Twitter Thread by Ezra Klein



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This is a piece I've been thinking about for a long time. One of the most dominant policy ideas in Washington is that policy should, always and everywhere, move parents into paid labor. But what if that's wrong?

My reporting here convinced me that there's no large effect in either direction on labor force participation from child allowances. Canada has a bigger one than either Romney or Biden are considering, and more labor force participation among women.

But what if that wasn't true?

Forcing parents into low-wage, often exploitative, jobs by threatening them and their children with poverty may be counted as a success by some policymakers, but it’s a sign of a society that doesn’t value the most essential forms of labor.

The problem is in the very language we use. If I left my job as a New York Times columnist to care for my 2-year-old son, I’d be described as leaving the labor force. But as much as I adore him, there is no doubt I’d be working harder. I wouldn't have stopped working!

I tried to render conservative objections here fairly. I appreciate that @swinshi talked with me, and I'm sorry I couldn't include everything he said. I'll say I believe I used his strongest arguments, not more speculative ones, in the piece. https://t.co/6iQia79qGi

> I appreciate his intellectual curiosity and effort. I have quibbles. But my big disappointment is there was no mention of unintended consequences, which we discussed and which are kind of THE core conservative concern on this issue.
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We did talk about "unintended consequences," but most of the consequences he considered unintended I considered intended. And some I just thought were too causally weak, like his argument that lowering child poverty this way might weaken social mobility.

Moreover, I believe the "unintended consequences" of forcing parents in these conditions to work are profound and devastating. When people make a decision to leave paid labor for a paltry social insurance check, there's often a damn good reason. It's not an easy decision.

In other contexts, and particularly other social strata, we understand and honor this. It's only with the poor that we don't. I love this point and story by @povertyscholar:

> When I talked to Jamila Michener, co-director of Cornell's Center for Health Equity, about this, she argued that we do trust parents to make those decisions. We just don't trust poor parents to make them. She told me the story of coming to Cornell with a 3-month-old and a 3-year-old, and finding out that her mother had stage 3 pancreatic cancer. Michener was vying for tenure at that point, so her husband took five years off to care for their children and her mother.
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> "Whenever I tell people about that, they say, 'He's amazing! What a great partner,'" Michener said. "In the context of a family not living in poverty, to make the decision to stay home for a bit to care for an ill family member is considered virtuous. But for a woman living in poverty to take some time off to care for a family member is vice." That experience has become a touchstone for Michener in the classroom. She always asks her students why they praise her husband for staying home, but whenever the syllabus turns to welfare or food stamps, they worry social insurance will lead poor mothers to stop working.

And this one, for that matter:

There is no evidence that spending long hours as a day care worker for someone else's child or a health aide for someone else's parent is somehow a better choice than caring for your own family. It can look that way in the statistics, if we consign poor families to poverty when a parent feels she needs to stay home. But that is society simply measuring the outcome of its own cruelty and calling the result economics.

"People on the right always say, what about the dignity of work?" Michener told me, "and my answer is: What about the dignity of dignity? The ability to be of sound body and mind and do the things most human beings want to do: spend time with your family. Have some time for leisure. Of course there can be dignity in work, and we should create the circumstances to make that possible, but there's no natural dignity in work. We've needed labor movements because work can be harmful and oppressive unless we organize to make sure it has dignity. There are a lot of other factors and ways we need to intervene if we want work and dignity to be words we can use in the same sentence. And the way we do our social policy in this country, we have no right to use those words in the same sentence."

There are lots of ways to make work more attractive to poor parents. The danger is when you use poverty as the lash. Then society is simply measuring the outcome of its own cruelty and calling the result economics.

Anyway — I hope you'll read the whole piece. The belief that paid labor is always a better choice for poor parents is a powerful one, and bipartisan. But it is built on so many toxic assumptions, not least that parenting isn't real work. https://t.co/f7H3CCo9M0