



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 37

Issue 4 December - Special Issue on
Homelessness in Canada

Article 15

2010

**Review of *Work-Life Policies*. Ann C. Crouter and Alan Booth, Eds.
Reviewed by Marguerite G. Rosenthal.**

Marguerite G. Rosenthal
Salem State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Rosenthal, Marguerite G. (2010) "Review of *Work-Life Policies*. Ann C. Crouter and Alan Booth, Eds. Reviewed by Marguerite G. Rosenthal.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 37: Iss. 4, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3571>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol37/iss4/15>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Ann C. Crouter and Alan Booth, Eds., *Work-Life Policies*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2009. \$32.50, paperback.

Policy analysts frequently focus on macro level policies and programs. This edited volume, while paying attention to the only relevant federal policy, the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), is more concerned with employer-initiated programs and practices at the workplace level. Starting from the premise that flexible work schedules can ease the stresses affecting most working adults with responsibilities for children, aging parents, or both, the several studies in this volume document a big divide between policies affecting professional and middle managers and those for hourly workers.

Emanating from a 2007 Pennsylvania State National Symposium on Family Issues, over 20 contributors (most chapters are co-authored) examine different aspects of workplace policies and the challenges of conducting research in this area. The book is organized into 4 parts: (1) Workplace Policies: Opportunities to Improve Health and Well-Being, focused on extant policies, their sufficiency, availability and utilization; (2) Intervening in the Corporate Workplace, primarily an examination of results-only work environment (ROWE), a flextime approach to increase Best Buy middle managers' control over their work time and place, studied in a mixed methods research design by Moen, Kelly and Chelmack; (3) Making a Difference for Hourly Employees, where Lambert and Milkman separately discuss the burdensome impact that "flexible work time" has on hourly workers; and (4) Future Directions for Research and Policies, that summarizes some of the major findings of the preceding chapters and poses areas for future study.

The inadequacies of employee benefits in the U.S., especially compared to other industrialized countries, are well-known. The FMLA covers only employees in settings with 50 or more employees and requires merely 12 weeks of unpaid leave for a serious health condition or care for a newborn, a newly adopted or fostered child, or a sick near relative. Firestein reports that the U.S., Liberia, Switzerland and Papua New Guinea are the only countries of 173 surveyed with no guaranteed paid leave for childbirth. Citing a 2006 Bureau of Labor Statistics study,

Kossek and Distelberg find that only 57% of surveyed employees have paid sick leave. Compared to Europeans, U.S. citizens work longer hours and have much less paid vacation time. Organizational culture plays an important role in disseminating information about workplace policies, either encouraging or discouraging their use. A 2007 U.S. Department of Labor study found that 30% of employers do not comply with the FMLA, and most supervisors do not facilitate employees' getting information about their rights.

The evaluation of the Best Buy ROWE program concluded that there was a "statistically significant impact on changes in employees' sense of control over their work time, their decisions about where and when they work, their sense of work-family conflict, some aspects of their health and wellness, and their work pressures and commitment." These positive results indicate that corporations can implement work organization strategies that reduce stress for managerial employees.

Hourly workers confront a completely different situation. Many are women (often single mothers) working swing shifts. Here flexibility serves employers' interests to keep labor costs low. Workers may not know until late in the week what their next week's work schedule will be. Consequently, they have great difficulty arranging for child care, transportation, medical appointments, and even mealtimes. Some employers purposefully schedule few hours for their workers, making them essentially unemployed but ineligible for unemployment benefits. At other times, when demand is high, workers are required to work overtime. These practices result in high absenteeism, turnover, stress, depressed wages and low benefits payouts.

The contributors conclude that work-life policies are, on the whole, deficient and lag behind the realities of the country's changed economy and workforce. Wisely or not, rather than looking to the federal government for remedies, they instead point to innovations at the state level (California, New Jersey and New York, principally) and those that are employer-initiated. Finally, Firestein reminds the reader that collective bargaining remains a powerful tool for workers lucky enough to be in unions.

Work-Force Policies offers an enormity of information. One drawback is its repetitiveness (too often, one contributor cites

another). And there is this caveat: the chapters were written before the current Great Recession; the work-life challenges depicted in the book are undoubtedly much worse now for those still in the labor force.

Marguerite G. Rosenthal, Emerita, Salem State University

David J. Erickson, *The Housing Policy Revolution: Networks and Neighborhoods*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2009. \$29.50 paperback.

One of the most fundamental questions regarding U.S. housing policy since the 1930s is: who should provide affordable rental housing? The first response—the federal public housing program—was criticized for poor design, quality, management, and financial sustainability, among other things. The second response—publicly-funded private sector development—was blamed for cost overruns, fraud, and lack of affordability despite generous public investment. The most recent response—a decentralized network centered on the nonprofit sector—might just have the right combination to make everyone happy, according to Erickson, delivering high-quality affordable housing that is both mission-driven to serve disadvantaged populations and a cost-effective investment.

Erickson argues that while many have bemoaned the exodus of the federal government from affordable housing since the 1960s, “in many ways, the welfare state is more present and harder to see” because it has simply decentralized. Relying on primary texts, including political speeches and governmental reports and secondary analysis of housing project evaluations, he presents a familiar narrative of the growth and resiliency of a new decentralized affordable housing delivery system. Erickson claims this represents a retooled, rather than a reduced, welfare state, involving a long list of partners—such as community development corporations, intermediaries, and foundations—and new flexible government funding programs—like the federal HOME block grant and Low Income Housing Tax Credit programs, state housing finance agencies, and local inclusionary zoning and housing trust funds. He suggests that this network has succeeded where prior top-down government