

## **More working parents play 'beat the clock'**

Forty percent of Americans work unusual hours - weekends, nights, split shifts - which makes family life hard.

**By Marilyn Gardner, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor JUNE 2, 2004**

Scott Fulgham, a night-shift police officer in Chattanooga, Tenn., knows a lot about strange schedules. He eats breakfast when he wakes up at 2 p.m. He joins his family for dinner at 6:30 p.m., then grabs "lunch" on the job at 2 a.m. When the sun comes up, he pulls down the shades and goes to bed.

"My sleep cycle gets a little crazy," says Mr. Fulgham, a patrol sergeant who spends 10 nights on duty, then four nights off. "Your body's having to adjust all the time."

That isn't the only adjustment taking place in the Fulgham household. Like many families living with America's 24 million shift workers, his wife, Kathie, and two daughters must adapt their schedules to accommodate his. "It puts challenges on the whole family," Mrs. Fulgham says.

By one count, 40 percent of employed Americans work late hours or weekends or both. As more families like the Fulghams inhabit a topsy-turvy world that turns nights into days and weekends into just another time to punch the clock, some are paying a price.

These unconventional schedules can "undermine the stability of marriages, increase the amount of housework to be done, reduce family cohesiveness, and require elaborate child-care arrangements," warns Harriet Presser, a sociologist at the University of Maryland. Parents working nights are more likely to separate or divorce than those on other work schedules, she finds. As the ranks of extended-hours employees grow, so does the recognition among sociologists, labor specialists, and employers

that off-hour workers and families need more attention than they are getting, says Dr. Presser, author of the book "Working in a 24/7 Economy: Challenges for American Families."

For decades, nontraditional schedules were largely the province of blue-collar workers, many of whom had a family history of shift work. Today, half of those on nonstandard hours are white-collar, technical, or service-industry workers.

"It's a huge change," says David Mitchell, director of publications for Circadian Technologies in Lexington, Mass. "A lot of these people just don't think of themselves as shift workers." Because these new white-collar employees have no personal or family history of shifts, he adds, "it just slams them. The expectations are so different from what all their years of education led them to expect."

The Fulghams both have college degrees, as do their parents. Referring to her husband's schedule, Mrs. Fulgham, public-relations director of the Tennessee Aquarium, says, "We weren't prepared for it." Neither was Kacey Powers of Bakersfield, Calif. A week after she and her husband, Chris, were married 10 years ago, he started a job at a shingle manufacturing plant.

He works 12-hour shifts, rotating between days and nights. This involves four nights on the "graveyard" shift from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Then he has 1-1/2 days off, after which he works 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. for three days. After two days off, he puts in three graveyard shifts. Then he has 1-1/2 days off and four days on, capped by a meeting day that starts at 7 a.m. A calendar by the phone keeps the family on track.

"The kids are used to it," Mrs. Powers says of their two sons, ages 6 and 7. "They know when he sleeps graveyard. They're quiet. They tend to play outside." But that kind of easy acceptance can be

harder for adults. Powers observes a high divorce rate at her husband's plant, as well as other problems. "I've seen men lose their jobs because they're losing their family," Powers says. "They neglect their work, call in sick, and have high absenteeism."

To resolve problems, she says, "You have to talk, you have to relay things to each other. A lot of wives don't get up with their husbands at 5 a.m. I try to go the extra mile, and he does the same for me." They also carve out family time. Two weeks ago they visited Universal Studios. On Mr. Powers's weekends off, they set aside a day with their sons, perhaps going to a lake or renting videos.

Who watches the children?

For two-career couples and single parents, nonstandard schedules make child care complex. Nearly a third of extended-hours employees have children under 18. And more than a quarter of employed women regularly work nights, evenings, and weekends, when quality care is least available.

"People are really struggling with the question, What do you do with your kids?" says Netsy Firestein, executive director of the Labor Project for Working Families in Berkeley, Calif. "They're making all kinds of informal arrangements, whether it's early in the morning or in the evening. There are no great solutions to this."

Teri Ransom, director of Happy Kids 'Round the Clock Child Care in Denver, says that because parents have such difficulty finding after-hours child care, she even accepted children on Mother's Day this year. "Restaurants are open then, and waitresses have to work," she explains. Yet even extended-hours care does not solve all problems. Most parents do not want their children to spend all night at a center. To avoid such dilemmas, a third of married mothers with preschool children say

they and their spouses deliberately work different shifts so their husbands or parents can care for the children. Yet most married mothers who work evenings, nights, or weekends do so because the job demands it, Presser says. Many parents simply cannot choose their schedules.

When parents work different shifts, Presser wonders whether the father or mother who worked all night is coming home and sleeping, leaving the children essentially unsupervised. She does find some benefits when parents work different shifts. Child care costs less. Fathers often spend more time with children, and many men do more housework. Mr. Fulgham, for one, cooks dinner more than half the time, shares the grocery shopping, and does some laundry. He picks up 5-year-old Jilly after school, and in the evening gives her a bath and reads to her.

Still, "tag-team parenting" can create its own challenges. Jo Browning, who works at the B.F. Goodrich plant in Opelika, Ala., watches husbands and wives who work on different shifts meeting in the parking lot or at the time clock. "There's no family time together when you both rotate," she says.

Divorced and the mother of a 13-year-old daughter, Ms. Browning also knows how nonstandard hours affect parents with older children.

"If you're a single mom and you have a 14-year-old, what do you do?" she asks. "You don't want to hire a baby sitter, but you don't want to leave them alone, either. You depend on family and friends and neighbors to help you."

Health concerns also rank high for some shift workers. Because sleep deprivation is common, a handful of companies are starting to teach these employees how to sleep in the daytime. The average

man who works nights sleeps 5.5 hours during the day, Mitchell says, while the average woman on the night shift sleeps only 4.8 hours because of domestic responsibilities.

Some employers are also educating night workers about nutrition. "They're eating the wrong food - fried chicken, spicy burritos, and coffee," Mitchell explains.

But even practical help like this doesn't address other issues affecting many employees on nonstandard hours.

"When he works 10 days straight, it's a strain," Mrs. Fulgham says. "It's not just a lack of intimacy. It's a lack of communication. You just seem to be speaking in this code of getting through life."

Challenges can be even more acute for single parents. Forty percent of single mothers work shifts, and more than a third work weekends. They are also more likely to hold lower-paying jobs with fewer benefits and less flexibility.

Family mealtime sacrificed

Researchers still have much to learn about the ramifications of these schedules, Presser says. This includes their long-term effects on children. Noting that many shiftwork families lose their dinner hour, she says, "Dinnertime is the most important family ritual in togetherness time. Working evenings clearly leads to the absence of a parent during dinnertime."

Presser expects jobs with off-hours schedules to increase. "We like stores to be open around the clock, medical services to be available continuously, and people to answer the phone when we make travel reservations late at night," she says.

For now, some parents take a philosophical, you-do-what-you-gotta-do approach. As Mr. Fulgham puts it, "You've got to look at the positives. You've got to manipulate the negatives and make them more positive."

To which his wife adds, "In a family like ours, everybody learns that they're all part of the solution. Our family has adapted."