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RESEARCH

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Children's living arrangements and labor market outcomes of divorced mothers in Wisconsin

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Abstract

Objective: This paper examines the way divorced mothers' long-run employment, long-run earnings, and subjective experiences of work–family conflict differ by children's postdivorce living arrangements.

Background: Children's living arrangements are an important—and somewhat overlooked—determinant of mothers' postdivorce economic outcomes. Parenting commitments and resource availability tied to the amount of time children spend in residence can impact mothers' experiences of work–family conflict and consequent employment.

Method: The paper uses linked administrative and survey data for divorced parents in Wisconsin. It applies a mixed-methods approach, first using multivariate regression models to control for baseline characteristics in exploring mothers' labor market outcomes and experiences of work–family conflict, and subsequently performing content analysis on open-ended survey responses to enhance the findings from the quantitative analysis.

Results: Mothers with shared physical custody are 5% more likely to report being employed in the long run, experience 6% less work–family conflict, and show larger increases in long-term earnings than mothers who have sole physical custody of their children. However, the higher long-term earnings of shared placement mothers cannot be attributed to lower work–family conflict.

Conclusion: Shared placement mothers enjoy a labor market advantage in the long term after divorce, but more research is needed to understand the mechanisms behind this relationship.

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Implications: Public policy encouraging shared placement can be beneficial for divorced mothers' economic outcomes.

KEYWORDS
divorce, labor supply, shared custody, work–family conflict

INTRODUCTION

Divorce triggers an economic shock in the lives of couples, particularly those with children, with mothers facing worse economic outcomes both in relation to fathers and to their predivorce levels of economic well-being for several years after separation (Mortelmans, 2020). The loss of a household member reduces the economic resources available to a mother's household. Further, the way time with children is shared after divorce, or child placement arrangements, influences mothers' postdivorce economic well-being. Shared placement, where children live substantial amounts of time with each parent, has grown considerably in recent years both in the United States (Meyer et al., 2022) and across other Western countries (Hakovirta et al., 2023; Smyth, 2017). Placement affects the time available to mothers—especially mothers of young children— to spend in labor market activities, which is the primary way they cope with lower household economic resources postdivorce (de Vaus et al., 2017). Placement also determines the amount of child support mothers are entitled to after divorce, with orders typically lower in the case of shared placement (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023).

The difference in child support determinations for mothers in sole and shared placement is generally motivated by the differences in cost sharing for children who live in the house full versus part time. Sole placement mothers must bear all fixed and variable costs associated with children living in their house full time. But for shared placement mothers, the variable costs of children like food and groceries are shared with the other parent and are less than with sole placement, although the fixed costs of housing, toys, and so forth likely remain the same. Shared placement thresholds and associated child support determination guidelines differ by states, but shared arrangements generally divide both the responsibilities of parenting and costs of raising children in a more equitable way across divorcing mothers and fathers than traditional sole mother arrangements. Such arrangements have become a common form of postdivorce family structure in recent years, with an estimated one third of divorce cases ending in shared placement nationally (Meyer et al., 2022). However, although the economic outcomes of divorce and mothers' postdivorce employment rates have been widely discussed in the literature, little is known about the way mothers manage parenting and employment after divorce and its impact on their long-term earnings trajectories, especially in light of placement arrangements.

The current study investigates whether labor force participation several years after divorce differs by placement arrangements for divorced mothers with school-age children in Wisconsin using unique survey data linked with administrative wage records and court records on divorce cases. Applying mixed-methods techniques, it focuses on the role of family-to-work conflict as measured through mothers' perceptions about whether parenting commitments have affected their postdivorce employment decisions, and studies the relationship between placement and annual earnings. Specifically, the I address the following research questions:

- Do medium- to long-term employment status and earnings (6–10 years after divorce) differ for divorced mothers with shared versus sole placement?
- Does reported family-to-work conflict, measured as the extent to which parenting obligations have impacted work and career choices since divorce, differ for shared versus sole placement mothers?

- Do earnings of mothers in shared and sole placement arrangements evolve differently over the 10 years following a divorce?
- Is reported family-to-work conflict associated with different postdivorce earnings trajectories? If so, does this mediate any observed relationship between placement and earnings trajectories?
- How do mothers themselves characterize the way they have adjusted their employment decisions in response to parenting demands since their divorce?

Understanding whether long-term labor market trajectories evolve differently for mothers in sole versus shared placement, and whether these groups experience work–family conflict differently, can expand existing knowledge of the economic implications of placement arrangements. The findings from this study can inform how targeted policies can improve labor market outcomes for divorced mothers both across placement groups and over time. Moreover, understanding whether mothers' reports of family-to-work conflict differ by placement arrangements can shed light on the extent of time pressures faced by divorced mothers, and inform the need for policies that promote work–family balance.

BACKGROUND

Divorce, economic outcomes, and work–family conflict

Women, especially mothers, are economically worse off after divorce (Mortelmans, 2020). Because married men are likely to work and earn more than married women, this difference arises out of loss in household income after divorce, and persists in spite of child support receipts (Bartfeld, 2000; Bartfeld et al., 2012; Bonnet et al., 2022; Tach & Eads, 2015). Women primarily cope with the loss in household income by increasing their employment (de Vaus et al., 2017; Mortelmans, 2020). However, women earn and work less than men (Blau & Winkler, 2017; Goldin, 2006; Payscale, 2022) and parenthood responsibilities may increase barriers to employment for mothers, putting them at a greater risk of poverty (Malcolm & Abdurrahman, 2014). Although the time commitments associated with parenting remain salient after divorce for mothers with primary responsibility of their children, the absence of a second caregiver and/or earner in the family could increase their financial need to participate in the labor market, exacerbating their work–family trade-offs. The substitution cost of mothers' time is presumably very high, conditional on how children's time is divided between households after divorce.

Children's living arrangements after divorce

Traditionally, children have been more likely to live with the mother postseparation, but research from Wisconsin has shown that this trend has declined dramatically in recent decades (Cancian et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2017, 2022). This literature, which has primarily utilized court records data from Wisconsin, has found that shared placement arrangements—defined in Wisconsin as spending at least 25% of time with each parent—have grown so much since the 1980s (19% in 1985 to 48% in 2010) that now it is more common among Wisconsin divorces than sole placement, with equal shared placement (where the child stays with each parent half the time) being the most common. Recent analysis with data from the Current Population Survey has shown that shared placement has increased nationally as well, albeit at a more modest rate, from 12% of divorces involving shared placement before 1985 to 25% in 2010–2014 (Meyer et al., 2022).

The assignment of shared placement has increased across diverse demographic groups and appears unrelated to children's characteristics such as gender and age (Meyer et al., 2017). It is

associated with characteristics of the parents instead, such as income and legal representation at divorce (Meyer et al., 2017). Shared placement has been shown to be more common among higher income and better educated households. This trend also reflects increasing legal and societal preference toward more gender-equitable parenting over the years (Cancian et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2017). Changing family norms and children's living arrangements have important implications for family well-being across a range of dimensions.

