

COVID-19 AND THE GENDER GAP IN EMPLOYMENT AMONG PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN CANADA

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Economic and social disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have important implications for gender and class inequality. Drawing on Statistics Canada's monthly Labour Force Survey, we document trends in gender gaps in employment and work hours over the pandemic (February–October 2020). Our findings highlight the importance of care provisions for gender equity, with gaps larger among parents than people without children, and most pronounced when care and employment were more difficult to reconcile. When employment barriers eased, so did the gender–employment gap. The pandemic could not undo longer-standing cultural and structural shifts motivating contemporary mothers' employment. The pandemic also exacerbated educational inequalities among women, highlighting the importance of assessing gendered impacts through an intersectional lens.

Keywords: *COVID-19; employment; gender equality; inequality; labour market; parents*

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread social and economic disruption in Canada. As the pandemic took hold, public health orders shuttered nonessential businesses. Those who could work from home were urged to do so. Parents scrambled as schools and child care centers closed. Although both mothers and fathers experienced employment disruptions, mothers bore the brunt. Between February and May, a gender employment gap grew among parents, particularly

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among those with less education (Qian and Fuller 2020). This led to concerns of lasting implications for gender equity: Would the pandemic reverse longstanding trends toward more gender-equitable divisions of earning and caring?

Although the gendered impact of the pandemic's early months is clear, we know less about later developments. As spring turned to summer, restrictions on businesses loosened, paving the way for many laid-off workers to return. Child care centers were allowed to reopen, as were day camps for school-age children in the summer (albeit with new rules and restrictions). Obtaining caregiving help from friends and family also became easier as officials encouraged people to socialize again in limited bubbles (Collie 2020). September brought full-time in-person elementary schools. These developments suggest that COVID-19-related gender employment gaps among parents might have eroded.

Yet this is not a foregone conclusion. Although exact numbers are unclear, some parents kept children home rather than send them to full classrooms or child care centers with limited physical distancing. Most Canadian jurisdictions implemented enhanced job protections for caregivers, but employers struggling to maintain viability may have become less sympathetic to caregiving-related limitations. Because labor market re-entry after family-related employment lapses can be challenging (Fuller 2018; Weisshaar 2018), mothers with pandemic employment interruptions may face even greater discrimination than usual from employers concerned about ongoing disruptions to schools and child care arrangements. Children with COVID-19 symptoms, a positive test, or exposures must be kept home, potentially for extended periods.

Class differences observed early in the pandemic may also have shifted. Less-educated and low-wage workers were hit hardest in Canada (Brochu, Cr chet, and Deng 2020; Lemieux et al. 2020). Mothers with more education were initially somewhat sheltered by a greater ability to work from home (Messacar, Morissette, and Deng 2020). But doing so while caregiving is difficult. Home-working mothers with children underfoot may have hit a breaking point, pushing them to sacrifice employment as the pandemic stretched on.

In what follows, we update our analysis of gender differences in the impact of the early months of the pandemic on parents' employment across educational levels (Qian and Fuller 2020). Expanding our analysis through to mid-October, we cover the first wave and subsequent reopening in late spring, ending at the beginning of a second wave and before a retightening of restrictions.

BACKGROUND: EMPLOYMENT, CARE, AND SCHOOLING IN THE PANDEMIC

Education, employment standards, and health fall largely under provincial jurisdiction in Canada,¹ leading to some variation in pandemic policy responses. However, broad parameters were similar. Emergency declarations restricting travel, gatherings, and commerce were declared between March 17 and 22, 2020.² Essential services operated with physical distancing and capacity restrictions; most other establishments closed or shifted to remote provision. Employment levels and work hours plunged as layoffs mounted (Brochu, Cr chet, and Deng 2020; Lemieux et al. 2020). Restrictions eased early May to early June.

Child care centers followed a similar timeline. In the initial wave, licensed child care was typically closed for all but essential workers (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2020a). Reopenings occurred mid-May to mid-June. For the most part, centers were allowed to reopen with full capacity and new rules designed to reduce transmission. However, financial pressures caused by new procedures and reduced enrollment prevented many from reopening (Friendly, Forer, and Vickerson 2020).

