriage have received much attention from the welfare- and poverty-exit literature, as changes in economic or family status such as loss of a job

⁵ Impoverished families not linked to cash assistance are often absent from these analyses, although some have suggested a high level of crossover between impoverished populations and those receiving some type of social welfare resource (i.e. cash assistance, disability insurance, Medicaid) (Duncan et al. 1984). Single mother households are quite targeted in this literature.

⁶ For example, a study of Swedish welfare recipients found leaving long-term welfare receipt for employment provided the most favorable outcomes in terms of maximizing protection from future welfare cycling (Bergmark and Backman 2004).

(Rank 2004) or divorce (Corcoran et al. 1985) are major conduits for household poverty. Thus, the addition of income through employment or marriage can function as an anti-poverty policy in and of itself. Yet, studies continually find high rates of concurrent work and welfare receipt among single-parent families (Shirk, Bennett, and Aber 1999), despite single-mothers' strong preference for working rather than receiving cash assistance (Monroe and Tiller 2001). Employment often fails to meet the needs of single mother households due to their increased likelihood of low-wage earnings and barriers to higher-paying jobs. Other circumstances, such as scheduling work around conflicts rising from child-care responsibilities, often undermine the economic success that a transition to employment should provide (Harris 1993; Harris 1996; McCrate and Smith 1998; Corcoran et al. 2000; Hennessy 2005).⁷

Critics of employment as a successful instrument for facilitating a transition off welfare observe the frequency at which single-parents employ “income packaging”, combining multiple forms of income from work, social support, or other nonwork sources (Edin and Lein 1997; Marianne 1998). Still, there is some support for employment in terms of decreasing poverty rates, as increasing maternal employment is responsible for half of the decline in child poverty since the 1996 reform (Bianchi 1999; Lichter and Crowley 2004). The overall benefit of employment among welfare-recipient single

⁷ Harris's (1996) analysis of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) exemplifies the failure of work to successfully move single mothers from welfare to financial independence – one quarter of women returned to welfare after one year of exiting, and 42 percent returned within two years. Participants of welfare demonstration programs meant to permanently employ single parents maintained high rates of job loss within one year (Corcoran 2000). A post-welfare reform study finds families who had ever received welfare reportedly fared worse economically after two years of employment than comparable families who had never received welfare benefits (Hennessy 2005).

mothers is dubious at best, especially considering that some types of work have negative effects on children's well-being that do not outweigh the monetary benefits (Wilson, Ellwood, and Chase-Lansdale 1995).

Marriage has also been strongly posited to reduce rates of welfare receipt, alleviate poverty and generally improve the well-being of impoverished families (Brown 2010). Both poverty and welfare receipt are lower for those who married and stayed married than for the never-married or divorced (Lichter, Grafe and Brown 2003). For women who marry but later divorce, rates of poverty are higher than for never-married women. Marriage as a means of transitioning from welfare seems to work best when single mothers "get married, stay married, and marry well" (Lichter et al.2003:62). Getting and staying married also offsets the deleterious effect of having a disadvantaged family background on economic well-being (Lichter et al. 2003). Finally, marriage is also highly correlated with higher levels of postsecondary educational attainment, which in and of itself has strong positive effects on economic status (Pandey and Kim 2008).

There are many limitations to the effectiveness of marriage or partnering as a strategy for transitioning from welfare. Marriage occurs at a slower rate among black single mothers, who are also more likely to be impoverished than their white or childless counterparts (Smith, Morgan, and Cox 1996). The actions of black and white mothers alike indicate a developing separation between births and first marriages, as contemporary mothers experience much longer delays to marriage following a nonmarital

birth than their earlier contemporaries (Gibson-Davis 2011).⁸ Transitions to marriage from cohabitation are lower for poor women, as only one third of poor women marry within 5 years as compared to nonpoor women (Lichter, Quinn, and Mellott 2006). Additionally, some research has indicated that low-income, unmarried mothers would have higher rates of poverty than married moms even if they married their children's fathers (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002). Given the potential importance of positive economic well-being as a precursor to marriage among low-income cohabiting couples (Gibson-Davis 2007, 2009; Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan 2005), marriage might be a particularly unlikely strategy for poverty escape or prevention as compared to employment.

Although the dissolution of a marriage generally increases the odds of falling into poverty for female partners, in some cases, marriage dissolution is actually correlated with exiting poverty (Mauldin and Mimura 2007). Ooms (1998) addresses the limitations of transitioning definitively off welfare using employment or marriage alone, and argues for a "marriage plus" strategy which includes the combination of work and marriage (see also Lichter et al. 2003). Marriage, like employment, is not a universally-successful means of exiting welfare,⁹ although under certain circumstances or in combination with

⁸ There seems to be some divergence between attitudes and behaviors, as low-income women do not promote the idea of having large gaps between birth and marriage (Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton and Garrett-Peters 2008). Delays in marriage are more likely driven by internally- and externally- imposed constraints, including personal financial goals (see below) or availability of suitable marriage partners (Cherlin et al. 2008:932).

⁹ A follow-up study of women from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics found over half of all women who left welfare for marriage or cohabitation returned to the rolls in 5-6 years (Harris 1996). Another study found only 1/3 of mothers moved to economic self-sufficiency within three years; maternal education,

other status changes, such as in employment, marriage can enable a welfare exit. It seems employment is the more effective of the two competing strategies for facilitating poverty exit. Changes in household income significantly factor into the beginnings and endings of poverty spells. A change in marital status (i.e. getting married) has not been found to be as effective at ending spells as an increase in the head's or overall household's earnings (Bane and Ellwood 1986).

The analyses below will address the viability of employment and marriage as a means of poverty exit for nonmetropolitan households. This chapter will make several other contributions, including the consideration of low-income and impoverished households rather than a more exclusive population of welfare-recipient families specifically. This chapter also more carefully scrutinizes the frequency and subsequent impact of employment instabilities, particularly given the types of work and wages low-income nonmetropolitan workers are likely to obtain. Unreliable and variable employment requires families to change their jobs frequently, sometimes on a weekly basis, in order to earn a stable and sufficient amount of income (Venkatesh 2006, 2008). Thus, employment may fail as a poverty-exit strategy for even the most industrious households. Marriage is likewise a viable, and potentially successful, upward mobility strategy for single-mother families, although it is also by no means a foolproof solution to

hours worked, and employment status were important to the positive economic outcome, as was partnering of any kind (no difference between married or unmarried partners) (Simmons, Dolan and Braun 2007).

poverty. Furthermore, the promotion of marriage is not a policy solution for partnered or married families who remain impoverished despite their idealized relationship status.

5.1.2 The Influence of the Nonmetropolitan Context

The implications of poverty spells for nonmetropolitan families' longer-term economic well-being are particularly interesting, as prior research has documented the pervasive, chronic and legendary nature of poverty in places such as the Appalachian mountain region (Plunkett and Bowman 1973; Billings and Blee 2002) and parts of the South and post-industrial Northeast (Duncan 2000). As compared to urban and suburban areas, nonmetropolitan areas are characterized by a higher-than-average proportion of nonstandard work (McLaughlin and Jensen 2008), and nonmetropolitan workers are more likely to be employed in contingent or varied-hour work. Benefits and wages also tend to be lower for nonstandard workers, which creates a disproportionately greater amount of hardship for families seeking to leave welfare (Haynie and Gorman 1999). Furthermore, nonmetropolitan single mothers do not reap the same economic benefits from employment as do their urban counterparts, although cohabitating or co-residing mothers have higher economic well-being than mothers living without a partner (Brown and Lichter 2004).

The rural context is also characterized by a strong historical presence of familialism and traditionalism that constrains current mobility opportunities for low-income rural families. For example, Cynthia Duncan's (2000) study of communities in the Mississippi Delta and the Appalachian Mountains identifies a dual-class system of "haves" and "have-nots", between which there is little social movement. Family and

institutional legacies (Plunkett and Bowman 1973; Billings and Blee 2000) also create mobility constraints for families through control of dominant industries, such as coal mining or agriculture. Rural environments, however, are not totally without mobility opportunities for low-income people, as rural areas are often the site of social justice and activism movements (Billings and Blee 2000). Asset-building programs such as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) have larger-than expected take-up rates (Grinstein-Weiss et al. 2007). Due to these dynamics, nonmetropolitan contexts present an interesting supplement to the economic mobility literature.

5.1.3 Routes to Escaping Poverty and Welfare-Reliance

Research addressing household welfare- and poverty- mobility has so far revealed the extent to which transitioning from poverty can be daunting and temporary. In many cases, a definitive “exit” from poverty does not exist, especially for the smaller proportion of families and individuals who experience persistent, long-term spells of poverty. There should also be a distinction between exiting welfare versus exiting poverty, as families who exit welfare do not necessarily exit poverty, too.¹⁰ Changes in employment and marital status, child support receipt and/or educational attainment alone do not produce strong results in terms of definitive exits from poverty or welfare (Meyer and Hu 1999).

Additionally, the particularities of a nonmetropolitan context may complicate households’ poverty exit on three accounts. First, nonmetropolitan places may preclude

¹⁰ For example, a study of pre-reform welfare-leavers from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) found 41 percent of leavers still remained poor after 5 years (Meyer and Cancian 1998).

the effectiveness of employment or marriage for households' poverty exit. Impoverished nonmetropolitan households are already more likely to be married and employed than are their urban counterparts. Thus, becoming employed or married is not an option for these households, and households must rely on alternative routes out of poverty. Second, nonmetropolitan households' opportunities for economic mobility are quite constrained by low wages and a prevalence of nonstandard work. Households' prospects of moving above the poverty line by way of employment are even more limited in these environments than for their urban counterparts. Finally, familialism and traditionalism present in nonmetropolitan contexts may actively constrain the economic opportunities of households not part of the "right" families or social groups.¹¹

The following analyses will begin to address the potential limitations of employment, marriage and the nonmetropolitan context for households' upward economic mobility. The section below begins with a discussion of families' economic trajectories, including the frequency, degree and role of employment in FLP families' upward trajectories.

5.2 FLP Families' Trajectories

Chapter three introduced the trajectory dimension, which categorizes FLP families' economic status over time. Trajectory consists of three categories – upward downward and no change – which encapsulate the overall variation in economic status

¹¹ Cynthia Duncan's fieldwork (2000) in the Appalachian town of "Blackwell" illuminates the critical importance of a having a good family name for securing employment or access to other resources, such as store credit, in times of need. She documents a similar phenomenon, along family name and racial lines, in the town "Dahlia" in the Mississippi Delta.

per family. Although extending the longitudinal scope of the study would provide a more accurate picture of families' long term economic mobility, two trends appear during the period of families' study participation. First, no change trajectories are most the common trajectories by a large margin. This indicates that most families do not experience any net change in their employment and economic circumstances. However, a subset of families within the no change category experiences lower levels of employment consistency, leading to frequently-occurring spells of reduced earnings or unemployment. These families, and the implications of their employment instabilities, will also be discussed in more detail below. Second, families in upward trajectories generally experience only small gains in income due to the modest hourly wages offered by nonmetropolitan employment. Despite their upward trajectories, very few families are able to save money and build wealth rather than live paycheck-to-paycheck.

The sections below will address these findings through a discussion of the frequency, degree and contributing factors of families' upward and no change trajectories. Downward trajectories are excluded from this discussion for several reasons. Although twelve families across the sample fall into this category, downward trajectories are actually less common than upward and no change trajectories. Yet, like their upward and no change counterparts, households' downward trajectories are driven by changes in families' employment status. In most cases, these trajectories occur due to the loss of a

job or a reduction in work hours – such as from full-time to part-time.¹² In two exceptions, households’ downward trajectories were due to the respondents’ incarceration. The following section will discuss households’ upward trajectories.