Shared placement and family functioning

Shared placement has been studied extensively in the context of children's health, behavioral, and education outcomes. Findings from this literature broadly agree that shared placement after divorce is associated with positive outcomes for children (Baude et al., 2016); for instance, Nielsen (2018) found that children living in joint physical custody arrangements versus with one parent have better emotional and physical well-being and healthier relationships with parents irrespective of the level of conflict between parents. These findings are further corroborated by Turunen (2017) who find Swedish children in equal shared arrangements have lower levels of stress than children in sole custody. Fewer studies have explored how shared custody impacts the well-being of parents. Steinbach's (2019) comprehensive review suggests that extant literature mostly finds greater satisfaction with living arrangements and better physical and emotional health among shared custody parents, and lower time pressures and work–family conflict among shared custody mothers. These benefits stem from greater sharing of costs and responsibilities, allowing mothers more freedom with their time (Steinbach, 2019). Relevant research on fathers is even more limited, but existing studies suggest satisfaction with shared custody is even higher among fathers (Patulny et al., 2010), although they face greater time pressures than shared custody mothers (van der Heijden et al., 2016). A primary caveat for all these findings is the issue of selection into shared placement, as the arrangement remains more common among higher income and highly educated couples. However, causal research in recent years suggests that these benefits are indeed attributable to shared custody per se and not simply selection into such arrangements (Braver & Votruba, 2021).

Shared placement, time-use, and postdivorce economic outcomes

Whereas earlier research on shared placement focused on broad outcomes related to child and family well-being, the economic and time-use implications of shared placement has recently begun gaining attention in research. The division of nights children spend with mothers and fathers impacts the amount of resources available to a household and influences economic outcomes through several pathways. First, child-related expenses are likely to be lower in shared versus sole mother households although the difference is not proportional because of duplication of some costs like housing and clothes. Lower child-related expenses, however, would reduce the strain on household resources as well as mothers' incentive to earn or work. Second, although formulas for calculating child support differ across states, mothers in shared placement typically receive much less in child support as a result of having their children a lower amount of time, which would incentivize them to earn more and increase employment (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023).

In essence, child-related expenses and child support are both dependent on the amount of time the child spends with the mother and are designed to offset each other, implying that their combined impact on employment and earnings could in theory be null. Empirical evidence on shared placement and mother's labor market outcomes is conflicted. Vuri (2018) suggested that the passage of joint custody reforms in the United States is linked with reduced earnings for

U.S. mothers who do not marry after divorce, with receipts from child support offsetting the need to participate in the labor market. On the other hand, recent evidence from Wisconsin found that shared placement mothers have modestly larger increases in earnings in the first 2 years after divorce as compared to similar mothers with sole placement (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023). Accounting for child support and cost-sharing arrangements, however, this does not translate into better economic circumstances for shared versus sole placement mothers. Nevertheless, subjective or self-reported economic well-being of mothers in shared placement has been shown to be similar or better than that of mothers in sole placement arrangements in different country contexts (Augustijn, 2023; Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023; Sodermans et al., 2015).

Placement arrangements also place varying constraints on mothers' time in ways that may impact employment and economic well-being. Mothers with shared placement may have the capacity to prioritize employment more than their sole placement counterparts as time commitments of parenting may be reduced. Mothers in sole placement on the other hand have to manage all childcare responsibilities when children are ill or schools are closed—something that has had a profound impact on working parents in recent years (Garcia & Cowan, 2022). van der Heijden et al. (2016) found that resident parents in Netherlands face greater time pressures than nonresident parents and mothers having sole physical custody of their children face greater time pressure than mothers with shared physical custody after divorce. Further, studies in Europe have shown that mothers in shared placement are better equipped to maintain social contacts, participate in outdoor leisure activities, and maintain a better work–family balance than mothers in sole placement arrangements (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Sodermans et al., 2015). The shared placement relationship with longer term postdivorce employment patterns, especially with respect to the role of parenting time-commitments, has however remained largely unexplored.

The Wisconsin context

In Wisconsin, divorce rates have decreased from 9.7 to 6.2 per 1,000 women from 2008 to 2018 and are currently lower than the national average of 7.2 (J. Borbely, personal communication, 2021[1]). At the same time, the share of divorced families having shared placement arrangements has increased so much that in the last decade, there have been more divorce judgments without mother sole custody than with it (Cancian et al., 2014). Wisconsin defines mother sole placement cases as children spending at least 75% of overnights with the mother and shared cases where children spend between 25%–75% of overnights with the mother. Shared placement cases could further be divided into equal and unequal shared arrangements, where children spend 50% of overnights with each parent in equal shared placement cases, and between 25%–49% (father primary arrangement) or 51%–75% (mother primary arrangement) of the overnights with the mother in unequal shared placement arrangements (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.). The shared placement threshold is important in that shared and sole placement arrangements are subject to different child support guidelines.

Wisconsin has long been leading research on shared custody in the United States owing to focused attention of academics and practitioners to issues surrounding placement and child support. Through a decades long partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families involving longitudinal data collection from court records of divorcing parents as well as administrative data, researchers have documented trends and outcomes of placement arrangements in Wisconsin from the 1980s through present times with access to details about living arrangement that goes well beyond what can be learned from national survey data.

[1]Author's calculations are from personal correspondence with James Borbely, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021.

Although the limited data available show that Wisconsin has higher rates of shared placement than the nation as a whole (Meyer et al., 2022), the Wisconsin policy context is nonetheless broadly consistent with the range of policy regimes in place around the country, which have been increasingly encouraging shared placement arrangements after divorce (Cancian et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2022). In addition to changing legal norms, shared custody assignments have been linked to several characteristics of the divorcing parents (Cancian et al., 2014) such as both partners being employed before divorce and having higher earnings. It is also more likely when the father has legal representation, whereas the possibility of sole custody increases as the mothers' relative income increases. Having children and partners from other marriages or unions increases the probability of shared custody as well (Cancian et al., 2014). Nevertheless, norms or individual characteristics of divorced parents are neither sufficient alone nor in combination to explain the remarkably high rates of shared placement in the state (Meyer et al., 2022). By looking at longer term employment and earnings by placement in Wisconsin, the current study capitalizes on both the unique data available in Wisconsin and the high rates of shared placement to provide new insight on the relationship between placement and employment over time.

Theoretical perspectives

Several theoretical frameworks are useful in considering how shared placement might impact mothers' employment decisions. Economic theories of marriage formation and dissolution highlight that a divorce occurs only when gains from marriage are lost, or individuals are themselves able to make up for household resources contributed by their partners. Thus, in their postdivorce household, mothers must increase earnings to make up for the divorce-induced loss in household resources. Consequently, the substitution cost of their time investments in children, which in turn is a function of physical custody arrangements, becomes high. We may therefore expect that mothers in shared placement, who have their children for a lesser amount of time, would be more equipped to prioritize market work owing to lower costs of forgone time in the household relative to the market, and mothers who were employed before divorce would be better able to maintain predivorce levels of utility.