Schools closed between March 13 and 23 (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2020b), and only Quebec fully reopened before the end of the school year (in mid-May). As the months rolled on, summer programs for school-age children were in short supply (MacLeod 2020). Pandemic restrictions shuttered overnight camps. Some day-programs were offered, but many could not operate with the required restrictions and thus closed or moved online. Elementary schools fully reopened in-person in September. A cohorting approach was used, with limited to no provision for physical distancing and variation in mask mandates (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2020b). This led to considerable outcry (Jung 2020; *National Post* 2020), with some parents opting for distance learning instead.

Thus, as the economy reopened, parents did not always have access to care arrangements necessary to return to work. When asked about “concerns about returning to your physical workplace now?” in early June, 35 percent of Canadian fathers with children under 18 years and 56 percent of mothers reported child care or caregiving issues (Statistics Canada 2020). Recognizing this problem, the federal government enacted policies (Canada Emergency Response Benefit and Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit) to provide financial support for parents to provide care themselves.

Employment standards were also modified to ensure job protection for caregivers, but provisions varied. British Columbia, for example, allowed leave as long as needed for reasons “including a school, daycare or similar facility closure” (Government of British Columbia 2020), but the federal jurisdiction limited leaves to 26 weeks (Government of Canada 2020), and Quebec relied on an existing 10-day personal leave. Protection could also come via Human Rights Codes that prohibit discrimination on the basis of family status, requiring employers to reasonably accommodate family obligations that seriously interfere with work. “Reasonable accommodation” and “serious interference,” however, leave room for interpretation (Hirsh, Treleaven, and Fuller 2020).

Pandemic caregiving policy was formally gender neutral, and shifts to homeschooling and working from home increased men’s child care involvement in Canada (Shafer, Scheibling, and Milkie 2020). But divisions of work and care remain strongly gendered (Doucet 2015; Guppy, Sakumoto, and Wilkes 2019; Moyser and Burlock 2018; Uppal 2015), even during the pandemic (Shafer, Scheibling, and Milkie 2020). Statistics Canada data (Statistics Canada 2020) from early June reveal that 42 percent of mothers reported that it was mostly they who stayed at home with the children, versus only 8 percent of fathers. Similarly, 47 percent of mothers and only 14 percent of fathers claimed that it was mostly they who homeschooled/helped with homework. Not surprisingly, we documented a rising gender gap in employment among parents in the early months of the pandemic (Qian and Fuller 2020). We now extend this analysis to see how the gap changed as the economy and schools reopened.

THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER EMPLOYMENT GAPS AMONG PARENTS THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

Drawing on monthly cross-sectional microdata from Statistics Canada’s Labour Force Survey (LFS), we document changing gender gaps in employment between mid-February (just before the pandemic hit Canada) and mid-October 2020. The LFS provides representative data for the civilian noninstitutionalized population in the 10 provinces. We focus on individuals of prime working age (25–54 years) with children young enough to require direct supervision (12 years and younger). Because we are interested in the impact of the pandemic on employment, we exclude those who had not been employed within the past year.

In the initial months of the pandemic, job search was constrained by workplace closures. This makes traditional measures of unemployment,