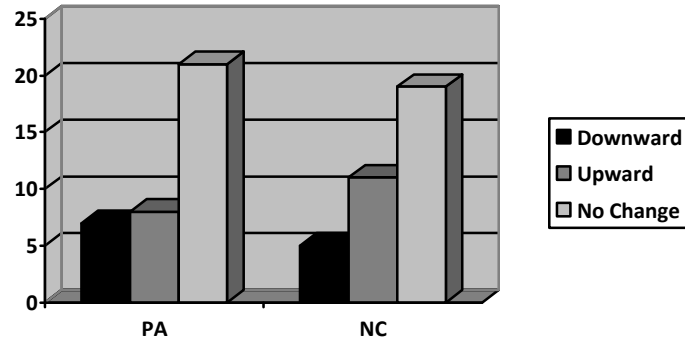


Figure 4: Number of FLP Trajectories by State

5.2.1 Upward Trajectories

Over one quarter of the FLP sample experiences an upward economic trajectory during their participation in the study. Slightly more families in NC experience these types of trajectories as compared to families living in PA (see Table 5 below). Among the PA families, upward trajectories are approximately equally distributed across the three counties with three each in Blair and Cambria counties and two families in Huntingdon County. The same distribution of upward trajectories holds across the three NC counties with four families each in Sampson and Wayne counties and three families in Wilson.¹³

¹² Although it is beyond the scope of the chapter to discuss, these reductions in employment are typically driven by the employer and the seasonal nature of work, e.g. retail holiday hours.

¹³ Among these upward trajectory families, all of the PA families are white. The NC sample, which is more racially diverse and representative of the region, contains 5 white and 6 African-American upward trajectory families.

Across the nineteen families in this subsample, the median period of observation is 33 months.¹⁴

Table 5: FLP Trajectories

	PA	NC	Overall
Upward	8	11	19 (26.7%)
Downward	7	5	12 (17.0%)
No Change	21	19	40 (56.3%)
Total	36	35	71

FLP households achieve upward trajectories through a range of changes in employment status. These changes include becoming employed, obtaining new job offering higher wages, receiving a raise at their current place of employment or adding income from another job (either by way of second job or an additional worker). Contrary to findings in the literature reviewed above, the experiences of the nineteen upwardly-mobile FLP households above offer no evidence for marriage as a means of enhancing families' upward economic mobility. Instead, all nineteen FLP families rely on the addition of earned income from employment to improve the financial stability of their households. Furthermore, most families experiencing an upward trajectory do not make large gains in income or wealth, nor do they move definitively out of poverty or low-income status. The following sections will discuss the range of experiences of upward trajectory FLP households, beginning with families who became employed following a previous state of unemployment.

¹⁴ It is important to note that the median for NC (39 months) is longer than for PA (28.5 months) due to the state-specific administration of follow-up interviews.

5.2.2 Becoming Employed

Upward trajectory households whose members became employed over the course of the study include married and single-mother households alike.¹⁵ Although the households included here experienced substantial periods of unemployment prior to becoming employed, this subset also includes two households with relatively short periods of unemployment corresponding to the births of their focal children. In five of the seven cases, respondents find employment opportunities within the food service and retail sectors, including full- and part-time employment at a buffet restaurant, a sandwich shop, McDonalds and “big box” retailers Wal-Mart and Sam’s Club.

Although these households experienced an absolute increase in their income, respondents’ average earnings from these jobs equaled approximately \$7.64/hour (in 2012 dollars), thus falling short of high rewards. Even with the addition of earned income from employment, most upward trajectory households in this subcategory rely on periodic help or partial assistance from extended family and social services, a finding that is also supported in the literature reviewed above. For example, Marcia, the young PA mother previously mentioned in Chapter 3, becomes employed full-time at local sandwich shop. Despite her upward trajectory, Marcia’s reported earnings amount to only \$235/week, which places her new job squarely in the low rewards category. However, Marcia is able to make ends meet through the help of her parents, who allow her to

¹⁵ Seven households fell into this subcategory. The single-mother households in this part of the sample periodically include additional household members, such as romantic partners and extended-family relatives, whose economic contribution to the household is unspecified. Several single mothers within the upward trajectory category eventually establish their own households over the course of the study.

maintain residence in their trailer and provide childcare and other sources of support which offset Marcia's living expenses.

Harriet and her family find themselves in a similar situation, as Harriet's move toward employment provides only modest wages. Harriet, who is a 19-year old white single mother in NC, moves out of the home she shares with her partner shortly after she gives birth to their child. The ethnographer reports, "Harriet left him because he is an alcoholic, and she wants a better life for her child." Harriet, who is unemployed, moves in with her 40-year-old mother and spends the next 16 months steadily improving her economic situation. Harriet begins attaining the goals she articulates in her initial interview: finding a good job and getting her GED.

Harriet attends GED preparation classes at night, applies for and receives Work First and actively begins looking for a job. Harriet first finds employment with McDonalds, which pays her \$6.26/hour. Although she is scheduled for 40 hours per week, Harriet remains classified as a part-time employee and is not eligible for health or other fringe benefits. Several months later, Harriet has secured a temporary job at Wal-Mart. Harriet's mother explains she feels more secure about the health of the focal child and Harriet's ability to provide for her now that Harriet has a "better" job: "*If things go well and [Harriet's] on time and does everything she's told and she does real good...[Wal-Mart]'ll give em a [non-temp] spot in the store.*" Harriet is promoted to full-time at Wal-Mart, where she maintains employment until the end of her participation in the study. Harriet stocks shelves during the night shift and qualifies for medical benefits due to her full-time status with Wal-Mart. With Harriet's steady upward earnings

progression, her family is able to eliminate their debt. However, Harriet and her daughter continue to live with Harriet's mother, and also meet the income qualifications for food stamps. Even by the end of her participation in the study in July 2006, the household reports receiving food stamps in the amount of \$283 per month.

As Harriet's and Marcia's narratives indicate, households experiencing upward trajectories do not necessarily have the highest incomes, nor are they any more likely to have better financial standing than families with no change trajectories. In fact, some families with no change trajectories actually earn more, as it is securing and retaining one of the "right" jobs and not the addition of just any job that matters most for households' overall earnings potential. For example, Jane and Rick, who are mentioned in Chapter 3, maintain a no change, steady trajectory, but also have two of the highest reward jobs in the FLP study sample.¹⁶ Among upward trajectory households who become employed from a previous state of unemployment, only one household epitomizes the ideal economic success story. Corinne, previously mentioned above, moves through a long period of unemployment and dependence on her family of origin to a high reward, high affirmation, consistent, low cost, full-time job with benefits. Corrine's case, discussed below, is particularly exceptional given she only has a high school diploma.

¹⁶ Jane and Rick's jobs provide higher relative wages, fringe benefits and other perks such as membership at the discount warehouse Sam's Club and a clothing allowance for work uniforms. They also maintain a high level of consistency. Despite their exceptional income and economic stability, however, Jane and Rick also express low affirmation sentiments about work.

5.2.3 A Rare Success Story

As discussed in chapter 4 above, Corinne obtains a job working nights at a hospital ER reception desk.¹⁷ Corinne left college as a sophomore in order to move back home and give birth to her first child. She entered the study in February of 2003 and spent fourteen months attempting to find a job. Prior to finding her job at the hospital, Corinne applied to entry-level clerical and cashier positions at another local hospital and a few check-cashing establishments, respectively. She also submitted her resume to the employment website Monster.com, and made visits to the unemployment office, a temporary hiring agency and the Employment Security Commission. During an interview regarding her employment history, Corinne reported she had previously held only three jobs at three national chain retail stores. Corinne made \$6.26-\$7.84/hour at these jobs.

As her job search continued, Corinne expressed increasing levels of distress about the financial strain she was causing her family. Corinne lived in a modular home with her mother, stepfather and 15-year-old stepbrother, and relied on them entirely for financial support.¹⁸ One year into her job search, Corinne established a child support request for her child's father and qualified for cash assistance under the Work First program. Corinne also received job application assistance from this program, including two mandatory days per week with the "Job Club". She verbally listed the various places she had applied for work during her FLP interviews, and discussed moving to Charlotte, NC because she thought she would have comparatively more job options in this large, urban area. Corinne

¹⁷ Corinne makes \$11.22/hour before 11pm. After 11pm, her night shift differential raises her pay to \$12.22/hour. This wage places her on the highest end of earners in the FLP sample across both states.

¹⁸ The stepbrother displays violent and criminal behavior resulting in arrest. He later leaves the home.

reported gaining ten pounds due to the stress of being unemployed and admitted her emotional health was “*fluctuating*”. She clarified the source of her stress when she said, “*I can’t seem to get on my feet the way I want to. I’m trying so hard and I get frustrated when people keep reminding me that, you know, ‘you need to get on your feet’. I know that, you don’t have to tell me*”.

Corinne’s eventual employment and upward trajectory are especially striking given her limited prior work experience, absence of a college degree and the amount of time and effort Corinne invested in her job search. Corinne maintained her employment at the hospital from August 2004 at least through her final follow-up interview in August 2006. At last contact with the study, Corinne had given birth to a second child, was living with the father of this child in her own home and received a raise at work amounting to \$1 more per hour. She also qualified for a comprehensive benefits package at work including vision, dental, health and life insurance as well as short- and long- term disability.

Corinne’s is one of the few “bottom-to-top” upward trajectories across both the PA and NC interview households. Her acquisition of a steady, full-time job with benefits places her squarely in a high rewards position that also provides her with a high level of affirmation. Though seven FLP households achieve upward mobility through the process of becoming employed, the jobs they obtain generally fail to provide above-poverty wages and/or fringe benefits. Thus, scholarly expectations should be adjusted given the more likely scenario: nonmetro households who become employed experience continued poverty with only a modest influx of income from low wages.

5.2.4 Making Modest Improvements

Families also achieve upward trajectories by adding to their existing earnings via an additional source of employment, a raise at the current place of employment or by opting into a higher-paying job. This subset of families (n=9) also includes both single mother and married households across NC and PA. Five households obtain new jobs with better wages, including Abe and Emma, who benefit from Abe's dangerous but financially rewarding chemical factory job. Sandra, whose "like family" experiences as a nursing assistant motivate her to continue her education, eventually obtains an RN job with health benefits, thereby definitively improving her financial standing. Another NC household, Anita and her husband, Tony, are the parents of two girls under age 5. Anita is unemployed while Tony is the household's sole source of income. He has been steadily working for the same oil-and-gas company for the past eight years. Although Tony suddenly fails a drug test at work and is let go,¹⁹ he finds a similar, higher-paying job at a smaller company within a week. In addition to a higher wage at this new job, Tony's family also receives propane for their home heating needs. His previous job did not supply this service. These households obtain a higher level of rewards, including higher wages and sometimes fringe and other benefits, by opting into a new job.²⁰

¹⁹ Tony tested positive for marijuana. Anita seems to maintain that Tony doesn't smoke, he was just too close to a family member who was smoking, but this also reads as a weak assertion on Anita's part.

²⁰This group of households also includes Angela and Carl, who begins working at the same family-owned local business with his wife. Also included are Bobbi and Ryan, as Ryan gets a job with benefits at a furniture store with the help of his cousins. All but one of these five families is a married-couple household, and all but one quit their prior jobs to work elsewhere. Although the exception, Tony, was fired from his prior job, he finds the new job within a week.