However, the simple microeconomic model of household time use is likely to mask considerable heterogeneity in the trade-offs mothers face with regard to different components of housework, leisure, and market work. Role conflict theory posits that individuals may have to accommodate various demands from the roles they occupy every day in the household and market and that these roles may be inherently incompatible with each other given their distinct time and behavioral expectations. Such a clash of obligations is manifested in work–family conflict where individuals face competing demands from the household and labor market. This conflict arises in two ways—work-to-family conflict, which refers to conflict in the household owing to demands from the workplace, and family-to-work conflict, which arises when the circumstances of home life interfere with work. The present study examines whether mothers in different placement arrangements differ in their experience of family-to-work (FTW) conflict in the form of responding to parenting time commitments through adjustments in employment. FTW conflict has been shown to be strongly related to the presence of young children and absence of a partner in the case of women, and it affects job performance and productivity of women more than men and mothers more than nonmothers (see Bianchi & Milkie, 2010, for a review). For divorced mothers, time with children depends largely on placement arrangements, and role-conflict theory suggests that shared versus sole placement mothers would face lower conflict between their work and family roles and have greater capacity to prioritize work. This would translate into greater attachment with the labor force and consequent higher earnings

since they have their children for a lesser amount of time. Thus, reductions in FTW conflict for mothers with shared placement could contribute to different earnings trajectories over time.

Constructs about parenting are also useful in thinking about mothers' time with children postdivorce. Intensive mothering is a social construct that suggests ideal motherhood involves taking an extremely labor intensive, emotionally, and financially expensive approach to parenting, where the child has the greatest priority in one's life (Johnson, 2014; Lareau, 2002). This idea remains prevalent in the United States despite having originated in the post–World War II era (Geiger et al., 2019), and more so among affluent households (Lareau, 2002; Lareau & Weininger, 2008). According to this ideal, compensatory mother–child time is likely to occur in the aftermath of a union dissolution owing to the gendered nature of child care and contemporary parenting norms. But divorced mothers are resource constrained and that would also predict a more hands-off approach, with the extent of economic losses determining how much time the mother spends with the child after divorce. Moreover, the shift to shared placement arrangements from traditional living arrangements poses a challenge to traditional family norms like intensive mothering by encouraging a more egalitarian parenting practice. The rise in shared placement arrangements negates the idea that mothers have to be solely responsible for their children, and builds toward an ideology of parenting that allows them to prioritize work, be financially self-reliant, and seek help from others for child-rearing without any associated guilt. This ideology, termed as "integrated motherhood" by Dawn Dow (2016), would therefore dictate that shared placement mothers who are presumably opting into or potentially getting assigned to an egalitarian parenting arrangement would be less affected by obligations of parenting than mothers in sole placement.

The current study uses a mixed-methods approach to examine long-run work, long-run earnings, and subjective measures of work–family conflict in association with children's postdivorce living arrangements. It extends the literature on economic outcomes of divorce in three ways: First, it looks at employment and earnings for a much longer postdivorce period than previous studies, spanning 6 to 10 years after divorce; second, it examines mothers' reports of the extent to which FTW conflict in the form of parenting time commitments have impacted their employment choices since divorce; and third, it considers how employment, earnings, and experience of FTW conflict differ by placement arrangements. Following the posits of the economic theory of the household, role conflict theory, and the framework of integrated motherhood, it might be expected that child support receipts and cost-sharing on child-related expenses have offsetting impacts on employment, and lower parenting commitments allow mothers in shared placement to devote more time to the labor market, resulting in higher earnings. It can also be expected that this employment advantage would be greater the more time children spend with the other parent, so that mothers in equal shared placement are more likely to have higher earnings than mothers in primary shared placement arrangements.

Though it is known from past work that mothers with shared placement tend to enter into divorce with higher earnings than their sole placement counterparts, it is possible that these differences increase over time following divorce if the returns to investing more time in the labor market take a while to come into effect. On the other hand, FTW conflict could potentially lead to lower earnings if the specifics of time-sharing require greater flexibility or if parents are particularly reluctant to give up time with children when they already only live with children part time.

METHOD

Data

The data for this study come from multiple sources. The first is the WiscParents survey, which was fielded in 2020 by the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) for divorced parents in

Wisconsin. Surveyed individuals included mothers and fathers in shared placement arrangements, and mothers in sole placement arrangements who had filed for divorce about 6 to 10 years ago and had a child under 6 years old at the time of the divorce (and are therefore school age at the time of the survey). Data were collected through in-person interviews before the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently through telephone interviews conducted by trained personnel from the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. The survey collected extensive information on current living arrangements of the couples' youngest child, respondents' employment and economic well-being indicators, and demographic information, as well as current and retrospective information on parenting practices.

The WiscParents sample was drawn from the Wisconsin Court Records Data (CRD), which includes a representative sample of divorce and paternity cases coming to court in 21 Wisconsin counties. The current survey sample includes divorcing parents coming to court in 2009–2010 and 2013, or 6 to 10 years before the year the survey was fielded. The CRD provides detailed information on the court process, demographics, income, and final determinations of placement and child support obligations. In addition to quantitative information, the survey also includes open-ended responses to questions about how parenting commitments toward children have affected mothers' postdivorce employment decisions. These responses are used to study how mothers have adjusted their employment in the years following divorce as a result of FTW conflict.

Data for this study were created by merging longitudinal data from Unemployment Insurance (UI) records to the survey data to identify earnings patterns of the mothers in WiscParents over time. Earnings records from the UI system are provided by Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development and are maintained as part of the Wisconsin Administrative Data Core at IRP. The data include quarterly earnings for all jobs in Wisconsin that are covered by UI. I use earnings data from the quarter in which the divorce was finalized until the last quarter of 2019 when the WiscParents survey was fielded. Sample weights account for unequal sampling percentages across counties.

Sample

The analytic sample for this study consists of 403 mothers, including 169 in sole placement and 234 in shared placement arrangements. Mothers with shared placement are classified following the Wisconsin state guidelines. Although this covers a wide range of arrangements, the shared placement category represents those who are subjected to a different formula for child support calculation by courts. Shared placement includes mothers with mother primary (50%–75% of time with children), equal shared (50% of time with children), and father primary (25%–49% of time with children). A little over 40% of mothers in the sample had sole placement of their children, whereas most mothers in shared placement had equal shared time with their children. For some analyses, I broke down the shared placement category into the 156 mothers with equal shared placement and 78 mothers in unequal shared placement, about 90% of whom have more than 51% of nights (or mother primary arrangements) with their children and 10% who have between 25%–49% time-share arrangements.

