In this paper, we use recent data on unwed new mothers living in urban cities to examine employment plans of low-income women the year following childbirth. We conceptually distinguish work expectations, a cognition; from work, a behavior. We argue that government support and social support are related to the work expectations of unwed new mothers. The results provide evidence that the receipt of various forms of government and social support are positively associated with work expectations. The only variations from this pattern were found for government medical assistance and support from the baby’s father. Overall, these findings are contrary to the idea that self-sufficiency is more likely to be achieved when support is denied. Our results suggest that any effort to engage low-income unwed mothers in work activity should consider the importance of support for employment.

Introduction

There is now a historically high rate of mothers in the labor force (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002) due to various social, economic, and political changes in the United States. Also occurring is the implementation of the 1996 welfare reform legislation that requires work activity for recipients of government aid, even mothers with young children (U.S. Congress, 1996). Welfare reform was driven by a concern that government aid was serving as a disincentive for employment and contributing to a cycle of poverty, particularly among unwed mothers. This view of poverty corresponds to the culture of poverty thesis, which emphasizes psychological and culture explanations for poverty, as opposed to structural explanations. According
to this perspective, the values and behavior of the poor are counter to mainstream cultural values and welfare recipients are thought to be lacking in self-reliance and their desire to work (see Hays, 2003 for review and critique). The emphasis of the culture of poverty thesis is on the cognitive element of work (desire or expectation) while using actual work to indicate a work ethic or intentions about work. However, work expectations are conceptually distinct from actual work because the former is a cognitive phenomenon while the latter is behavioral. Research refuting the culture of poverty argument focuses on the effect of structural constraints on work behavior. We argue that structural factors are also related to work expectations.

In this paper, we use recent data on unwed new mothers living in urban cities to examine the employment plans of low-income women the year following childbirth. Specifically, we consider whether structural factors, as opposed to psychological or cultural factors, influenced work plans. We focus on the ways that broad measures of support including government assistance and housing as well as social support from family and friends affect unwed new mother’s work expectations. This investigation offers insight into the lives of mothers who are in fragile social and financial positions.

Literature Review

The literature review discusses national trends in employment of mothers to illustrate the context in which the work expectations of new mothers are currently being framed. It reviews research regarding the factors associated with the employment of mothers, with particular attention to research on the relationship between government and social support and employment. We argue that the same structural factors found to be associated with employment are also related to work expectations.

Trends in the Employment of Mothers

Trends in social, political, and economic behavior frame the work expectations of new mothers. Over the past three decades there has been a dramatic increase in the labor force participation of women with children and particularly among mothers with children under the age of six (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). Part of this trend in mothers’ employment is due to rising rates of divorce and single motherhood that make some women largely responsible for supporting their families (England 1992). In 1980, the first available Census data on single women with children under six years old showed that 44 percent of these mothers were employed. By 1995, over half (53 percent) of single mothers with young children were working and by 2001, this rose to almost 70 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census,