Rather than increasing earnings through a change in employment, two other households get pay increases at their current jobs. Pamela, the PA mother who frequently works overtime as a care provider at an assisted living home for mentally- and behaviorally- challenged teens, was eventually offered a raise from \$8.50 to \$9.50/hour.²¹ She often works overnight shifts, regularly clocking between 60 and 80 hours per week, but does not qualify for health benefits because she is not technically a “full-time” employee. Due to the high rate of employee turnover at her workplace, Pamela boasts about currently being the most senior employee and thus, believes she is next in line for a full-time supervisory position. Despite a number of traumatic experiences during the study, including and not limited to the tragic death of her newborn second child, Sasha, a white, 19-year-old NC mother, obtains a raise and promotion to assistant manager at her place of employment, a convenience store chain.²²

Another two upward trajectory households increase their earnings through the addition of a second job. This includes Clarissa and Cary in PA, who benefit from Clarissa’s additional income when she begins working as a substitute bus driver. Although Cary’s income supports the family, Clarissa’s part time earnings supplement the household’s income and provide Clarissa the opportunity to fulfill her need to be

²¹ Pamela’s initial wage was \$7.90/hour. She worked for this company for over two years (February 2004 to June 2006) before receiving a \$1/hour raise.

²² Without her most recent promotion, Sasha would have been better characterized as having a no change trajectory with low employment consistency. Sasha’s trajectory would certainly follow a much stronger upward direction if not for several traumatic events, which is why she is generously included in the upward trajectory category.

social.²³ Alivia, a 30-year-old mother of four children mother in NC, takes a second job at a flea market food stand to supplement her income from her job as a part-time certified nursing assistant.²⁴

Although this range of employment transitions and their accompanying additional income enhances families' quality of life, the raises and additional jobs FLP households obtain provide only minor changes in their absolute economic status. Promotion opportunities within this sample are rare to begin with, and pay increases are infrequent and modest, amounting to pennies on the dollar despite months or years of service. However, this subset of families also illustrates the potential for families to trade up into better, higher-paying jobs. Both Sandra and Abe secure conventionally "good" jobs in selected industries – manufacturing and nursing. However, these coveted jobs are often simply not available to families due to the processes of closure accompanying the application or hiring process, which will be discussed in Section 5.3 below.

5.2.5 Beyond Employment: Alternative Upward Trajectories

Finally, three households experience upward trajectories due to events other than changes in employment. These alternative pathways provide families with potential long-term economic investments and the means to generate savings and wealth. Anna and Roman, who have been discussed extensively above, successfully open a school of massage therapy. Anna's school had already begun to become self-sustaining by the time

²³ Clarissa's work history includes serving food in bar/restaurants. She says she likes that kind of work because it gives her a chance to talk to people. Clarissa says becoming a nurse is her "dream job".

²⁴ It is also not unusual for households to experience more than one change in employment. At her last follow-up interview, Alivia has quit both of these jobs and has a new job with an ambulance company.

their participation in the study ended, and it has since become a stable presence in the community. The school has a regularly-updated Facebook page and website, and has expanded its services to include continuing education classes and guest speakers in various massage therapy techniques. Additionally, the school runs a full-service massage clinic. The school even offers CPR certification classes on a bi-annual basis. Though the school was initially Anna's project, both Anna and Roman take pride in the teamwork and determination required to begin the school, and it is clearly a source of pride and identity for the entire household. Though Anna's and Roman's trajectory is certainly an exception, but is still a notable example of the range of economic successes experienced by families in the FLP.²⁵

Other families in this group include Howard and Roxanne, who realize their dream of homeownership through Habitat for Humanity. Howard and Roxanne spent months searching for a house, but were not able to find any in their price range that were also in good repair. Roxanne tells the ethnographer about one house in particular that she liked, but they did not purchase the home because it required extensive foundation repair. During an interview, Roxanne screens a call from Habitat for Humanity, and tells the ethnographer they "*might get a house*". The ethnographer writes that Roxanne "gets an excited look on her face" as she explains the details of the call. The family is initially not chosen for the house, but unexpectedly learns several months later that the original family

²⁵ Anna and Roman are notably one of the few households in the study who completed college degrees. Although Roman admits his job does not require a bachelor's degree, it is clear the family's educational attainment is exceptional.

did not comply with Habitat's work requirements.²⁶ As a result, Roxanne and Howard are finally able to own their own home, a brand-new house in good repair with a modest mortgage payment of \$500 per month.²⁷

In another case, one household's trajectory does not necessitate changes in employment. Rather, an upward trajectory results from a family taking the next step toward higher earnings, financial stability and future employment. Danielle, a 24-year old African-American mother of three in NC, spends most of her participation in the study unemployed. She lives with her father and his girlfriend, but discusses wanting to find a home of her own and go back to school.²⁸ Danielle enrolls in the Work First program and plans to apply for public housing and childcare so she may begin searching for employment. Danielle's participation in the study ends after this interview, which hopefully indicates her continued upward economic trajectory.

Although most of the nineteen families classified as having upward trajectories make economic gains through changes to their employment status, the three households in this subsection – Anna/Roman, Roxanne/Howard and Danielle – acquire resources that

²⁶ Families are required to put in several hundred hours of "sweat equity" alongside the volunteers who build their homes as a qualifying condition of the program. Howard and Roxanne will be required to assist future projects, as they did not have the opportunity to do so for the building of their own home.

²⁷ Most FLP families do not own their homes. Instead, families rent, live in subsidized housing, or live with relatives and pay "rent" in the form of groceries or assisting with other household bills and expenses. Although some families in PA and NC own their trailers, they often have to pay rent for the lot those trailers are situated on. Unlike more standard housing, which tends to appreciate over time, trailers depreciate, making it difficult to obtain financing to purchase one. Furthermore, models that predate regulation by the National Manufactured Housing Construction and Safety Standards Act of 1974 are potentially high-risk and can be notoriously difficult to buy or sell (and dangerous to live in).

²⁸ Danielle's living situation is dire, as the household is without electricity, telephone or water service. She reports that her father and his sister "'waste' their money on drugs and alcohol". Danielle keeps their food in an ice cooler, runs an extension cord across the street to a neighbor's house for electricity and bathes her children at a friend's house.

will provide more stable, favorable economic outcomes over the long term. Anna and Roman benefit from Anna's earnings as a massage therapist and instructor at her school, in addition to finding pride in establishing the school itself. Roxanne and Howard's participation in Habitat for Humanity provided them with an affordable home and the opportunity to build equity through its ownership. Finally, Danielle's hopeful step toward financial stability is a small one, but the financial and job search support she will receive through Work First will hopefully ensure she eventually finds employment and, more immediately, a home with all the necessary utilities.

Changes in employment status play the critical role in ensuring FLP families' upward economic trajectories, but it is also important to note that most of the households in this subset are comprised of married or cohabitating partnerships established prior to the study (n=12). Although the addition of marriage or a cohabitating partner does not contribute to the remaining seven non-partnered households' upward trajectories, households with multiple adults may benefit from the additional flexibility of having an in-home childcare provider and/or dual incomes. Thus, although marriage itself does not provide the integral solution to escaping poverty, married or cohabitating couples benefit from the flexibility and additional time resources of having multiple adults in the home. However, changes in household's employment status remain the single largest factor associated with families' upward trajectories.

Despite the relative financial "success" of some FLP families, in most cases families have not achieved protection from financial distress. For example, most FLP families do not own their homes or have savings, liquid assets or any other forms of

wealth that would protect them if they were to suddenly lose their jobs (Keister and Destro 2008) or experience health incidents or injuries rendering them unable to work. In large part, even those families who experience upward trajectories constantly face the potential for financial adversity. Anita, whose husband Tony was unemployed for just one week over the past 8 years exemplifies this tension when she says, *“That week kind of set us back I guess you could say. We’re struggling.”* The following sections will expand on this illustration of the precarious employment status of FLP families through the discussion of no change trajectories and employment instabilities.

5.2.6 No (Net) Change Trajectories

As illustrated in Table 5 above, the majority of FLP households experience economic trajectories classified as no change. However, no change trajectories may be accompanied by low consistency in employment and frequent oscillations in household earnings and financial well-being. Figure 5 below indicates the frequency of patterns across both the consistency and trajectory dimensions. Variable trajectories include those households experiencing no net change in economic standing from the start to end of their participation in the study, yet have notable income gain or loss during that period. No change trajectories that are not variable indicate the household has maintained the same relative economic status despite changes in employment. This latter scenario occurs when families move from one job to another of the same reward level in rapid succession.

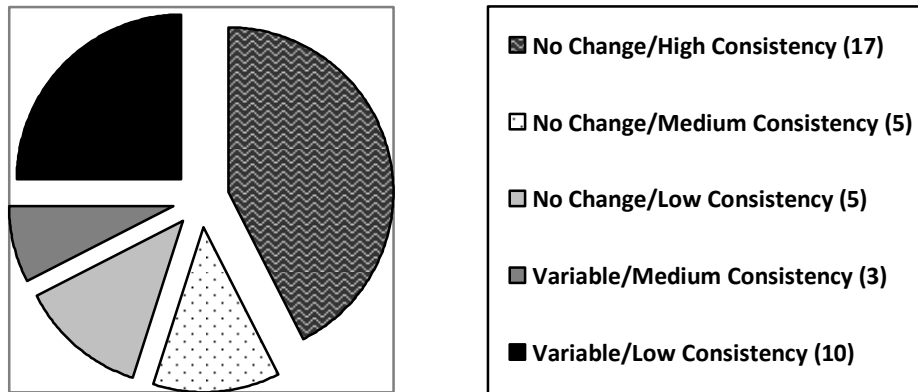


Figure 5: Variability in FLP No Change Trajectories

As Figure 5 shows, most families within the no change trajectory categorization display high consistency, meaning these households maintained the same employment (or unemployment) and thus experienced a static – and stable – trajectory. However, it is the next largest category of households that reveals the degree to which families experience regularly-occurring spells of poverty or periods of even greater economic distress due to oscillations in their employment status. Ten households displayed low employment consistency and variable trajectories, and another three households have variable trajectories with medium employment consistency. Although these households experienced no net change in their economic well-being, their participation in the study was defined by significant and repeating periods of variable earnings and/or unemployment.

5.2.7 Un/employment Spells and Income Volatility

Including all of their working members, the thirteen households in this category experience regular fluctuations in hours worked or to their employment status – an average of five employment changes per family over an observation period of three years. If evenly dispersed by the number of households and time, each household would undergo a job or schedule change every seven months.²⁹ Changes in employment and, subsequently, income, occur due to household members' poor health, lack of childcare or transportation, employer-generated changes in workers' schedules and in/voluntary termination. Regardless of the origin or motivation for these changes, their result includes frequent and varying degrees of poverty and financial instability.

Two families profiled in Chapter 3 provide useful examples of the types of external factors that facilitate families' employment instabilities and spells of economic distress. Despite two incomes, Lucy's household constantly struggles to make ends meet.³⁰ Lucy's serious health condition – blood clots in her legs and lung – forces her to constantly negotiate her health with the financial well-being of her family. Her employment lapses twice due to health complications and a hospitalization, but she is forced to resume working when her household's financial situation becomes dire enough to necessitate her additional income. Lucy's prohibitive health expenses and periodic

²⁹ This is likely an underestimate of fluctuations in employment status as families' work schedules sometimes change weekly, especially for those employed in food service and retail. Although the frequent interview tempo captures many of these changes, there are likely more that fly under the interviewers' radar so to speak.

³⁰ Lucy's husband's limited income is further limited by the court-ordered child support payment he makes to a daughter from a previous relationship. Lucy's extensive and necessary medication adds yet another expense.

employment, combined with wages in the low and medium rewards range, ensure that Lucy's household will continue to cycle through relatively less and more extreme periods of poverty for the foreseeable future.³¹

Andrea, whose un/employment spells are outlined in Table 6 below, experiences eleven changes to her employment in 27 months, including five periods of unemployment. Despite being a more extreme example in terms of absolute number of job transitions and periods of unemployment, Andrea's experience exemplifies how a lack of childcare and transportation can influence nonmetro households' employment and economic trajectories. Andrea is twice unemployed because of transportation issues and once when she loses her crucial childcare subsidy.³² As a consequence, Andrea's family is evicted from public housing and moves twice during her participation in the study. Andrea's telephone service is also disconnected on at least two occasions. For many FLP families, periodic employment volatility requires that certain household bills go unpaid. At a minimum, this strategy can result in the temporary loss of key utilities.³³

Sources of public transportation are especially scarce across the six study counties and in nonmetropolitan places, generally. Respondents often report not being able to get

³¹ In June 2004, Lucy earns minimum wage at her job at McDonalds (the equivalent of \$6.26/hour in 2012 dollars) and works 32 hours per week. When she returns to her job at the Dollar Store at \$7.35/hour despite ten years of previous experience, she is only scheduled for 15-17 hours per week. Her husband makes \$7.60/hour and is scheduled for 40 hours per week.