Table 1 describes mothers in sole and shared placement separately by their age, age of their youngest child, education, race, income, number of children, length of marriage, time since divorce, and baseline income and employment in the year preceding divorce. Mothers with shared placement have higher predivorce incomes and employment, higher education, and are more likely to be non-Hispanic White than their sole placement counterparts, with little difference in other dimensions.

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TABLE 1 Sample characteristics.

		Placement		
	All	**Sole**	**Shared**	**Sole versus Shared**
Non-Hispanic White	0.88	0.79	0.95	**
Education				
High school or less	0.31	0.34	0.29	
Some college or associate degree	0.26	0.31	0.23	*
4-year college or higher	0.24	0.20	0.28	*
Age of youngest child	11.75	11.49	11.96	†
	(2.40)	(2.26)	(2.48)	
Respondents' age	31.82	31.92	31.74	
	(6.02)	(5.94)	(6.08)	
Married or partnered	0.49	0.49	0.49	
Length of marriage	7.00	6.80	7.14	
	(4.11)	(4.36)	(3.91)	
Mothers' annual earnings at baseline ($)	27,831	22,407	31,970	**
	(33,980)	(25,721)	(38,672)	
Fathers' annual earnings at baseline ($)	45,702	34,296	54,244	**
	(50,889)	(39,225)	(56,707)	
Baseline employment				
Both parents employed	0.62	0.57	0.66	*
Only father employed	0.14	0.21	0.09	**
Only mother employed	0.17	0.14	0.19	
Neither parent employed	0.07	0.08	0.06	
N	405	169	236	

Note. Table shows proportions or means where applicable. Standard deviations in parentheses. All figures are weighted to adjust for different sampling percentages per county.
†$p < .10$.
*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.

Measures of interest

I constructed measures for long-term employment, earnings, and reported FTW conflict using information contained in the WiscParents survey. I assessed differential growth in earnings between mothers in shared and sole placement over time using UI wage records. Finally, I supplemented the findings from these measures using responses from an open-ended survey question.

Employment status

I constructed an indicator for whether the respondent had done any work for pay over the past 12 months preceding the survey.

Reported FTW conflict

The reported FTW conflict variable was constructed from the following survey item: "Thinking about the full period of time since your divorce, how much do you think that the amount of time

you spend parenting your child(ren) has affected the choices you have made about your work and career?" Responses were on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *a great deal*. I treated this as a continuous variable in my analysis, with higher values indicating higher levels of FTW conflict, and I refer to it as "reported FTW conflict" throughout the paper. I used this measure in two ways in my analysis: First, I assessed how shared placement mothers differ on their reports of FTW conflict from sole placement mothers, and second, I included it as an independent variable in the multivariate analyses estimating the relationship between placement and earnings.

There are three things worth noting about this measure. First, this variable records FTW conflict only with respect to changes in mothers' work or career decisions and not other relevant dimensions of employment behavior and outcomes such as work-related stress. Second, I used the term "conflict" to denote any work adjustments, positive *or* negative, arising out of competing demands from the household and labor market, even if that means maintaining status quo or finding better jobs. Finally, the FTW conflict measure is constructed out of a retrospective survey item that references the entire postdivorce period, and this might cause respondents' answers to have recency bias. If such a bias exists, then reported FTW would be more accurate in measuring conflict in the later years after divorce, which is important to keep in mind while interpreting regression results involving this variable.

Gross annual earnings

This is a self-reported survey measure of respondents' total pretax earnings over the past 12 months, including money earned from wages, salaries, tips, and commissions.

Earnings constructed from UI wage records

I calculated annual earnings UI wage records by aggregating quarterly earnings to each year starting from the quarter in which the divorce was finalized until the last quarter of 2019. This yielded annual earnings from jobs covered by UI for a total of 6 to 10 years following divorce.

Shared placement

The main independent variable is an indicator of whether mothers were legally assigned shared or sole placement arrangements at the time of the final divorce judgment. This variable was constructed from information on final placement determinations obtained from the CRD. It classifies children's living arrangements according to Wisconsin definitions of placement (25%–75% of overnights in a year as being in shared placement, over 75% of overnights in a year as being in sole placement). Mothers in shared placement were further divided into mothers having equal (50% of overnights) and unequal (25%–49% or 51%–75%) shared physical custody of their children for some analyses. Eighty-nine percent of mothers in unequal shared arrangements had primary custody (51%–75%), and I ran a sensitivity test of my results leaving out the 11% of mothers who didn't have primary shared custody of their children.

Open-ended responses

An open-ended follow-up question to the item about FTW conflict in the WiscParents survey asked mothers why they responded the way they did to the scale-based question on parenting obligations and employment decisions after divorce. Supplemental Table 1 shows the number

of mothers who responded to this question, overall and by placement type. Mothers only responded to this question if they had reported that parenting commitments had affected their work and career decisions at least a little bit since divorce. I examined these short (typically one- to two-sentence) responses and summarized how mothers describe their postdivorce experience of FTW conflict.

Analytical framework

Analyses were designed to examine placement-related differences in employment, earnings, and self-assessed FTW conflict at the time of the survey; year-by-year earnings in the 6–10 years between the divorce and the time of the survey; and mothers' own characterization of how parenting responsibilities have impacted their career since divorce. The analytic strategies were designed to control, to the extent possible, for baseline differences between mothers with shared and sole placement. I conducted these analysis using three distinct analytical methods per the research questions.

Employment, reported FTW conflict, and earnings at the time of survey

I regressed employment status, reported FTW conflict, and gross annual earnings on shared placement with robust standard errors, using a logit model for the binary employment status, and an ordinary least squares (OLS) model for the continuous FTW and gross annual earnings variables. I included a dummy variable indicating shared placement, along with a vector of control variables including earnings and employment of mothers and fathers in the year before divorce, whether each party had legal representation, who the petitioner was, year of final judgment, length of time between petition and final judgment, length of marriage, number of children to both parents, age of the youngest child and of respondent at final judgment, previous children and marriages of mothers and fathers, presence of other adults in the household, and an indicator of county urbanicity. I also included a survey-based indicator for poor health and disability status, partnership status, time since divorce, and cohort (differentiating divorce petitions in 2009–2010 versus 2013). All regressions are weighted to account for unequal sampling percentages across counties.

Earnings from longitudinal UI wage records

I estimated multivariate models for each postdivorce year relative to the date when the divorce was finalized leading up to the survey to assess whether placement has had a differential relationship with earnings over time. For each postdivorce year, I modeled earnings as reflected in the UI data using an OLS regression with robust standard errors. The models control for all variables mentioned above other than health, partnership status, and time since divorce as the latter are point-in-time information collected in the survey that cannot be extrapolated to previous years. Because the FTW conflict measure references the entire time since the divorce, I included this variable in my vector of covariates and present results from models with and without the variable included to show whether its inclusion influences the coefficient on the shared placement variable.

