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Do couples with children spend less time together during recessions?

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The time families spend together has important social implications, and shared leisure time as a couple may promote marital satisfaction and stability. While research has shown that couples who have children enjoy less shared leisure time and more shared housework, total time together as a couple is the same regardless of whether or not there are children in the household. Not only shared leisure time but all time together may be important for marital satisfaction and stability as couples try to manage their household and childcare responsibilities.

In “What effects do macroeconomic conditions have on the time couples with children spend together?” (*Review of Economics of the Household*, March 2015), Melinda Sandler Morrill and Sabrina Wulff Pabilonia examine two questions: First, how does the time that couples who have children spend together vary over the business cycle? Second, do changes in couple time together correspond to changes in the total hours worked and when those hours take place? Some examples of channels through which business cycles could affect couple time together include reduced time spent in labor market activities, stress on families from financial constraints, teenager labor market activities, changes in childcare arrangements, and shifts in the timing of work hours. The effects of economic decline on shared leisure or shared housework, however, is theoretically ambiguous because both members of a couple must be willing and able to coordinate their schedules to spend that nonwork time together.

The article uses 2003–10 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics American Time Use Survey (ATUS) and state unemployment rates. The ATUS is unique in that it is the only ongoing survey in the world about how people spend their time and with whom they spend it. Therefore, it is the only time-use survey that currently allows for the examination of the effects of business cycles on the time-use behavior of individuals living in the United States beyond their working-time behavior.

Morrill and Pabilonia find a U-shaped relationship between the state unemployment rate and the total time that couples who have children spend together, with the lowest amount of time together occurring when unemployment rates are around 9 percent. The majority of the variability in couple time together over the business cycle comes from changes in shared leisure time, especially time spent watching TV and movies together, rather than from changes in shared housework or primary childcare time. Morrill and Pabilonia also find that this relationship holds not just for those who lose their jobs but also for couples where both partners are employed. These results suggest that at such times as during the Great Recession, when the national unemployment rate grew from 5 percent to 10 percent, couple time together dropped by five percent on average. Thus, another cost of the recession for couples who have children is a reduction in leisure time together.

Morrill and Pabilonia hypothesize that a reduction in jobs with desirable work schedules during periods of economic decline may hinder the ability of couples to synchronize their time at work, thereby limiting their time spent together. As unemployment rates increase and households lose incomes, mothers may accept new jobs that require them to work at nonstandard hours when their spouse is more likely to be at home. They find evidence that as economic conditions worsen, mothers work fewer minutes during standard business hours and more minutes on weekend days. This result is consistent with couples spending less time together at moderately high unemployment rates (8–10 percent). However, at the highest unemployment rates (12–13 percent), mothers' time working on all days of the week falls, which is consistent with increases in the time that couples spend together. Thus, over the business cycle, changes in both the total hours worked and when those hours take place correspond to changes in couple time together.