³² Andrea has five children, so the unsubsidized cost of daycare would be prohibitive to say the least.

³³ The evidence of un/employment spells often manifested through FLP households' disconnected telephones (both landlines and cellular numbers). The lines would be reconnected the next month or as soon as families could start paying in their phone bills again.

to work or even look for employment because they have no way to get there.³⁴ Andrea's fluctuating economic trajectory speaks to the constant volatility experienced by low-income nonmetropolitan households, especially those who add health, childcare or transportation issues to the already challenging circumstances posed by low wages and limited work opportunities. Like the other households with this type of trajectory, although Andrea seems to begin and end the study in relatively similar economic standing, her earnings and record of employment are highly variable.

³⁴ The lack of public transportation in nonmetropolitan counties necessitates that households have a vehicle or else rely on friends, family members, taxis, jitneys or other less formal forms of ride-sharing (if they even exist). For respondents with cars, their vehicles are often in disrepair, break down unexpectedly or cannot pass state inspections.

Table 6: Andrea's Variable Economic Trajectory

Date	Job Status	Financial Status
January – May 2003	Part-time nursing assistant	Makes \$8.11/hour, \$150-160/week. Also receives Medicaid for pregnancy, considering Work First [also lives in subsidized housing, receives childcare subsidy and WIC].
May – September 2003	Unemployed	Receives maternity pay (1/3 regular pay) for 6 weeks during this period, has difficulty paying bills related to car accident which occurred May 19.
September 2003	Full-time nursing assistant	Returns to former place of employment, same rate of pay.
November 2003	Unemployed	Andrea is without driver's license & transportation.
December 2003	Began job at fast food restaurant	(wage unreported)
February – April 2004	Switched jobs, at former nursing assistant position	Andrea works 30 hours per week at \$9.23/hour.
May 2004 – September 2004	Unemployed	Again considering Work First, facing eviction, telephone disconnected since May.
September 2004	Employed at different nursing home	Family evicted from public housing, changed residences.
October 2004	Unemployed	Andrea quit because she was not eligible for childcare subsidy/assistance.
November 2004	Working at childcare facility	Andrea works 6:30am-5pm M-F, also works weekends, does not disclose salary.
December 2004 – June 2005	Unemployed	Vehicle transmission broke down, again without transportation, enrolled full-time in community college nursing program, family relocates to a mobile home.
June – July 2005	Employed	Andrea is working 12 hour shifts on weekends, commutes to Raleigh for higher wage.

The third case outlined below provides additional detail regarding the regular frequency and relative circumstances under which households experience spells of economic instability and unemployment. This case will also reveal households' use of alternative strategies to secure additional sources of income via public assistance or financial support from extended family. FLP families seek out other sources of income to serve as a buffer against the negative effects of frequent oscillations in their un/employment status.

5.2.8 Negotiating Variable Trajectories: Seeking Stability in Disability

Mandi and Franklin, a family with low employment consistency and a no change (variable) trajectory, provide an example of FLP families' engagement with alternative sources of income.³⁵ Mandi and Franklin's economic trajectory is defined by a series of bouts of unemployment and multiple attempts to secure steady income through Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) for Franklin's physical disability. Mandi and Franklin are a cohabiting biracial couple in a PA county that is over 90 percent white.³⁶ Mandi is white and was 23-years-old at the time of recruitment. She is pleasant and cheerful, but frank, and is more seasoned and wise about the world than someone in her early twenties ought to be. Mandi has a high school diploma, but has not pursued

³⁵ During my tenure on the project, families' strategic use of their income from Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) frequently emerged as a topic of discussion informally among ethnographic team members and during project meetings. Given the percentage of the population of disabled over age 5 is several points higher than the national average across all six study counties (see Table 1, Chapter 2), households' engagement with SSDI and the interaction of disability and economic mobility warrants special analytical attention.

³⁶This author also had the pleasure of interviewing Mandi and Franklin on a monthly basis for about two years.

additional education. Mandi lives with her boyfriend, Franklin, a painfully thin, biracial 24-year-old who readily shares his sense of humor and opinions. Franklin completed high school and two years of trade school and then served with the National Guard. Franklin explains, “*I was supposed to do six [years], but I had little issues.*”³⁷

The couple was recruited into the study when Mandi was pregnant with their only child.³⁸ At the time of recruitment, Mandi was receiving unemployment and Franklin reported working for a factory that produces paper and plastic products, including Easter grass.³⁹ As of the next interview, Mandi and Franklin’s son was born prematurely, and neither parent reported working. Mandi says, “*We were both laid off...we’re on unemployment.*” Because of their newborn’s precarious health, neither Mandi nor Franklin pursue employment in the months immediately following Franklin Jr.’s birth. It is not until later that Mandi discloses Franklin has a “serious back problem that is very painful for him...and he has applied for disability [SSDI] because of it”.

Ten months into the study and six months following the birth of their son, Mandi says she must start looking for employment because her unemployment benefits end the next month. She discloses that Franklin has an official diagnosis for his spinal condition,

³⁷ At this point in the study, Mandi revealed Franklin was honorably discharged for health reasons, but neither respondent mentioned anything about the severity of his condition.

³⁸ Franklin also has a child from a previous relationship. The mother of this child lives about 30 miles away, but Franklin sees his son on a regular basis. Mandi was previously married, but no child resulted from this union.

³⁹ This factory, which shut down shortly after the FLP interviews ended, was one of the major employers in the region. Historically, the region was principally known for silica brick manufacturing. Other major industries and employers included several tanneries, coal yards, foundries and machine shops.

and she anticipates he will be approved for SSDI in the next few months.⁴⁰ Mandi describes how the illness impacts Franklin's ability to work: "*He can't work. The doctor already told him that, you know. There's a lot he can't do. He can't even ride in the car for a half an hour*". She continues to describe the severity of Franklin's illness: "*He can barely get out of bed sometimes...[and] he moves at a slow pace.*" Mandi reports that Franklin still "*thinks he needs to work.*"

Mandi's employment history is quite typical of the sample and includes jobs within food service and retail as well as at the more coveted, higher-wage employers in the area. Mandi worked at Wendy's fast food restaurant for four years while she attended high school and was promoted from cashier/food prep to an assistant management position. Mandi started out at minimum wage (\$4.75 in 1996 dollars, or the equivalent of \$7 in 2012), but made approximately \$8.15/hour (\$12/hour in 2012 dollars) as a salaried assistant manager. After her high school graduation, Mandi started working for FCI/Berg Electronics, where she "*kept track of their inventory, things like that*". After five years with Berg, began work as a shipping secretary at Warneco, another large regional employer and manufacturer of swimwear and undergarments.

Mandi worked 40 to 50 hours per week at for Warneco for two years, and her starting and ending hourly wages were \$8 and \$9.67, respectively. Although she enjoyed

⁴⁰ The condition is called ankylosing spondylitis, and is more likely to affect males between ages 20 and 40 with a family history of the disease. It is a long-term disease that causes inflammation of the joints between the spinal bones and the joints between the spine and pelvis. It eventually causes the affected spinal bones to join together (U.S. National Library of Medicine 2011).

the 7am-3pm shift, Mandi says, “*There wasn’t no room for advancement or anything like that*”. Mandi discusses her present employment options with her ethnographer:

[Berg’s] hiring back out there now, but they want to start me off as a temp, and I don’t want to go through that again...cause when I left I was makin’ \$20 an hour, and I can’t, I don’t want to start at no \$7.90 doing the same job I did before for \$20. So I don’t know. I can’t see myself pullin’ that one off.

Mandi explains the first time she worked for Berg, she was initially hired as a temp but was then hired on full-time.⁴¹ She also mentions applying for a management position at a department store called Peebles, citing her previous experience in management at Wendy’s as a reason she would be highly qualified for this job.

Fifteen months into the study,⁴² Mandi’s return to the workforce has become a necessity due to the family’s current economic situation. She discusses a job opportunity at a gas station/convenience store that offers a starting wage of \$7.90/hour. One month later, Mandi has taken a job at one of her former employers, Wendy’s, with a starting wage of \$6.38/hour despite her previous experience at this very same establishment. She is eligible for a pay increase to \$7.29/hour in six months. Mandi’s household receives benefits through WIC and food stamps for three people. Additionally, she has applied for Section 8, but there’s a waiting list for this program that can take upwards of a year. Franklin, who is still in the process of applying for disability months later, summarizes the household’s financial well-being during this period of time: “*We get by every month. That’s it.*” Franklin received cash assistance for a month, but that was discontinued when

⁴¹ Mandi contradicts this information in a subsequent interview. She maintains she worked for Berg/FCI for two years, and was paid almost \$15/hour when she left her position as shipping clerk.

⁴² Mandi’s first interview was in March 2003, so this refers to June 2004.

Mandi started working. If and when Franklin is approved for SSDI, his lawyer will take a cut from Franklin's lump sum disability payout.⁴³

By the September 2004 interview, the family finds itself on slightly better financial standing. Although her earnings have not raised the family from poverty, Mandi reports she has been promoted to assistant manager at a gas station/cigarette outlet located two blocks from her home. Mandi left her Wendy's job to work at this gas station. She makes \$9.75/hour, works 40-45 hour weeks, receives health benefits through work and is enrolled in a 401k program.⁴⁴ Additionally, the family saves money on gas because Mandi walks to work. As of January 2005, Mandi is still employed at the gas station, but Franklin has not been approved for SSDI. He and Mandi discuss the application process with the ethnographer and maintain it is normal to have to apply several times before being approved because this is how the disability office "weeds out" applicants. By April 2005, Franklin has submitted his third application.

After nearly a year of financial stability through her job at the gas station, Mandi was fired from her assistant manager job. The ethnographer describes the incident that led to Mandi's dismissal: "Mandi told her boss to watch the security tapes from a certain day because of something her co-worker was doing...[and] when the manager watched the tape, she saw Mandi buying a \$1 lottery ticket and fired her for breach of employee contract." Mandi says there was a rule against buying lottery tickets at work, but she

⁴³ Upon approval, a disability recipient would qualify for back-pay for all of the months in-between the initial application and the approval date. Depending on how many times one's application was rejected before being approved, this lump sum payout can add up to several years' worth of disability payments.

⁴⁴ A high reward job.

thought it was such a minor issue that the rule didn't even occur to her when she was in the process of buying the ticket. Mandi maintains that her boss already "had it out for her", and Franklin agrees the woman saw Mandi as a threat to her own position.

Mandi and Franklin sound dejected when the ethnographer asks for details about how the loss of Mandi's job has affected the household's financial well-being. Mandi says, "*We just don't have too many jobs around here... [but] I gotta get a job quick.*" When asked about their plans for the summer, Franklin adds it is "*hard to make plans*" because they do not have enough money to spend on travel or other activities. Mandi's unemployment leads to a discussion about finding jobs in the area, and about the prevalence of illicit means of earning income, such as dealing marijuana and other drugs. Franklin maintains there are no legitimate jobs available, so people would prefer to sell drugs rather than work a full-time, minimum wage job only to take home less than \$200 per week.