Earnings from the UI system exclude out-of-state and self-employment earnings, as well as informal earnings such as those arising out of gig work. I restricted my sample for this analysis to mothers who were in-state at the time of the survey to minimize the risk of missing out-of-state earnings. Nevertheless, earnings from this measure are still underestimates of actual

earnings of mothers. Moreover, because these are the same mothers for whom the WiscParents survey was fielded, not all of them have a full 10 years of postdivorce data as many have been divorced for less than that time. The sample decreases by almost 50% after the 6th year postdivorce, but I carried out robustness checks containing only mothers with a full 10 years of data. I used listwise deletion for missing values of independent variables.

Content analysis of open-ended responses

To shed light on and enhance the results from the quantitative analysis, I analyzed responses to the open-ended survey item described under the Measures of Interest section using constant comparison analysis. I used the qualitative responses to gain insight on three main aspects of mothers' postdivorce employment decisions:

a. How did mothers make adjustments to their career and employment after divorce?
b. What kind of parenting-related conflicts led mothers to make these adjustments?
c. How were placement arrangements and the broader divorce context relevant in their decisions?

I followed a deductive approach of analysis, systematically going through the data and finding responses that answered one or more of the questions above. Constant comparison was particularly suited for this study because I looked for predetermined, underlying themes in the data and tried to form patterns and points of comparison between the two groups of respondents (mothers in sole and shared placement arrangements; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The questions I focused on in this analysis were chosen to provide context to the quantitative analysis. Whereas the quantitative analysis focuses on the extent of reported FTW and its relation to observed earnings trajectories, the qualitative analysis considers the nature of the perceived FTW conflict and associated work adjustments. Although the quantitative focuses on differences in the magnitude of FTW conflict between shared and sole placement mothers, the qualitative explores how the overall divorce context, including but not limited to placement arrangements, factors into mothers' explanations.

RESULTS

Unadjusted comparisons of employment status, reported FTW conflict, and earnings reveal a clear advantage of mothers in shared placement over those with sole placement at the time of the survey. Moreover, mothers in shared placement consistently earn more than mothers in sole placement throughout the postdivorce period (see Supplemental Table 2 and Supplemental Figure 1). I also found that earnings from the UI data, even in later years, are much lower than earnings reported in the survey, which suggests that the UI earnings are an underestimate of mothers' actual earnings—consistent with the UI data not capturing self-employment including gig work, earnings from out-of-state employers, or informal jobs. Nevertheless, the difference in earnings by placement arrangements is evident in measures of earnings constructed from both sources of data.

Estimating baseline-adjusted placement associations with long-run employment, reported FTW conflict, and earnings

Table 2 shows the coefficient on the shared placement variable from a logistic regression of employment status on shared placement (Column 1) and coefficients from an OLS regression

TABLE 2 Results from regressing employment status and reported FTW conflict on shared placement.

	1	2
	Employment status 6–11 years after divorce (Logit)	**Reported FTW conflict (OLS)**
Panel A		
Shared	0.053* (0.025)	−0.310† (0.175)
Panel B		
Equal shared	0.042 (0.027)	−0.450* (0.197)
Unequal shared	0.078** (0.025)	−0.045 (0.212)
Observations	396	403

Note. FTW = family to work; OLS = ordinary least squares. Standard errors in parentheses. Results are weighted by pweights. Column 1 reports average marginal effects from a logistic regression of employment status on shared placement. The logistic regression specification drops seven shared placement mothers with missing information on previous marriages as the dummy for missing information on the previous marriage variable predicts shared placement perfectly. Column 2 reports OLS coefficients from regressing reported FTW on placement. Models control for earnings and employment of mothers and fathers in the year before divorce, legal representation, who the petitioner was, year of final judgment, length of time between petition and final judgment, length of marriage, number of children to both before divorce, age of the youngest child at final judgment, age of respondent at final judgment, previous children and marriages of mothers and fathers, urbanicity, race, education, cohort of the court records data in which the divorce was recorded, poor health and disability status, partnership status, number of children in the household, presence of any other adult in the household, and time since divorce.

†$p < .10$.

*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.

of reported FTW on shared placement (Column 2). In Panel A, Column 1 shows the probability of being employed is higher for mothers in shared placement by 5%. Column 2 results show that mothers in shared placement have a 0.3 or 6% lower score on FTW conflict as compared to mothers in sole placement (full results in Supplemental Table 3). In Panel B, the shared placement variable is disaggregated into equal and unequal shared categories. Results suggest that while the higher likelihood of employment among shared placement mothers is being driven mostly by mothers in unequal shared arrangements, it is the mothers in equal shared placement who tend to have lower scores on the FTW conflict scale. Results therefore suggest that among mothers who are comparable on observable baseline and other characteristics, shared placement mothers are more likely to be employed and report lower FTW conflict than sole placement mothers several years after divorce,[2] with the division of nights among shared placement mothers also playing a role in determining outcomes.

I further investigated the earnings difference between mothers in shared and sole placement using gross annual earnings and additional controls from the WiscParents Survey. Table 3 reports coefficients of the shared placement and reported FTW conflict coefficients from the model after successively adding in controls and the FTW conflict variable for shared versus sole placement mothers (Panel A) and for equal and unequal shared mothers versus sole placement mothers (Panel B; full models available upon request). Panel A shows that shared placement has a statistically significant positive effect of over $15,000 in earnings before adjusting for other regressors. After including controls, the effect size reduces to about $6,000 for shared placement mothers and becomes insignificant. Adding the FTW conflict variable has little impact on the model, and although its coefficient is in the expected direction (i.e., associated with lower earnings), it is neither statistically significant nor substantively large. Panel B shows

[2]Robustness checks using a propensity score matching (PSM) specification yield similar results in terms of direction of the estimates, although the average treatment effect on the treated (ATET) estimate of shared placement from PSM is more precise than the shared placement coefficient in the logit regression of employment status, and the average marginal effect of shared placement on employment is substantially smaller in magnitude than the ATET of shared placement recovered from PSM (see Supplemental Figure 1). The OLS estimate of shared placement in predicting reported FTW conflict is robust in terms of magnitude, direction, and precision to the PSM specification.

TABLE 3 Coefficients from OLS regression of shared placement on earnings at survey.

