As we move into the twenty-first century, we are witnessing temporal changes in labor market demands at the macro level that are profoundly affecting the time we spend in paid employment outside the home and, consequently, the temporal nature and functioning of family life at the micro level. The “home-time” structure of family life, namely whether we are home alone or with other family members at various times of the day or night, is undergoing significant change. I am not referring here simply to the number of hours individuals and family members are employed outside the home, but to which hours they are employed. The twenty-first century, I contend, will experience even further movement toward a 24-hour economy, with increasing demands on employees to diversify their work hours and work evening and night shifts as well as weekends. This phenomenon will affect women as well as men, married as well as nonmarried, and those with children as well as those without. The seeds of this movement have already taken hold on a world-wide basis and, in my view, the trend is not likely to reverse.

This chapter, which draws upon work published in a book on the 24-hour economy, focuses on the United States (Presser, 2003). It is fortunate that national data are available for the U.S. on people’s work schedules as well as their total work hours. But, unfortunately, these data do not permit rigorous analyses of changes over time due to changes in the wording of questions over the years. Theoretically, however, a case can be made that there is an increasing demand for Americans to work late hours and weekends due to three interrelated factors: a changing economy, changing demography, and changing technology.

As I have argued elsewhere (Presser, 1989, 2000b), an important aspect of the changing economy is the growth of the service sector with its high prevalence of nonstandard work schedules relative to the goods-producing sector. In the 1960s, employees in manufacturing greatly exceeded those in service...
industries; by 1995, the percentage was about twice as high in services as in manufacturing (Meisenheimer II, 1998). This growth in the service sector is linked with the growth of women’s labor force in an interactive way. The service sector has a disproportionate number of traditionally female-type jobs, and thus growth in this sector reflects a growing demand for female employment. As more women become employed, they in turn contribute to the growth of the service sector. For example, the decline in full-time homemaking has generated an increase in family members eating out and purchasing services. Moreover, women’s increasing daytime labor force participation has generated a demand for services during nondaytime hours and weekends.

Demographic factors have also contributed. The postponement of marriage in recent decades from a median age in the early to mid-twenties and the increasing proportion of Americans never marrying (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998: Tables 61 and 159) has, along with the rise in dual-earner households, increased the demand for recreation and entertainment. The aging of the population is also relevant, as this trend has increased the demand for medical services over a 24-hour day, seven days a week.

Finally, technological change, along with reduced costs, has moved us to a global 24-hour economy. The ability to be “on call” at all hours of the day and night to others around the world at low cost generates a need to do so. For example, the rise of multinational corporations, along with the use of computers, faxes, and other forms of rapid communication, increases the demand for branch offices to operate at the same time that corporate headquarters are open. Similarly, international financial markets are expanding their hours of operation. Express mailing companies, such as United Parcel, require round-the-clock workers, all days of the week.

15.1 THE PROCESS: FROM SOCIETAL DEMAND TO INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY OUTCOMES

Given these three interrelated factors at the macro level that affect the demand for employment during late or rotating hours: a changing economy, changing demography, and changing technology, how do they affect the lives of individuals and their families?

As portrayed in Figure 1, these societal conditions affect the timing of labor force activity, which in turn affects individual well-being and the temporal nature of family life. In this paper I shall not review in detail the literature on the greater individual health risks associated working late hours, particularly nights (as distinct from evenings) and rotating shifts (whereby one periodically changes from days to evenings and/or nights). But it should be noted that very late or changing work hours affect an individual’s circadian rhythms, which in turn are