Luckily, Mandi quickly finds a job waiting tables at small, local restaurant located on a busy state route across from her former employer, Wendy's. Mandi makes the standard serving wage of \$2.83/hour, which is then supplemented by her cash tips. Mandi's boss does not require his employees to claim all of their tips, although customers who pay with a credit card have their tips automatically recorded.⁴⁵ When she first takes the job, Mandi says they are able to pay their bills and nothing else: "*We make it, but barely*". However, within the next month, Mandi reports she is making a comfortable

⁴⁵ Although technically illegal, underreporting cash tips is a service industry standard.

wage at the restaurant and has been able to save some money. Mandi says the household lives off the cash tips she makes. She saves up her paychecks until the end of the month and can almost pay her rent with earnings from the paychecks alone.⁴⁶

Mandi considers herself to be doing very well in terms of earnings, especially compared to the cooks at the restaurant who do not get tips and live “*paycheck to paycheck*”. Mandi says, “*I might only make three dollars an hour, but there are days when I make fourteen dollars an hour [in unreported tips].*” This favorable employment situation does not last more than six months before Mandi is laid off with only four days of advance notice. The restaurant “couldn’t afford to [rent] the place”, declared bankruptcy and closed their doors. By the follow-interview in January 2006, Mandi is drawing unemployment for the second time since her participation in the study began, and Franklin has still not been approved for disability.⁴⁷

Mandi and Franklin’s participation in the study begins and ends with Mandi’s receipt of unemployment insurance. Although she is able to secure various sources of employment over a period of 36 months, the household is never quite able to get ahead due to periods of reduced earnings caused by her unemployment. Mandi attempts to secure a more stable economic future for her family by using the same tactics as families

⁴⁶ In order to receive a paycheck from work, Mandi’s reported tips can be no higher than would put her over minimum wage in 2005 (\$5.15). This means, she reported less than \$2.32/hour in tips.

⁴⁷ The corresponding fieldnote indicates that Mandi is receiving unemployment benefits based on her employment at the gas station, for which she received \$13.30/hour. This contradicts the \$9.75/hour figure cited earlier, possibly because Mandi received a raise over the year she worked there. It is also possible that Mandi was paid \$13.30/hour, but reported her take-home pay after taxes and paying for benefits (which then amounted to \$9.75/hour). Households often report their take-home wage rather than gross income, as the post-tax difference makes a very meaningful impact on families’ purchasing power.

profiled in the upward trajectory section above. Mandi moves from unemployment to employment, as well as trades her initial job for a higher paying one. However, Mandi is unfortunately set back twice due to unexpected layoffs and ends up collecting unemployment at the end of her study participation also.

Franklin, whose health deteriorated so much over this period of time that he started using a cane to help him walk, was laid off at the beginning of the study and denied disability despite multiple application attempts. If Franklin were suddenly approved for disability, the household would receive a lump sum in disability back payments for the time elapsed since Franklin's first application.⁴⁸ The household would also benefit from a consistent income of approximately \$500/month, which could help buffer the family through future periods of unemployment. Franklin would also qualify for consistent health coverage, thus eliminating that expense from the family's monthly income.

Not every FLP family categorized within the no change trajectory experiences the same level of employment instability as Mandi and Franklin's household. However, their narrative speaks to the types of employment FLP families are likely to have, as well as to the tempo and degree to which most families with variable, no change trajectories experience spells in income volatility and unemployment. In particular, Mandi and Franklin's SSDI application persistence provides an example of FLP households' attempts to buffer income volatility by securing an alternative source of reliable income.

⁴⁸ If approved, Franklin would receive approximately \$500/month for 30 months, an amount that would provide the family with a down payment for a house and/or a more reliable vehicle.

This household also provides an interesting and insightful view of the role of employment and cohabitation for facilitating upward economic mobility. Mandi and Franklin have all of the resources necessary for escaping poverty indicated in existing literature: an intact, two parent household, a committed caregiver, (relatively) regular income from employment and support from extended family. Yet, given the cycles of un/employment Mandi navigates, they are barely able to make ends meet and experience no real gains in terms of their economic well-being over a three year period.

Like her study colleagues, Mandi strategizes, uses social services such as WIC and food stamps, saves money when possible and sells valuable belongings, but is still subject to a limited, nonmetropolitan low-wage job market. Mandi echoes this when she discusses her struggle to make ends meet for her family: *“All that’s around here anymore is minimum wage jobs at fast food restaurants or little grocery stores, stuff like that. And people can’t do it, it’s real hard [financially].”* The experiences of variable, no change trajectory households suggest a proportion of nonmetropolitan low-income families must constantly negotiate periods of reduced or complete unemployment and the spells of poverty and income volatility which accompany them. Monthly employment inconsistencies, whether anticipated or not, limit these households’ potential for upward mobility at least over the short-term and, possibly, for the long term as well.

5.3 Families’ Perceptions of Economic Mobility: “Getting Ahead”

Given the relative immobility of FLP families’ economic trajectories, it is helpful to consider how families reflect on their economic futures and how those thoughts might influence families’ economic behaviors. The FLP interviews included research questions

targeting respondents' hopes and dreams, including the solicitation of families' definition of "getting ahead" or "moving up in the world".⁴⁹ The following responses offer some insight into the kinds of employment and economic well-being that families would like to have, and subsequently, what level of economic mobility they find possible.

When asked what "getting ahead" or "moving up in the world" means to them, respondents generally offer modest expectations for their continued education, employment and their economic futures. First, respondents mention wanting to obtain jobs with higher wages and, thus, a more secure and stable financial situation. Additional education is typically connected to these employment goals. Sandra, for example, responds that she wants to finish school and get a better job. She eventually fulfills both goals, given her position as an RN at her final follow-up interview. Alivia, who experiences an upward trajectory through the addition of a second job, wants "*bigger and better things*", meaning obtaining additional schooling so she can meet qualifications and be competitive for the kinds of job she wants – secretarial, office-based work with regular 9-to-5 hours. Therese, who is currently unemployed, shares a similar definition of "getting ahead": "*Just a higher level, better salary, better benefits in the same company 'cause I need stability... just climb the ladder with whoever I decide to work for*".

Other respondents specifically reference consumption standards indicative of an upper or middle class lifestyle when offering their interpretation of the above statements.

⁴⁹ The interview questions included the following: "How would you define 'getting ahead'?" "How would you define 'moving up in the world'?" "Are there members of your family who have gotten ahead or moved up? How did they do this?" "What do you think would help your own family get ahead? What would have to occur for this to happen?"

However, most respondents still maintain a separation between these conceptions of “getting ahead” and their own mobility dreams or expectations. For example, when asked what “moving up in the world” means to her, Alivia cites the popular TV sitcom “The Jeffersons”.⁵⁰ Yet, Alivia’s own mobility aspirations do not include a similar level of financial well-being. Lena, a married, African-American mother of one, identifies her own mother as a person who has gotten ahead/moved up in the world:

I can remember when we used to live in the projects...and today she is living in a \$250,000 home in Maryland. She drives a Lexus, her husband drives a [Dodge] Durango[truck]...[both] my mother and my stepfather do very well...they go on two vacations a year, my mom just retired, my stepfather is retired military and still holds a full-time job. I know their salary is over \$100,000 a year. She has come a long way....

Lena maintains that in order to get ahead, “*You need to work hard to get there.*” It could be argued that both Lena and her husband work hard, as they were both steadily employed with the NC Department of Transportation. Lena’s husband even continues to work though he sustains an injury on the job. Lena discusses making modest choices regarding her purchases, “*All I need is what’s sufficient...what will work, I mean I don’t need brand names, I don’t need to have a new car every two years.*” Yet, despite Lena and her husband’s marriage, employment, joint income, reasonable standard of living and hard work, Lena feels her household “*hasn’t gotten [ahead] yet*”. Lena seems to consider that her household might never achieve the same level of economic comfort success that

⁵⁰ The iconic show’s theme song begins with the lyrics, “*We’re movin’ on up...*” The show features an upwardly-mobile African-American family who moves into a luxury apartment building in Manhattan from their former home in the Bronx.

her own mother has: *“I know there are exceptions to every rule, sometimes you can work hard and still don’t make it there.”*

5.3.1 The Questionable Viability of the “American Dream”

Lena’s comments are representative of the underlying tension that exists across FLP households’ responses regarding their potential upward mobility. Families critically acknowledge the structural limitations placed on their economic opportunities. At the same time, many families also continue to adhere to the dominant American meritocratic ideology, as they place value on hard work and personal responsibility. Scholars have noted the tendency of poor people to vote counter to their economic interests (Brady, Sosnaud and Frenk 2009), fail to protest economic inequality despite their perception of unfairness (Hochschild 2006) and express confusion or ambiguity about the redistribution of wealth (Hochschild 1981). FLP families, in essence, seem to enact both individualistic and structuralistic beliefs (Hunt 2002) when reflecting on the state of their economic well-being.

Families across both states are keenly aware of the relative scarcity of high-wage jobs, as well as the associated processes of social closure in place (Weeden 2002) within these workplaces. For example, Mandi reveals a personal reference is critical to even get one’s foot in the door with certain higher-wage employers: *“If you don’t know somebody [who already works there], nobody’s gonna give you a good enough reference”*. Amanda echoes this sentiment in her “getting ahead” interview: *“If you don’t know someone [working there], you ain’t gettin’ a job”*. However, respondents overwhelmingly note the simple inadequacy of work generally, even including lower wage options. In the same

interview, Amanda offers this definitive statement: *“It’s very hard to get a good job or a bad job around here.”*

Additionally, FLP households express opposition to their low wages and maintain a need for better employment options that provide both higher wages and flexible work arrangements. Sasha, whose economic trajectory brings her perilously close to crisis before it improves again, expresses frustration with her low-paying job at a gas station. She says, *“I don’t get no benefits...I make \$350 in two weeks...That don’t make no sense.”* In a discussion about good and bad jobs, Amanda says, *“Around here the standard they pay is \$8.50 an hour...I say, see ya’ later!”* She adds that a good job would involve flexibility, *“[Such as] scheduling you around your child [and] respect[ing] you as a mom first”*. Kathleen, whose employment during the study included two cashier jobs and artificially inseminating livestock on a farm, says increasing wages would help families lessen their struggle, *“Especially when you have to work your butt off to try to even make ends meet. And you’re sitting there putting all these hours in. Struggling. Staying away from your family a lot. Just to make ends meet.”*

Despite placing blame on limited jobs and low wages, many families continue to emphasize the importance of hard work and making oneself a viable candidate for better jobs through additional education. When asked to share her dreams for her future, Therese, who is 26-years-old at the beginning of the study, combines more modest aspirations with a desire to eventually live the *“middle class lifestyle”*. Additional education is a necessary component of both Therese’s short- and long-term goals. She reveals her immediate educational plans: *“After I receive this two-year degree...there’s a*

program at Mount Olive College where you can get your bachelor's in a year to a year in a half. You can go to school one day a week for five hours, so that's what I plan on doing." These's ambition to improve her employment prospects through additional education is a sentiment reflected in elsewhere in the sample. Other households discuss the limits of a high school education and return to school in order to secure higher-paying employment and take the next step up the employment ladder.

5.3.2 Adaptive Fatalism

In addition to structuralistic and individualistic beliefs about the origins of stratification, scholars have also investigated more fatalistic, or luck-based, explanations for poverty and economic inequality. Support for fatalistic beliefs about poverty is present in the literature, especially among certain subgroups including Catholics, Jews, African-Americans and Latinos (Hunt 2002). Although the FLP interviews cannot provide a test of these three competing explanations, these data offer insight regarding families' use of fatalism as a "compromise explanation" (Hunt 2002:828) to explain poverty and economic immobility.