	1	2	3
	No controls	**Adding controls**	**Adding reported FTW**
Panel A			
Shared	15.734** (4.600)	6.625† (3.965)	6.377 (3.997)
Reported FTW conflict			−0.771 (1.168)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes
Panel B			
Equal shared	17.733** (5.182)	8.196† (4.254)	7.887† (4.351)
Unequal shared	12.021† (6.231)	3.705 (5.262)	3.665 (5.258)
Reported FTW conflict			−0.666 (1.204)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes
N	398	398	398

Note. FTW = family to work; OLS = ordinary least squares. Standard errors in parentheses. Earnings are scaled to thousands. Results are weighted by pweights. Models control for baseline earnings and employment of mothers and fathers, whether each party had legal representation, who the petitioner was, year of final judgment, length of time between petition and final judgment, number of children to both mothers and fathers, age of the youngest child, previous children and marriages of mothers and fathers, length of marriage, age, race, and education of mother, age of youngest child, presence of any other adult in the household, health and partnership status of mother, and time since divorce.
†$p < .10$.
**$p < .01$.

that preadjustment, both equal and unequal shared placement have a statistically significant positive association of over $10,000 in earnings before adjusting for other regressors. Adding the control variables reduces the differential to about $8,000 for equal shared placement mothers and makes the placement coefficient insignificant for mothers in unequal placement. Parenting obligations further reduces the magnitude and significance of both equal and unequal shared coefficients, albeit marginally, and the equal shared coefficient remains marginally significant at the 10% level after adding reported FTW conflict.

Mapping the trajectory of the shared placement association with earnings over time

I next ran multivariate models of earnings for 1 to 10 postdivorce years to examine how the long-run earnings differentials between shared and sole placement evolve over the years since divorce using year-by-year multivariate models of earnings constructed from UI wage data (Table 4; full models available upon request). Panel A reports coefficients from the model excluding reported FTW conflict and Panel B results include the reported FTW conflict variable. I found that earnings of mothers in shared placement start increasing more than that of mothers in sole placement in the 7th postdivorce year, an effect that becomes statistically significant in Year 8 ($p < .05$), remains significant through Year 9 ($p < .10$), before becoming insignificant in Year 10. The higher earnings increase for shared mothers jumps from an insignificant $766 in Year 6 to $4,300 in Year 7, before increasing to a statistically significant $9,100 in Year 8 ($p < .05$) and $8,300 in Year 9.

The differential earnings increase for shared placement mothers becomes insignificant in Year 10 but remains high in magnitude, at $7,213. On including the reported FTW conflict variable in the controls, the earnings differential in Year 9 loses significance but the difference in Year 8 remains significant (although it is lower in magnitude and significance than the model without FTW conflict).

TABLE 4 Coefficients from OLS regression of shared placement on earnings 1–10 years after divorce.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
Panel A										
Shared	0.952	−0.460	−0.089	−0.659	−1.454	0.766	4.288 (3.267)	9.108*	8.266†	7.213
	(2.231)	(2.160)	(3.008)	(2.305)	(3.083)	(2.956)		(4.542)	(4.985)	(5.436)
Panel B										
Shared	1.045	−0.514	−0.120	−0.964	−1.784	0.441	3.588 (3.308)	8.592†	7.891	6.996
	(2.259)	(2.176)	(3.085)	(2.333)	(3.110)	(2.992)		(4.492)	(4.944)	(5.410)
Reported FTW conflict	0.451	−0.262	−0.149	−1.478†	−1.521	−1.378	−2.493†	−2.452†	−1.747	−1.882
	(0.714)	(0.682)	(0.895)	(0.887)	(0.947)	(1.050)	(1.359)	(1.407)	(1.576)	(1.813)
N	386	386	386	386	382	377	309	186	184	162

Note: FTW = family to work; OLS = ordinary least squares. Standard errors in parentheses. Earnings are scaled to thousands. Results are weighted by pweights. Models control for baseline earnings and employment of mothers and fathers, whether each party had legal representation, who the petitioner was, year of final judgment, length of time between petition and final judgment, number of children to both mothers and fathers, age of the youngest child, previous children and marriages of mothers and fathers, length of marriage, age of mother, race, and education.

†$p < .10$.

*$p < .05$.

Reported FTW conflict consistently maintains a negative relationship with earnings throughout the postdivorce period, which sometimes reaches significance (Years 4, 7, and 8 after divorce). This provides suggestive evidence that shared placement mothers experience higher increases in earnings than sole placement mothers in the long term after divorce and that FTW conflict is associated with modestly lower earnings, but the results provide very little indication that FTW conflict, as measured here, is an important factor underlying the shared placement earnings advantage. Results with disaggregated shared placement categories are presented in Supplemental Table 4, and broadly conform with the finding that the shared placement earnings advantage is driven by mothers in equal shared arrangements.

Limiting the sample to mothers observed at least 10 years after divorce ($N = 162$) yields similar results, albeit measured with considerably less precision (Supplemental Table 5).

Together, the results suggest that shared placement mothers are a little more likely to be employed as of the survey and report adjusting their work on account of parenting time commitments to a smaller degree than mothers in sole placement arrangements. They also appear to increase their earnings relative to sole placement mothers beginning around Year 7 after divorce. Although there is some indication that FTW conflict is associated with lower earnings in some years, there is little evidence that the extent of FTW conflict as measured here explains the higher earnings of shared placement mothers.

Describing mothers' adjustment in employment decisions in response to FTW conflict in the years following divorce

Results from the quantitative analysis indicate that what mothers say about having adjusted their work on account of parenting time is only weakly or inconsistently associated with their actual earnings and does not explain the shared-placement advantage in earnings found in some years. To understand what mothers actually mean when they talk about adjusting their work decisions on account of parenting given that it is so weakly associated with actual earnings, I carried out a constant comparison analysis of a follow-up question that asked mothers why they responded the way they did regarding parenting time commitments and work adjustments. I discuss mothers' responses in the context of the actual adjustments they reported, the parenting-related motivations that drove them to make these adjustments, and the relevance of placement arrangements and the divorce context in this dynamic.

What adjustments did mothers make to their career and employment after divorce?

Mothers reported making several adjustments to their careers to align their time with the needs of their children, some of which might increase earnings while others are likely to decrease them. These adjustments were primarily in the form of switching jobs and careers for benefits that meet their children's needs, adjusting hours and negotiating flexibility and benefits at their existing workplaces, or maintaining a status quo without pursuing career-enhancing opportunities. A mother succinctly summarized such adjustments when she said, "I have gone in search of better paying jobs. I have left jobs due to inflexible work schedules." Mothers who used to work in jobs with unpredictable, long, or inflexible hours such as freelancing, health care, or hospitality reported turning to careers with more flexibility and family-friendly benefits like teaching or service jobs that let them choose their hours. For instance, a mother who was formerly a labor and delivery nurse with alternate shifts reported switching to a clinic where she could work "straight days" and be around her kids more. Several mothers chose to work in their child's school or daycare to have easy access and fulfill parenting needs when necessary.

Additionally, mothers routinely reported creating their "work schedule around [their] parenting schedule," which involves negotiating the hours and/or days of the week they work, choosing to remain part time versus full time, deciding to work certain shifts over others, and seeking out jobs that would allow them flexibility to parent whenever needed. Mothers predominantly worked first-shift jobs, sometimes taking the possibility of weekend or evening hours completely off the table: "I have blatantly told the places that I interview with that I cannot do second or third shift because of when my son goes to school and when he gets home." These adjustments help them to be present for their children when they are at home and support their parenting-time preferences. Some mothers, on the other hand, reported working more than they would if they did not have children to support their family after the divorce.