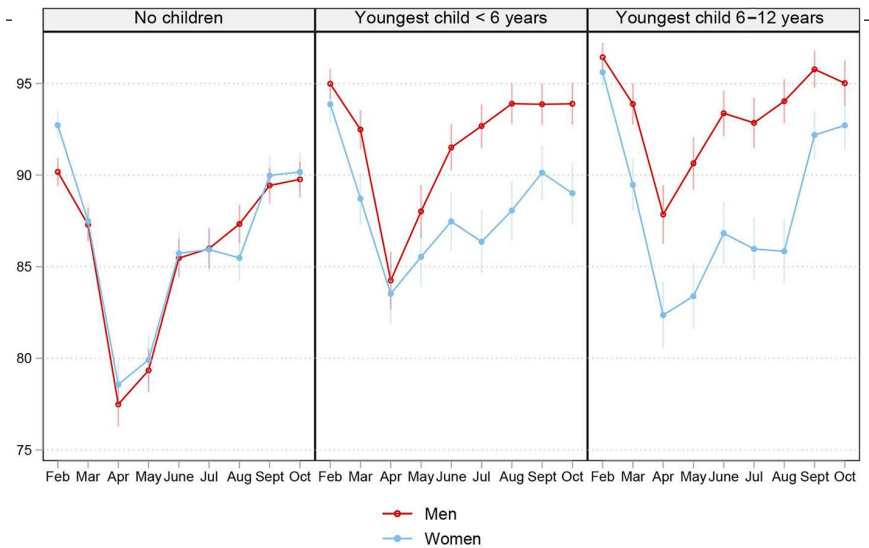


FIGURE 1: Percent Employed, by Gender, Survey Month, and Parental Status

which presume active job search, less relevant (Lemieux et al. 2020). We therefore focus on employment rates, with the employed including those who kept their jobs but were absent from work. This provides a conservative estimate of gender differences because mothers were more likely than fathers to be absent from work because of the pandemic (Statistics Canada 2020). To capture the gendered effect of such absences along with potential differences in reductions in work hours, we also analyze changing gender gaps in work hours.

Figure 1 presents men's and women's predicted probabilities of employment over the course of the pandemic for parents of children under 6 years ($n = 63,108$) and 6–12 years ($n = 54,612$). For comparison, we also include nonparents (those without children under 25 years; $n = 147,645$). Probabilities are estimated from separate logistic regression models by parental status that interact gender and survey month. We discuss results from models without control variables, but results (available on request) are virtually identical if we control for demographic, job, and employer characteristics.³

First, among nonparents, women had higher employment than men in February (92.7 vs. 90.2 percent). When the pandemic hit in March, employment dropped more for women, to about 87 percent for both

genders. Employment bottomed out in April and then increased through October, with largely parallel trends for men and women. By October, men's employment recovered to the February level (roughly 90 percent), but women's was still 3 percentage points lower (90.2 percent). Women's February employment advantage in this group thus disappeared during COVID-19.

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women's employment is even more pronounced among parents. In February, women's employment lagged men's by about 1 percentage point for both parents with a youngest child under 6 years (93.9 vs. 95.0 percent) and 6–12 years (95.6 vs. 96.4 percent). Employment losses through April were similar for fathers and mothers with a child under 6, but greater for mothers among parents of older children, with a 5.5–percentage point gender employment gap emerging by April.

As the economy reopened, fathers' employment recovered. By October, employment resembled pre-pandemic levels for fathers of both younger and older children. Mothers' employment recovery was slower and incomplete. A gender gap thus grew, peaking over the summer at 6.3 and 8.2 percentage points for those with children under 6 and 6–12 years, respectively. Mothers whose youngest child was 6–12 benefited most from school reopening in the fall, which narrowed the gender gap to 2.3 percent by October. The gender employment gap also shrank for mothers with a child under 6 in September (to 3.7 percent), but widened in October (to 4.9 percent). Employment remained significantly lower in October than February for both mothers of younger (89.0 vs. 93.9 percent) and older children (92.7 vs. 95.6 percent).

Figure A1 in the online Appendix compares trends for parents across educational groups. Initially, employment losses were much greater for the least-educated mothers both overall (dropping from about 90 to 70 percent) and in relation to fathers, with a gender gap peaking in May, at 11.5 and 16.8 percent for those with a youngest child under 6 and 6–12 years, respectively. Among parents with a postsecondary credential, the gap was less extreme, growing to 6 percent (youngest child under 6) and 7.5 percent (youngest 6–12) through May. Gender employment gaps grew least among the university educated: disappearing by May for those with young children and resting at 3.8 percent for those with children 6–12 years.

Less-educated mothers tend to be overrepresented in female-dominated service jobs that cannot be done remotely. Although this meant steeper initial job losses, the reopening of restaurants, retail establishments, and other service jobs also helped their recovery, shrinking the gender gap to

about 6 percentage points in July. Mothers with postsecondary credentials recovered less: the gender gap plateaued at about 6 percentage points for those with younger children and continued to widen over July and August (reaching 10 percentage points) for those with older children. For mothers with university degrees, employment stalled (at about 90 percent) over the summer for those whose youngest child was 6–12 years and dipped further through July (to 87.0 percent) for those with a child under 6 years. The gender gap, which initially opened the widest for the least educated, became similar across educational groups by August.

School reopening narrowed the gap for those with older children, with more-educated mothers benefiting more. Among those with university degrees and school-age children, the gender gap disappeared by October. For mothers with younger children, school reopening brought employment gains for the university educated, whereas recovery stalled for those with postsecondary credentials and reversed for the least educated. As a result, by October, gender employment gaps decreased to 2.3 percentage points for university-educated parents but widened to 10.3 and 7.1 percentage points for the least-educated parents and those with postsecondary credentials, respectively.