Respondents enact fatalistic elements when discussing their economic mobility prospects, which could be an adaptive technique to rationalize the continued struggle to make ends meet in environments of economic constraint. This "adaptive fatalism" includes several narrative techniques. For example, when respondents do express dreams of achieving middle-class success, those dreams are tempered by the expectation that

such achievements will take years to be realized, or may never come.⁵¹ After discussing her short-term plans for attending school in order to make herself a better job candidate, Therese mentions her long-term dreams:

Therese: I want to own a house by the time [my daughter] is five or six. By the time she starts school, I'd like to own my own home, be completely self-sufficient...off the system, off Work First, hopefully no more Medicaid, no more food stamps. I want to be completely independent from the system. I'd like to get married. That's a dream of mine.

Ethnographer: Any particular timeframe?

Therese: (Deep breath) At this rate, um um [no] (chuckles).

Ethnographer: Just some day soon?

Therese: I don't think it's going to be soon at all (chuckles). Hopefully by the time I'm 40 I want to be married, yeah. (Long pause) I want to live the middle-class lifestyle.⁵²

Other families project the prospect of economic achievement way into the future and onto their hopes and dreams for their children. In a discussion about her career aspirations, Roxanne says, *"I always wanted to be a hotel manager...it was always something that seemed interesting to me."* Roxanne reveals that the woman who used to baby sit her when she was a child ended up following this career path – she *"makes*

⁵¹ Alternatively, these responses may simply reflect class-based restrictions on respondents' time perspectives. For example, O'Rand and Ellis (1974) find differences in the future orientation and subsequent actions of youth by socioeconomic class. They also note these differences are still salient even for upwardly mobile lower-class youth.

⁵² Therese defines the middle class lifestyle as, *"Two cars, a husband, me, [my daughter], we're both employed making decent money where we can make a pretty good living. Nothing extravagant at all, simple, like the family vacations every year, that kind of stuff."*

beaucoup bucks” and does a lot of traveling. However, Roxanne’s plan to follow in her babysitter’s footsteps quickly unraveled as Roxanne tried to start her own career:

And then once I got into it...I knew it wasn't going to happen around here, you know what I mean? I worked at [a local restaurant and hotel] and got paid minimum wage. Like, around here there's not really any room for advancement...you're a desk clerk, you're a desk clerk. That's it.

Roxanne then turns to her 6 month-old daughter and says, “*You better be a doctor or something, take care of mommy.*” Roxanne abandons her employment dreams due to her perception of regional limitations as well as her ability to project her dreams onto her offspring.⁵³ Adaptive fatalism also seems to take hold of respondents regardless of their age. Sasha, a 19 year-old NC mother, tells the ethnographer she hopes her son gets “*further in life*” than she did. Sasha’s definition of “getting ahead” is paying her bills on time or early.

Another fatalistic sentiment includes families’ quick dismissal of achieving their ideal pay or employment due to some complicating personal or environmental factor. Mandi, for example, tells the ethnographer that she might like to go back to school for accounting, as she is “*good with math and things like that, so I think I could do that*”. When asked about her ideal salary, Mandi replies, “*Oh god, I don't even know. I mean, I don't want no lawyer's salary or doctor's salary, nothing like that. I don't want to leave [this town], so you have to think of what people pay around here...I want at least average.*” Roxanne, who wanted to be a hotel manager, similarly utilizes a narrative of

⁵³ Roxanne’s statement also alludes to the fact that she expects her daughter will do well enough financially to provide for Roxanne later in life.

environmental constraint when she discusses prematurely ending her career aspirations.

Mary, a 32-year-old, married NC respondent, echoes Roxanne's sentiments when she discusses her ideal job. Mary has a certification in cosmetology, and insists she must be employed by a salon or spa. She would not have a "good" job with fringe benefits if she worked in any other type of cosmetic-services establishment, but, "*There's nothing like [a salon or spa] around here, you'd have to go to Fayetteville or Raleigh for something like that.*" Mary continues to emphasize the impossibility of this type of employment through a sense of her own chronic residential immobility. She says her family would consider moving, but they "*don't have any money saved up and it takes a lot to move*".

The fact that respondents would have need for a fatalistic way of addressing their economic immobility is quite evident when even the households with "good jobs" admit upward mobility and "getting ahead" financially is unlikely. Martina, a white, 40-year-old NC grandmother, self-admittedly has one of the few "good" jobs left in the area. Martina works in manufacturing, sewing specialty products at a shirt factory. When asked about getting ahead, Martina says:

Getting ahead is when you are not living paycheck to paycheck, if you have an appliance that breaks down or you have something unexpected happen, that you don't have to wait a week or two or take money from another bill to fix what's broken. Getting ahead means you have enough in reserve that you are not gonna go under in a week or two weeks...I'm still working on it.

Martina and her husband suggest humor may be an integral part of adapting to chronic economic immobility, as they laugh their way through the next question:

Ethnographer: Is there a difference between getting ahead and moving up in the world?

Husband: Yeah, but I don't have a ladder for it!

Martina: Your ladder is broke?!

Husband: My ladder is broke.

Martina: Hey, speak for yourself! My ladder's made of quicksand...I do a lot of climbing.

FLP households define “getting ahead” and “moving up in the world” with a sense of adaptive fatalism, citing reasons of personal or environmental constraint to rationalize their inability to obtain the employment and/or wage of their choice. Despite their desire for middle- or upper-class markers of consumption, such as expensive houses or cars, households conservatively project such achievements for themselves. FLP families also seem to engage both structuralistic and individualistic themes when they reflect on the circumstances of their immobility, a finding that is supported in other literature regarding poor people’s perceptions of economic justice, inequality and poverty (Hunt 2002). FLP respondents maintain a keen awareness of regional constraints on employment, particularly access to higher-wage jobs, while also emphasizing the need to make themselves more competitive through additional education. Nonmetropolitan households’ perceptions of their own opportunities for economic mobility seem quite conservative, and even doubtful, which may in turn negatively contribute to these households’ well-being in other, non-economic ways.

5.4 Discussion

This analysis of FLP households' trajectories provides greater understanding of the potential for and experiences of economic mobility among nonmetropolitan low-income families. For the 71 families in the FLP, economic mobility is severely limited and should perhaps be characterized as economic immobility. Over half of the FLP households experience trajectories of no net change, and just over a quarter of the sample experiences an upward trajectory during their participation in the study. Households' upward trajectories are modest and result in putting families on slightly better financial footing rather than moving them definitively out of poverty. Upward trajectories are also driven entirely by the employment status of families rather than by changes to household composition (i.e. marriage) as indicated in existing literature. The employment changes that influence families' upward trajectories include moving into employment from unemployment, adding income earners or jobs, receiving raises at their current jobs and/or securing a higher-paying job.

The modal trajectory for FLP families across both states is one of no change, meaning families begin and end their participation in the study in much the same financial and employment status. However, only 17 out of 40 households within this trajectory designation also have high levels of consistency, meaning most families experience some variability in employment and earnings although their trajectories seem relatively static. The degree to which some families experience employment instability is striking, recurrent and is also likely underestimated even in these data. Frequent reductions in households' hours at work and spells of unemployment have substantial

impact on households' income and short-term economic trajectories. Families in this category have the same relative economic well-being at the end of their participation in the study as they did three years earlier. However the years in-between are marked by layoffs, reductions in work hours and periods of reduced or zero earnings.

Families in this trajectory categorization, report feeling financially strained most of the time, yet there are also periods of time where the increased earnings foster the household's capability to save money rather than live "paycheck to paycheck". For example, despite Mandi's use of the same strategies as families experiencing upward trajectories – moving out of unemployment and leaving one job for another, higher-paying one – her misstep at one workplace and the bankruptcy of another employer put her back on unemployment for the second time in two years. Furthermore, like many of their nonmetropolitan peers, Mandi and Franklin are in a committed, cohabiting union where one partner provides childcare while the other participates in the workforce. Although nonmetropolitan household composition is changing over time such that households look more like their urban and suburban counterparts, nonmetropolitan families are still more likely to include two parents. The nonmetropolitan poor are also more likely to be actively participating in the workforce than their urban counterparts.

The prevalence of the no change trajectory and modest upward trajectories is particularly striking given nonmetropolitan families seem to have what it takes to escape poverty, namely their constant engagement with the labor force and intact, two-parent families. Future economic mobility research should shift its focus to employment instabilities rather than the act of becoming employed (in other words, moving from

securing a job to job security). An overemphasis on employment without an appreciation for employment instability neglects the true complications associated with nonmetropolitan families' poverty exit, or at the very least, income stabilization.⁵⁴

Families' economic aspirations and how they define "getting ahead" and "moving up in the world" further reveal the limiting nature of nonmetropolitan places. Previous research has established that workers draw information from their environment, prior experiences and workplace contemporaries in order to form their own expectations about working conditions and job satisfaction (Hodson 1985; Poggi 2010). Evidence suggests the negative effect of having workplace expectations that far exceed reality is stronger than the positive effect associated with erroneously setting expectations too low (Poggi 2010). Thus, FLP households' dreams for their employment and economic futures are modest, and are highly influenced by their nonmetropolitan environments and contemporaries.

When asked to assess their own economic futures and define "getting ahead", respondents offer conservative responses that mimic the reality of upward mobility in the sample, including continuing one's education, obtaining a more highly-paid job and improving the economic status of the household relatively rather than absolutely. If respondents reference upper or middle class aspirations, they do so with a fair amount of distance and expect such economic attainment to take a very long time or potentially

⁵⁴ The implications of employment instabilities extend beyond households' economic mobility. Additionally, periodic unemployment may contribute negatively to families' and children's well-being by increasing households' levels of behavioral or temporal chaos. Sporadic employment would affect the level of chaos in the home both externally and through respondents' feelings of self-efficacy. Thus, their agentic potential to manage chaotic conditions may also be compromised (Garrett-Peters and Burton in progress).

never happen. Some families project economic success as far forward as their children, and hope their children will surpass their educational and economic achievements. Finally, as evidenced by the exchange between Martina and her husband, economic mobility is elusive even among nonmetropolitan households with “good jobs”. A combination low wages, income shocks and a lack of protective monetary savings or wealth keep families running up the down escalator.

Although the FLP data provide frequently-collected, longitudinal data regarding households’ employment and economic status, the median period of observation is only two years. Information about households’ trajectories and economic mobility can be improved by additional follow-ups, as several critical events have occurred since the last wave of follow-ups. For example, only 45 percent of the NC sample and a quarter of the PA sample have achieved a level educational attainment including some college.⁵⁵ Families’ future employment options, including their opportunity for higher wages and stable full-time employment, may greatly expand upon future degree completion. FLP families were also recruited when respondents were pregnant. Those children are now firmly enrolled in elementary school, thus eliminating the need to provide childcare. Because the presence of young children is a barrier to work, particularly for women, their children’s transition to school may have enabled the reemployment of many of the FLP mothers and subsequently, transformed the economic well-being of their households.

⁵⁵ Please see Table 2 for FLP descriptive statistics.

6. Conclusion

This project examines the economic well-being of nonmetropolitan low-income families through an assessment of households' employment and economic trajectories. Two overarching questions motivate these analyses. First, this project examines how families' subjective experiences regarding poverty and im/mobility influence their choices about employment and, subsequently, their economic well-being. Second, this research seeks to understand how nonmetropolitan low-income families change and improve their economic status over time. Using fine-grained, longitudinal, household-level ethnographic data from the Family Life Project (FLP), these analyses evaluate families' objective economic outcomes as well as their subjective experiences of poverty.

I address these questions more specifically through an in-depth examination of households' employment experiences and short-term economic trajectories. I first ask what types of employment FLP households obtain as defined by their jobs' objective characteristics – wages, hours and the presence of fringe benefits. I then evaluate employment from the household perspective, including how families distinguish between “good” and “bad” jobs and how their criteria compare to existing scholarly metrics. This work also objectively characterizes households' overall economic well-being during their participation in the study. I assess families' economic trajectories given changes to household income, employment status and employment stability. Finally, I examine households' perspectives on their economic im/mobility, such as families' dreams for their financial futures, and how their perspectives may influence their decisions about employment.