Adjustments also came in the form of maintaining a stable and convenient status quo versus going for better opportunities in terms of career advancement, pay, or location and travel. A mother stated, for instance,

> I think that that's one of the reasons I stayed in my current position is that I have a lot of flexibility. I might be able to have a different higher paying job, but I wouldn't be able to get him on the bus; be here after school; all those things my current position allows me to; or to get him to his hockey practice.

Mothers also reported passing on promotions or better jobs to maintain their time with children, such as, "[trying to maximize my time with (FC)] has probably caused me to not be able to climb any further than I am. I've missed out on promotions because I am not willing to put in the hours" or "I have my teaching degree, but haven chosen to work as an aide, so I always have enough time for [FC]." Mothers likewise reported foregoing jobs with a travel component or relocation requirement.

I also compared the kinds of adjustments mothers described with their reported FTW conflict scores and found that the open-ended responses are broadly aligned with what mothers say in the scale-based question on which the FTW variable is based. That is, mothers with higher scores on the scale-based measure tend to describe making greater adjustments with respect to shifts, industries, and work schedules, and are more likely to report preferencing family-friendly jobs, compared to those with lower scores.

What parenting-related conflicts drove them to make these adjustments?

Mothers' preferences for adequate parenting time often led them to value certain qualities in jobs over others. Mothers widely reported prioritizing their children's needs while making career decisions: "I am keenly aware that they are children for a very short time, and I want to be present for them and tailor my work schedule accordingly." Sometimes, mothers who have chosen to prioritize parenting over work described their choice as "the sacrifice of being a parent." On the other hand, several mothers reported having to work more than they would have liked to support their children financially after divorce and ensure a stable and secure home and future for them. For instance, mothers reported working "too many hours" and that "the amount of time I can spend with my kids is less" because they need to work more than they want. However, flexibility and family friendliness were by far the most sought-after qualities in a job. A mother with a flexible job clearly stated that the flexibility "carries more weight than the paycheck." Some mothers also wanted to teach by example, attempting to show their children "what success is and be a good role model" to them by balancing home and work.

How were placement arrangements and the broader divorce context relevant in their decisions?

Although the above discussion highlights many work-parenting challenges facing mothers more broadly, some issues that arose remain particularly germane to the divorce context as far as changes in economic and family circumstances, and interaction with policies. However, shared placement or children's living arrangements do not emerge as a central factor driving employment decisions, and the limited reference to placement arrangements in mothers' responses associate shared placement arrangements with both increases and decreases in employment. For instance, some mothers with shared placement talk about the way having their children for part of the time versus full time in the household impacts their decision regarding work. A mother who has reduced her work hours after divorce said, "once we were divorced […] because of the schedule change there were days I could work a lot of hours and other days I could be home after school. I finally had a weekend off." On the other hand, another mother in shared placement said that her schedule with the other parent makes it easy to take care of the kids when she is working. Shared placement mothers also talked about making the most out of the time they had with their children. Mothers reported how they change their schedules to be with their children: "the weeks that I have [FC] for the week I don't work and when I don't have [FC], I work and parent around [FC]" or "because I have [FC] every other weekend and I am normally required to work weekends. It affects me because I try to take off when I have [FC]."

A mother in sole placement talked about how, since the divorce, she had become the "main caretaker" of her children "both physically and financially" for which she had to work more hours. A second mother in sole placement who had chosen to become self-employed to increase her parenting flexibility stated that

> being a single mom without another parent around and having children with other medical needs it's almost impossible to find a job that will work around that so I just made it work the best I could with child support so I could take care of them to the best of their needs.

Nevertheless, references to placement are limited, and broader issues around divorce such as increased responsibility for children stemming from the loss of a second caregiver emerge as the most important factors driving these adjustments. Divorce also puts additional constraints on mothers' mobility for work, as one mother stated: "I can't get up and move across the country because of [OP]. I have to think about what [FC] is going to do to see [their] dad." These anecdotes suggest that divorce exacerbates the work–family conflict mothers face by aggravating financial concerns or imposing additional restrictions on mothers' time and mobility, and that among mothers who report FTW, these challenges do not differ in clear ways according to placement arrangements.

DISCUSSION

Although overall divorce rates have been declining over the last 2 decades (Raley & Sweeney, 2020), the proportion of divorce cases with shared placement has increased substantially, with an estimated one third of divorces ending in shared placement nationwide in recent years (Meyer et al., 2022). Wisconsin has been the leading state in terms of shared placement cases since the 1980s and concerted attention to placement and child support policy both from academics and practitioners in the state have allowed researchers to study the impact of shared placement on economic outcomes of mothers postdivorce with data unavailable anywhere else in the country (Cancian et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2022). Using unique survey and longitudinal

administrative data on placement, parenting, and labor market outcomes from Wisconsin, this paper studied how the employment trajectories of mothers in shared and sole placement evolved in the long term after divorce and how time commitments in parenting their children affected their employment decisions. It found suggestive evidence that mothers in shared placement enjoy some employment and earnings advantage in the long term after divorce. Studying the placement impact on postdivorce economic outcomes is important as the time children spend in the household determines resources available to mothers both in terms of material resources as well as their time. Demands on mothers' time may differ for mothers in sole and shared placement, thereby influencing their labor market outcomes, which has largely remained unexplored in the postdivorce economic outcomes literature. Despite theoretical predictions and limited previous work, the current study does not find evidence to support any mediating influence of work–family conflict on the relationship between shared placement and economic outcomes, though the results provide suggestive evidence that work–family conflict itself is associated with lower earnings in the longer term.

Shared placement mothers studied in this paper are somewhat more likely to be employed and less likely to report FTW conflict than mothers in sole placement in the long term after divorce. Investigating whether these trade-offs translated into earnings differentials for mothers in different placement categories in the long term, I found evidence that shared placement mothers—especially those in equal shared placement arrangements—acquire an additional employment and earnings advantage that emerges in the long term after the divorce. Though recent work using administrative data and larger samples finds modest short-term increases in earnings for shared placement mothers (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023), in the current study this does not emerge until much later after divorce. This may be because of the smaller sample size, but it may also be because the current sample includes mothers who had very young children at divorce and employment and earnings respond differently for parents with younger versus older children.

