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Social Science Research 32 (2003) 98–128



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The impact of adolescent employment on high school dropout: Differences by individual and labor-market characteristics[☆]

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Abstract

In this paper we address five questions. First, how do individual- and labor-market-level factors influence high school students' paid employment behaviors? Second, to what extent is student employment associated with high school dropout net of these factors? Third, does the association between student employment and dropout vary by students' race/ethnicity and other socio-demographic characteristics? Fourth, to what extent do local labor-market opportunities influence high school dropout? Fifth, does the association between student employment and high school dropout vary by local labor-market circumstances? Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 and the 1990 US Census, we find that several individual- and labor-market-level factors influence students' employment behaviors; that adolescent employment and dropout are strongly associated, even after adjusting for individual- and labor-market-level factors; that this association does not vary

[☆] Paper originally prepared for presentation at the Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association, Washington, DC, August 2000. Support for this research was provided by the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, by the Royalty Research Fund of the University of Washington, and by the Center for Statistics and the Social Sciences at the University of Washington. We thank Eric Grodsky, Adam Gamoran, Kevin Quinn, Jerry Herting, Paul LePore, Ralph McNeal, and two anonymous reviewers for valuable suggestions. However, errors and opinions are the responsibility of the authors.

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by individual-level attributes; and that this association does not vary across labor markets. We end by describing two perspectives on the mechanisms linking adolescent employment and dropout.

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1. Introduction

Most US students complete high school, but the consequences for those who do not are severe. Data from the 2001 March Current Population Survey show that workers between the ages of 25 and 34 without a high school diploma earn about two-thirds as much as their peers who do have a diploma. About 30% of 25–34-year-olds without high school diplomas had personal incomes below the poverty threshold in 2001; this figure was only about 12% among 25–34 year olds who had diplomas but who had not gone on for any further schooling. High school students who work many hours per week at paid jobs during the school year are considerably more likely to drop out of high school than their peers who do not work or who work less intensively. Although working a *few* hours per week either has no effect or decreases the odds of dropping out, *intensive* work involvement—more than 15 or 20 h per week—detracts from the chances of graduating (D’Amico, 1984; Marsh, 1991; Warren et al., 2000). McNeal (1997) suggests that the effects of employment *status* on the odds of dropping out vary by gender and by the types of jobs that students hold, but there is little evidence regarding differences in the effects of employment *intensity* by sex or any other student characteristics. In this paper we ask whether the effects of employment status and intensity on high school dropout vary by individual and/or local labor-market characteristics.

How should we interpret the association between adolescent employment and high school dropout? From one perspective, we might conclude that intensive employment has the effect of pulling students out of high school. This conclusion is premised on the assumption that these students would not have dropped out had they not been involved (or had they been less intensively involved) in the paid labor market. From another perspective, we might conclude that some students perceive paid employment to be more worthwhile or rewarding—in the short and/or long run—than obtaining a high school diploma, and that intensive employment during high school is frequently a precursor to full-time employment instead of high school. From the latter point of view, paid employment does not necessarily pull students out of high school. Intensive employment is simply an alternative activity, pursued by those who see themselves as unlikely to graduate or go on to college or who perceive that their future labor-market position might be optimized through this course of action.

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