6.1 Chapter Review

This project begins with a discussion of relevant characteristics of the nonmetropolitan U.S., the FLP study counties and the FLP households (Chapter 2). The chapter first outlines significant demographic changes that have transformed the nonmetropolitan U.S., including oscillations in population size and new trends defining rural families' household composition. The chapter then addresses aspects of the nonmetropolitan economy, work and poverty, especially as these characteristics influence the employment and economic mobility experiences of the low-income families living in these environments. Next, the chapter discusses the demographic and economic characteristics of the study counties, noting key similarities and differences between these two regions. Finally, the chapter addresses the recruitment and characteristics of the FLP households, noting in particular households' "stayer" status and the presence of young children across these households.

Using a modified grounded theory method, Chapter 3 examines FLP households' employment characteristics and experiences. Through the analysis of families' subjective sentiments regarding their employment, this chapter presents five dimensions of job quality. These five dimensions – affirmation, consistency, rewards, costs and trajectory – are also informed by established, scholarly job quality metrics and include objective characteristics such as wage, hours, presence of fringe benefits and job/schedule stability. Across the two counties, the majority of households report low levels of affirmation, medium rewards, low costs and no change economic trajectories.

Thus, although most families in the FLP do not experience high costs of employment, neither do their jobs provide strong monetary resources or emotional incentives.

These jobs' failure to deliver much in the way of financial and noneconomic resources alike may help explain the high degree of employment instability present across FLP households. Households' modal employment consistency is both high and low, meaning families are just as likely to maintain the same employment over time as they are to experience frequent changes to their work schedule or of their jobs in general. As these households largely do not hold jobs with wages above \$9.75/hour and do not receive fringe benefits, including health insurance, there is little economic incentive to keep one low wage job over another. Affirmation is a job quality criterion which, for some families, compensates for low wages and provides workers with the incentive to retain a particular low wage job over others. In addition to economic rewards, workers in these households also cite the importance of high levels of affirmation on the job.

Chapter 4 presents the affirmation dimension in more detail, as this dimension often competes or appears with the rewards dimension when families discuss employment. This chapter reveals how workers in FLP families couple rewards with affirmation when choosing between jobs. Families can also be motivated to dis/continue their employment due to low levels of either criterion. The chapter also addresses households' experiences with two types of work generally categorized by high levels of affirmation: self-employment and jobs or workplaces that are "like family". In most cases, self-employment and "like family" employment offer positive alternatives to other types of low-wage jobs. These two types of employment provide households with the

schedule flexibility and social support necessary to attain work-family balance. Finally, this chapter also illustrates how affirmation is a useful and parsimonious measure of low-wage workers' job satisfaction.

The final set of analyses (Chapter 5) addresses the economic trajectories of FLP households in more detail. FLP families experience three major types of trajectories throughout their participation in the study. No change trajectories are the most common, followed by upward and downward trajectories. Despite the economic stability implied by the no change trajectories, a subset of families experiences substantial periods of economic volatility due to under- or un-employment. Households' upward trajectories are achieved through changes to households' employment, rather than changes to households' composition such as through marriage. The theoretical and practical implications of this project's findings are discussed below, followed by the study's limitations and potential directions for future research.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This project contributes to existing scholarship in the areas of work, poverty and mobility, especially as each of these areas of study pertains to low-income families. First, this project emphasizes the importance of both objective and subjective perspectives within the study of work. Specifically, this project shows how the analytical inclusion of households' subjective viewpoints and experiences can improve the accuracy and precision of two existing measures of work – job quality and job satisfaction. Existing measures of job quality and job satisfaction fail to acknowledge work from households' perspectives, focusing instead on the perspectives of individual workers. This approach

does not accurately reflect how workers embedded within households assess their jobs, as work conditions have implications for the well-being of the household beyond individual members. Furthermore, individuals' decisions about work are not made in the absence of the values, needs, concerns or employment of others in the household.

Evaluations of job quality and job satisfaction are also largely objective and are constructed without the explicit considerations and interests of low-income workers in mind. This is perhaps because scholars have been more oriented to the implications of workers' job satisfaction for producing behaviors and attitudes of organizational attachment than for worker well-being in and of itself (e.g. Lincoln and Kalleberg's (1990) comparative study of workplace commitment among American and Japanese workers). The five dimensions presented here provide a more accurate and holistic means of job quality assessment than traditional, objective criteria. Yet, they are also informed by existing approaches and share similar means of job quality evaluation. Thus, the outcomes of these analyses can be compared to other, similar studies. However, because they also incorporate households' subjective feelings and perspectives regarding employment, these dimensions contribute to our scholarly understanding of the criteria that matter most to workers, specifically those in low-wage and service sector occupations.

The affirmation dimension in particular makes two important contributions to the work literature. First, affirmation provides a parsimonious measure of job satisfaction that also incorporates criteria from the perspective of low-income workers. Existing measures of job satisfaction are associated with workers' attitudes, such as their

intentions to quit, but offer limited means to predict workers' behaviors and actions such as their productivity or retention. Affirmation may introduce a means to predict workers' actions and behaviors toward work, specifically among the growing segment of low-wage workers. As these analyses show, low-income workers maintain a commitment to jobs if they provide high levels of affirmation, and can be motivated to quit a job if the level of affirmation is low.

Second, and more usefully, the affirmation dimension provides deeper insight for the meaning of work and job satisfaction among low-income households and impoverished single mothers. Existing literature has established the importance of employment for impoverished single mothers, as work provides feelings of self-efficacy and pride, and makes mothers feel like a better role model to their children (Seefeldt 2008; Edin and Kissane 2010). Yet, single mothers' preference for work over welfare receipt should not be confused for job satisfaction, as many of the jobs low-income single mothers will obtain post-welfare receipt are of low quality, and offer little in the way of economic resources. The affirmation dimension should be incorporated into the employment assessments of working families in order to better evaluate their post-welfare economic well-being.

In addition to providing better metrics of job quality and satisfaction through the consideration of subjective, household perspectives, these analyses also offer information about how actors make choices under conditions of constraint. Workers in nonmetro low-income families across the U.S., including the 71 FLP households, face employment constraints driven by the nonmetropolitan economy, lower educational attainment and

work-family time pressures. Although low-income families would benefit from higher wage positions, these analyses reveal that households prioritize other dimensions over rewards when evaluating their employment options. As Chapter 4 illustrates, affirmation can actually undermine rewards as the decisive criterion for continuing or quitting work. The intangible, nonmonetary benefits of work may prove particularly important within environments where the only work available is of the low-wage, service sector variety. Scholars of work should more explicitly consider degree of constraint when evaluating workers' choices and behaviors regarding employment.

Given the above contributions, this project's main goal is to ask scholars and policymakers to reassess the role of employment for facilitating mobility out of poverty. The role of employment has become increasingly critical for poverty exit and the transition from welfare receipt, especially among impoverished single mother households (Edin and Kissane 2010). However, employment will continue to fail to provide a definitive escape route from poverty so long as the jobs low-income families obtain provide poverty-level wages and inconsistent or irregular schedules which force families to reconsider family over work (Tubbs, Roy and Burton 2005; Newman 2006). Although the FLP data cannot speak to households' longer-term economic outcomes, the FLP households are dominated by static economic trajectories that in many cases include frequent periods of under- and un-employment. In large part, even the households who experience upward economic trajectories would face economic hardship should their work, health or child care status change.

The frequent interview tempo of the FLP also provides a detailed picture of the degree to which low-income households and workers encounter prohibitive employment instabilities, despite their attempts to remain engaged in the labor force. The analyses and family narratives presented here should alert scholars to the possibility that upward mobility or the definitive exit from poverty is doubtful, particularly within nonmetropolitan places. Instead, policymakers should support families' long-term economic stability through the promotion of sustainable, flexible, living wage employment within nonmetropolitan areas. In other words, low-income families may never escape poverty despite "a lot of work effort [due to their jobs'] meager and inconsistent economic rewards" (Edin and Kissane 2010:461).

Finally, this project contributes to the small but growing body of literature concerned with nonmetropolitan poverty and the economic well-being of the low-income households who remain in these places. The distinct nature of nonmetropolitan poverty has important implications for the economic well-being of nonmetropolitan low-income families. Despite the fact that only one-fifth of the nation's poor live in nonmetropolitan areas, poverty in these areas is more likely to be chronic (Lichter, Roscigno and Condrón 2003). Rates of poverty across U.S. nonmetro counties are also disproportionately high (Weber et al. 2005) and have exceeded metro county poverty rates for the past 50 years (ERS 2004). Nonmetropolitan poverty is also more impervious to conventional anti-poverty strategies including employment and marriage. Impoverished nonmetropolitan households have higher rates of workforce participation than the urban poor (Jensen, McLaughlin and Slack 2003) and are more likely to live in traditional nuclear family

households (Cotter 2002). The study of nonmetropolitan places offers a useful perspective on American poverty, as impoverished and low-income households living in these places face pervasive economic obstacles despite their labor force participation.

6.3 Study Limitations

Despite the above contributions, this study faces limitations with respect to sample composition, size and scope. Although this study provides a much-needed addition to poverty scholarship by way of a nonmetropolitan focus, the FLP data are not generalizable to all nonmetro low-income families. Although they share demographic and economic similarities, the FLP study counties are also quite unique from other nonmetropolitan spaces. For example, despite their rural classification, the PA and NC counties contain micropolitan cities and small towns. Nonmetro poverty rates vary with degree of rurality such that the most rural areas are the most impoverished (ERS 2004). Among nonmetro counties with persistent poverty, the vast majority of these counties are found in the South, and none are located in the Northeast (ERS 2004).¹ Thus, these analyses provide the best understanding of low-income households' employment and economic mobility within similarly rural areas in their respective regions.

When compared to each other, the NC and PA study counties exhibit notable differences in racial composition, population growth, rates of educational achievement, predominant industries and poverty rates. Given differences in county characteristics, households across the three PA counties are likely to be white, have education equal to

¹ As of 1999, 340 of the 386 counties with persistent poverty were nonmetro, and 280 of those 340 nonmetro counties were located in the South. (ERS 2004:4).

high school completion, be employed by the service industry (followed by retail and manufacturing industries) and have incomes under \$48,500/year. Comparable households across the three NC counties are also likely to be employed in the service industry (then manufacturing, followed by retail), but are slightly less likely to have graduated high school than are the PA residents. NC households are also more likely to be African American or Latino, be impoverished and have annual incomes under \$42,500.

The FLP study households are further unique in that each household was recruited in order to establish a cohort of focal children born in approximately the same period in 2003/04. Because each of these households contained expectant mothers, the work and economic mobility experiences of these households are most representative of households likewise facing the economic, work and child care constraints associated with having very young infants and children. However, the FLP sample also incorporates a range of household configurations and respondents of varying ages, work histories and educational achievement. In this way, the FLP sample captures a meaningful cross-section of nonmetropolitan households and reflects the population characteristics of low-income families.

The project is also limited by its longitudinal scope, as most families were observed for a period of only 24 to 36 months. An extension of the study's timeframe would provide more accurate information about these households' longer-term mobility prospects. For example, previous scholarship has established upward economic mobility does occur among low-income families, but can be long-delayed due to extended periods of low earnings via regional wage constraints (Harvey 1993) or lower levels of

educational attainment (Newman 2006). Given each of the FLP households contains very young children, it is also possible significant changes in households' employment and economic status may be delayed only until their children enter school. Extended observations would also provide additional insights about the effects of frequent employment instability on families' long-term economic trajectories.

