

Employment Patterns, Family Resources, and Perception: Examining Depressive Symptoms among Rural Low-Income Mothers

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Using family stress management theory (Boss, 2002), this longitudinal study examined how employment patterns, family coping resources, and perceptions of financial well-being influenced depressive symptoms of rural low-income mothers. Data were drawn from three waves of the multi-state research project, *Rural Families Speak*, which focuses on rural families whose income was below 200% poverty threshold and had at least one child under the age of 13 at the time of the initial interview. Among 233 mothers, we identified four employment patterns: (1) stable employment ($n=41$), (2) switching employment ($n=57$), (3) intermittent employment ($n=81$), and (4) continuous unemployment ($n=54$). Mothers who remained employed as the same workplace over the course of the study were identified as having 'stable employment.' Mothers who remained employed throughout the course of the study but changed employers were classified as 'switching employment.' Mothers who were employed and also unemployed for some period over the course of the study were designated as having 'intermittent employment.' Finally, mothers who remained unemployed over the course of the study were categorized as being 'continuously unemployed.'

The correlation analysis indicated that, compared to stable employment, switching employment was negatively, and continuous unemployment was positively correlated with maternal depressive symptoms over the time span of this study. However, employment patterns did not predict depressive symptoms. Instead, hierarchical regression analysis suggested that physical health status at Time1 and change in perceived income significantly impacted mothers' mental health at Time 3. The results demonstrate that employment alone cannot improve mental health of rural low-income mothers. The results of this study support Boss' (2002) contention that a family's perception or interpretation of a situation is the key determinant of how effectively a family manages stress. Family coping resources, particularly, physical health, and mothers' perception of financial circumstances play critical roles in psychological well-being.

In addition to disseminating knowledge and providing services to improve the physical health status, programs which help increase mothers' life skills as well as knowledge of community resources would likely improve mothers' interpretation of the situation during stressful times. This study also suggests that having stable employment may not always benefit the psychological well-being of low-income mothers, many of whom earn only minimum wage or near minimum wage. Rather, switching to a job with better working

conditions can have a positive effect on mental health. “Any job” is not good enough to improve depressive symptoms for rural low-income mothers. The quality of a job needs to be strongly considered in policies targeting rural low-income families.