Mothers' own characterizations of how parenting commitments postdivorce have influenced their employment decisions shed light on the changes they have made to their employment during this period, what drove them to make these adjustments, and how the divorce context influenced this dynamic. Mothers reported reducing the amount of time they spent working to make time for parenting, increasing how much they worked to make ends meet, and the various qualities in a job that they sought to improve their work–life balance, sometimes to the effect of diminishing prospects for career advancement. Indeed, many of the kinds of adjustments they described highlight decisions that might have negative longer-term implications for earnings, consistent with the relationship between FTW and earnings that weakly emerged in the quantitative data. They also talked about the hardships of being a single parent in terms of providing both the time and financial resources children need, and some shared placement mothers mentioned how having children at home for discontinuous periods of time impacted their work hours, although placement did not appear as salient in their decision-making around employment in response to postdivorce parenting commitments. Overall, the qualitative findings suggest that the commonalities of the divorced context, and of balancing work and family more generally, are more central to mothers' framing of their experience than the details of the placement arrangement, among those who report at least some conflict. The limited amount of explicit reference to placement arrangements is not surprising in light of the fact that mothers with no reported FTW—more commonly shared placement mothers—were not asked the open-ended question.

Although the lack of concrete evidence on whether FTW conflict mediates how placement is associated with earnings could just be an artifact of the small sample size, it could also be that the work impacts reported by mothers in the FTW conflict question manifest in ways other than earnings differences. Moreover, it is also possible that sole and shared mothers have different flexibility requirements when it comes to parenting commitments, and future research can

investigate whether mothers in sole and shared placement prefer to work in certain careers and industries or whether access to family-friendly policies eliminates the shared placement earnings differential in the long term after divorce.

It is worth noting here that the present study includes only mothers of children who were under 6 years old at the time of divorce, and follows up on their economic trajectory through the time that the children become (and remain) of school-going age. Mothers with younger children are likely to face a greater amount of work–family conflict, and in this respect the point-in-time effect size of shared placement on work–family conflict is likely a lower bound for the analogous effect on all mothers of young children. At the same time, the year-by-year analysis did not reveal a distinct mediating role of work–family conflict on earnings even in the years immediately following divorce when children were younger. Further, mothers who select into shared placement are socioeconomically better off than sole placement mothers, and hence may have greater access to resources like child care, which can in turn allow them to deal with their parenting commitments in a way that prevents them from translating into lower labor market productivity. However, results in this paper control for predivorce characteristics of mothers, which reduces the possibility that this effect is occurring. Future research could explore how the relationship between work–family conflict and placement arrangements change with the age of children and income quartiles to shed light on how these factors interact with placement in studying mothers' economic outcomes.

This study has several limitations. It is primarily limited by the small sample size. Nevertheless, the WiscParents survey, in tandem with merged court record and earnings trajectory data, is well suited to the questions considered here, and my analyses provide suggestive evidence to inform future work.

A second issue concerns the UI data, which as noted does not capture self-employment, under-the-table work, or informal earnings such as gig work. Comparisons of UI earnings in 2019 with earnings reported in the survey have shown that a substantial share of mothers with zero-earnings in the UI data report at least some earnings in the survey, consistent with the UI data missing some earnings sources. I therefore performed a regression analysis using income from the survey as the dependent variable in the analysis, and found that my results are largely similar across the two measures.

Third, the results from this paper cannot be interpreted as causal because my analytical framework was based on selection on observables, and there may be unobserved characteristics affecting both placement and earnings that I was unable to capture with the data. However, the court records and baseline earnings data provide a rich set of controls unavailable in most longitudinal data sets that have been used to study the economic impacts of divorce, and the survey provides additional information relevant to divorced households that would reduce bias to a great extent.

Finally, the current study just focuses on Wisconsin alone, but the policy context in terms of encouraging shared placement and reducing child support orders in context of shared placement is broadly consistent with range of policy regimes in place around the country.

IMPLICATIONS

These results add to existing understanding of divorced mothers' long-term employment and earnings patterns, and suggest that focusing on placement arrangements is a promising avenue of inquiry.

Although the textual responses in combination with the findings from the quantitative analysis imply that divorced mothers have additional constraints in balancing family and work, constraints discussed by mothers in shared and sole placement categories who report any FTW are largely similar. Mothers with shared placement were less likely to report that their parenting

had impacted their employment and career, but the limited reference to placement arrangements in the open-ended responses illustrate how shared placement could both increase and decrease mothers' employment. It is also possible that the nature and prevalence of the FTW trade-offs in both groups matter for earnings in ways not captured in this simple measure. For instance, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that divorced mothers have the highest rates of work among all mothers (and all women). Seventy-eight percent of divorced mothers were employed in mostly full-time jobs as opposed to 65% of married mothers (and 52% of all women) in 2020 (J. Borbely, personal communication, 2021). However, it is unknown how this looks for mothers in different placement arrangements, and the results shown here suggest these patterns maybe heterogenous across placement categories. More work is needed to understand how placement impacts employment, and further survey data, ideally from large samples, could help in disentangling the effects of children's living arrangements on household resources and mothers' economic outcomes from the overall economic shock brought about by the event of divorce.

The findings from this paper have two important implications for policy—first, although studies have persistently found shared placement to be linked with various positive outcomes for children (Nielsen, 2014), this study adds to the research that is increasingly finding shared placement to be beneficial for mothers' economic well-being as well. Research varies with sociodemographic characteristics, particularly income, for parents with higher education and income, and among parents who are non-Hispanic White (Meyer et al., 2017, 2022), but a systematic investigation into the role of public policy in encouraging shared placement has so far been absent (Meyer et al., 2022). Custody laws that default to shared placement arrangements and explicit language prohibiting physical custody decisions to be based solely on the sex of the parents have been in effect in Wisconsin since the early 2000s, and they can be seen as encouraging norms around a more gender-equal form of family, which lead to such arrangements. Shared placement trends in Wisconsin provide important ground for future research to examine how policy may encourage shared physical custody arrangements across the country.

Second, the findings—especially mothers' characterizations of FTW conflict—support the need for workplace policies that would help balancing work and family for women and mothers, highlighting how divorced mothers may be an especially vulnerable group when it comes to maintaining a balance between work and family. Mothers in this study made explicit references to autonomy over work hours, paid child care, and family leave benefits as characteristics they seek in a job. Affordable child care, paid family leave, and regulations encouraging scheduling flexibility could be explicit policy interventions that help mitigate mothers' experiences of work–family conflict. Future research could also evaluate how access to childcare subsidies and/or family leave policies changes the relationship between placement arrangements and earnings to causally determine the extent of FTW conflict faced by mothers in different placement arrangements.

Finally, the findings from this study contribute to the postdivorce economic outcomes literature, enhancing our understanding of how placement is salient in the economic lives of families, particularly in the long term after divorce. They call for the need to gather better data on living arrangements of families across disparate national and economic contexts, which would help researchers investigate the impact of placement arrangements on fathers as well as mothers, the mechanisms through which placement impacts economic outcomes, and how living arrangements interact with other determinants of a postdivorce family budget such as child support receipt and childcare prices, along with transfer incomes from the social safety net.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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