Finally, the study has very limited data about respondents' actual workplaces. Although some ethnographers visited or interviewed their respondents at work, workplace observations were not performed in many cases. It is difficult to corroborate households' employment experiences without also having observed respondents in their respective workplaces. Additionally, workplace observations took place on the part of households' main informants, typically mothers or grandmothers of focal children. Despite the FLP's household study design, employment data gathered focuses primarily on the employment of the respondent and, in many cases, contains more limited data or observations for other workers in the household. This project would benefit from follow-up interviews which would directly address the above concerns. Two more potential extensions of the project are listed below.

6.4 Agenda for Future Research

The transforming nature of the rural economy presents a unique opportunity to examine how marginalized workers navigate, respond and adapt to economic constraints. The structure of the nonmetropolitan economy has definitively shifted from traditional industries such as agriculture and manufacturing to service sector industries including health, business and retail services (MacTavish and Salamon 2003, Tickamyer and

Henderson 2003). The reduction of jobs within manufacturing and agriculture has limited the earnings potential of nonmetropolitan workers, especially for those with lower levels of education and the inability to commute to urban areas where wages are higher. Respondents within the FLP households echo and epitomize the impact of these economic trends, likewise citing the increasing prevalence of nonstandard and low-wage service sector jobs in lieu of more desirable, high-wage jobs in local factories.

Although this work has made several important contributions to work and poverty scholarship, the FLP data and this research can be usefully extended in the following ways. First, scholars should continue to investigate work and poverty within nonmetropolitan places, given regional and local differences in population and economic characteristics. Due to differences between nonmetro places, the constraints affecting one nonmetropolitan community cannot be assumed to affect others. To this end, future research should investigate the applicability of the five dimensions presented here among low-income households in even more rural areas. As poverty and rurality are positively associated, it is possible these dimensions will be differentially effective in increasingly rural and economically constrained places. Their validity should be tested in more rural environments.

Future work should also investigate the role of social policy in households' work and poverty experiences, including households' decisions about employment and their subsequent economic outcomes. Existing literature has addressed the important role of national labor, health and social investment policies (Zuberi 2004, 2006) and welfare state generosity (Brady 2009) in determining the lives and well-being of the working

poor. A comparison of social policies across these PA and NC counties alongside the explicit investigation of this topic through additional interviews with FLP households would helpfully enhance this particular research project.

At the very least, and irrespective of its focus on nonmetropolitan low-income families, this dissertation answers the call for data addressing more contemporary accounts of poverty and of economic mobility experiences among the poor (Edin and Kissane 2010). In lieu of a more detailed investigation into the lives of nonmetropolitan impoverished and low-income families, it is important to note the extent to which these analyses suggest a kind of dubious solidarity between urban and rural poor. The narratives of individual workers and families across both urban and nonmetro areas are rife with tales of limited job prospects, modest wages and the inability to secure the fringe benefits that would guarantee families a modicum of stability, at least through access to health care and child care (Newman 2006; Edin and Kissane 2010).

The extent to which both populations experience cycles of poverty and welfare receipt also cannot be understated, as employment instabilities affect urban welfare recipients and nonmetro working poor households alike. How can employment be so absolutely central for improving the lives of impoverished families, yet fail them so miserably? It is clear low-income workers “do not need lessons about the dignity of work” (Newman 1999:297). The rest of us might reconsider what dignity of work should mean, given these families’ perspectives.

Appendix A: Selected Poverty Rates and Economic Indicators, 2002

Characteristic	Nonmetro	Metro
Median household income (dollars)	34,654	45,257
Poverty population (millions)	7.5	27.1
Prevalence of poverty (percent)	14.2	11.6
Poverty by region of U.S. (percent)		
Northeast	10.7	10.9
Midwest	10.7	10.1
South	17.5	12.7
West	14.3	12.1
Poverty rates for selected groups (percent)		
Non-Hispanic Blacks	33.2	22.7
Non-Hispanic Whites	11.0	7.2
Hispanics	26.7	21.4
Children (younger than age 18)	19.8	16.0
Elderly (age 65 and older)	11.9	10.0
Nonelderly adults (age 18-65)	12.4	10.2
Educational attainment of poor adults (percent)		
Less than high school education	44.5	40.0
No more than high school education	32.8	30.7
More than high school education	22.8	29.3
Income levels of poor adults (percent)		
Less than half the poverty line	36.4	41.9
Between half and 75 percent of the poverty line	28.2	25.5
Greater than 75 percent of the poverty line	35.4	32.6

(Source: ERS 2004)

Appendix B: Selected Demographic Characteristics

	Camden/Phila. (Edin & Kefalas 2005)	New Hope Ethnographic Study (Gibson-Davis & Duncan 2005)	FLP (PA Sample)	FLP (NC Sample)
	N=162	N=43	N=50	N=43
Age			(n=42)	(n=42)
Mean	25.8	29.6	23.6	24.5
Median	24	*	23	25
Range	15-56	*	18-35	16-39
Age at First Birth				(n=42)
Mean	18.3	*	21.2	20.9
Median	17	*	21.5	20
Range	13-36	*	16-33	15-39
Race/Ethnicity				
% Black	38.9	51.2	10	45.2
% Latino	29.0	34.9	12	14.3
% White	32.1	13.9	76^	40.5
Average Number of Children				
Total	2.2	*	1.9	2.5
Age <25	1.6	*	1.4	1.8
	(n=93)		(n=24)	(n=24)
Age 25 and over	3.1	*	2.3	3.4
	(n=69)		(n=18)	(n=18)
Education				
Some college (%)	31.9^^	*	24.0	45.2
High School/GED Only (%)	23.2^^	65.1	30.0	28.6
Less than high school (%)	44.9^^	*	22.0	26.2
Unknown (%)	--	*	24.0	--
Work Status (Age >18)	(n=130)			
Not working or in school (%)	47.7	*	44	34.9
Working (%)	40	39.5	42	60.5
Unknown (%)	--	--	14	4.7

*Statistics unavailable.

^Total does not add to 100%, as there is one Native-American respondent not included in the listed racial categories.

^^Includes only respondents aged >25.

Appendix C: List and Description of Interview Protocols

Topic	Description
Consent/Intake/Demographics	Basic family demographic survey and review of consent form.
Pregnancy	Questions regarding respondent's general health and well-being prior to giving birth to the focal child.
Post-Natal	Questions regarding respondent's general health and well-being after giving birth to the focal child. Child's health and birthing experiences also included.
Neighborhood*	Questions aimed at how families define, use and traverse geographic space focusing on both the immediate neighborhood and extending to other parts of the towns, cities and counties in which they live and work.
Health*	Current and past health status (including health problems and chronic illness, if applicable). Included doctor and hospital interfacing.
Typical Day	Included hour-by-hour descriptions of the family's typical day's activities.
Adultification	Discussions of acceptable levels of housework, etc. for young children and involvement with sensitive or sexually explicit topics. Also mother's experiences as a child.
Work	Respondent's work history.
Childcare	Childcare situation, including cost, location, and respondent's general feelings toward.
Social Support/Networks	List of respondent's family, friends and other sources of social support. Includes what type of support each resource provided.
Household Economy	Review of household income and expenditures.
6 Month	Interview conducted when focal child was approximately 6 months old. Reviewed child and mother health, child's development.
Dreams	Aspirations of respondent discussed generally, also ambitions for children.
Intimate Relationships	History of partnership, sexual activity, and current relationship status.
School Readiness	Evaluation of family's pre-school preparation.
Local Food Environments, Access and Security*	Discussion of access and quality of grocery stores, other sources of food-procurement.
Activity Log*	Looks specifically at spatial dimensions of life. Hour-by-hour, location-specific log of family's activities for one week.
Residential Mobility	Residential history of family, including rent, location, and descriptions of housing.
Baby Faces	Developmental activity and storybook reading exercise.
Parenting	Parenting practices of respondent and any others (family or otherwise) with parenting duties.
Crime/Conflict	General questions about neighborhood safety, incidents.
Substance Use/Abuse	Drug use, including legal, illegal, alcohol, prescription drugs.
Child Development	Milestones, achievements, etc. for focal child.
Social Networks II*	Detailed account of degree to which respondent's social supports were utilized.
Work Interviews – 2, 15, 24, 36 months	List of respondent's employment circumstances at 4 time points post focal child's birth.
FIG (Fill in the Gaps) List	Assessment of protocol adherence and attempt to answer previously unaddressed or unanswered questions.

Breastfeeding	Respondent's breastfeeding experiences and opinions.
Health/Mental Health	Mental-health of respondent and family specifically addressed.
Child Injury	Safety assessment and accompanying questions.
Observations	Interviewer accompanied respondent to various places, including and not limited to WIC visits, doctor appointments, birthday parties, grocery shopping trips.
Transect	Neighborhood walk-around or drive-around with respondent.

* These protocols have accompanying charts completed during the interview.

Appendix D: FLP Interview Descriptive Statistics

	Number of Interviews	Length of Study Participation (Months)
Mean	21	31

Median	21	34
Mode	20	40
Max	37	51
Min	4	6
	Range of Interview Start Dates January 2003 – November 2004	Range of Interview End Dates February 2004 - August 2007
	Modal Start Date March/April 2003	Modal End Date July 2006

Statistics above refer only to n=71 families included in these analyses.

Appendix E: FLP Households' Occupations

Respondent	Partner/Husband/Boyfriend
<p>Food Service (19) Fast Food, miscellaneous (8) Restaurant, server/waitstaff (6) Fast Food, management (2) Food preparation (3)</p> <p>Retail (17)</p>	<p>Laborer (15) [landscaping, construction, warehouse, automotive]</p> <p>Retail/Sales (8)</p> <p>Delivery/truck driver (6)</p>

<p>Retail, miscellaneous (12) Retail, cashier (5)</p> <p>Health Care (13) Nursing Assistant/CNA, non-home based (6) In-Home Health Care provider (2) Registered Nurse (RN) (3) Massage Therapist (2)</p> <p>Administrative Assistant/Receptionist (9) Administrative Assistant (6) [insurance company, county /state offices, medical office, hospital/ER] Receptionist, medical office (2) Receptionist, hotel</p> <p>Childcare (6) Childcare provider (in-home babysitter) (4) Childcare provider (daycare) (2)</p> <p>Agricultural/farm labor (5)</p> <p>Manufacturing, factory (3)</p> <p>Hairdresser/Hairstyling (under the table) (3)</p> <p>Maid service/housecleaning, janitorial (2)</p> <p>Telemarketing/Sales (2)</p> <p>Security Guard</p> <p>School Bus Driver</p> <p>Military</p>	<p>Self-employed (5) [Electrician, painter, contractor, mechanic, salvage (supplemental income)]</p> <p>Manufacturing, factory (4)</p> <p>Supervisor (3) [prison, maintenance]</p> <p>Restaurant Prep/Server (2)</p> <p>Repairman (2)</p> <p>Apprentice electrician</p> <p>Health care provider, non-home based</p> <p>Police/EMS</p> <p>Carpenter</p> <p>Farmer</p> <p>Illicit drug sales/distribution (suspected)</p>
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Biography

Lane Marie Destro was born on October 12, 1982 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She graduated in 2003 with Bachelor of Arts degrees in Anthropology and English from the Honors College at the Pennsylvania State University in State College, Pennsylvania. In 2008, she received her Master of Arts degree in Sociology from Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina. Lane has written an article with her advisor, Dr. David Brady, titled, “Does European-Style Welfare Generosity Discourage Single Mother Employment?” (*Research in the Sociology of Work, 2011*). Lane has also coauthored a book chapter with her mentor Dr. Linda Burton (also coauthored by Whitney Welsh) titled, “Grandmothers’ Differential Involvement with Grandchildren in Rural Multiple Partner Fertility Family Structures.” In her final year at Duke University, Lane was awarded the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Fellowship for Undergraduate Instruction. Lane was also awarded a Kenan Graduate Fellowship from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University and was a Sulzberger/ Levitan Fellow with the Center for Child and Family Policy in the Terry Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. In 2011, Lane received the Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award from the Department of Sociology at Duke University.