To account for potential gendered patterns of absence from work and work-hour reductions, we next examine gender gaps in work hours by parental status in Figure 2. Changes in the gender gap are greatest for parents of young children (growing by 30 percent at the August peak vs. 26 percent for nonparents and 25 percent for those with children 6–12 years). However, all three groups follow a similar overall pattern. A gap grew in April and then rebounded in May, followed by a steady widening through August, and a reversion to prepandemic levels through October. Although parental status clearly mattered for gendered patterns of job loss, it made less of a difference for lost hours among those who remained employed.

Figure A2 of the Online Appendix disaggregates trends by education. For parents of children under 6 years, school reopening in the fall helped narrow the gender gap among those with at least a postsecondary credential but failed to do so among the least educated. For this group, the gender gap in work hours remained higher in October than in February (15.4 vs. 12.7), whereas among the more educated, the gap largely recovered (postsecondary credential: 12.5 vs. 11.7; university degree: 9.9 vs. 10.7).

For parents of children 6–12 years, the gender gap in work hours widened the most among the least educated, by 68 percent (from 7.2 hours in February to 12.1 hours at its peak in July). In fact, this was the only group for whom there was a significant increase in the gap vis-à-vis February.

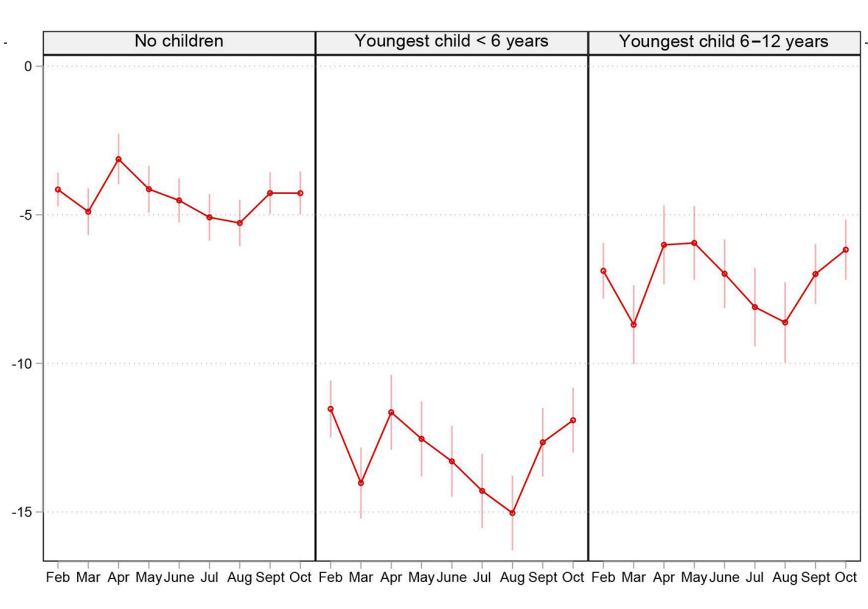


FIGURE 2: Gender Gap in Work Hours (Percentage Pts), by Survey Month and Parental Status

The gap shrank across the board in the fall, by which point it was not significantly different from February for any of the educational groups.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

COVID-19 has clearly exacerbated gender inequalities in employment. Female-dominated sectors of the economy have been hit especially hard (Lemieux et al. 2020), and school closures and child care restrictions devolved care back to the household. When care and employment became irreconcilable, it was most often mothers who reduced their hours, took leave, or were pushed out of their jobs.

The good news is that gender employment gaps among parents did narrow with the loosening of restrictions, the increased availability of child care options, and especially, the reopening of schools. Fears that women will have lost 30 years of progress can be assuaged: While the pandemic was an enormous shock, it could not undo the longer-standing cultural and structural shifts that motivate contemporary mothers' employment in Canada. Institutional constraints may have contributed to a stall in the gender revolution (England 2010; Pedulla and Thébaud

2015), but the changes that have occurred appear entrenched. When barriers to employment eased, so did the gender employment gap.

At the same time, there are areas of concern. So far, the full-capacity, in-person cohort-based model for elementary schooling in the pandemic has avoided widespread or lasting school closures. However, as the second wave took hold, COVID-19 exposures in schools and child care centers mounted, accounting for the most common setting for outbreaks in September and the second most common in October (Public Health Agency of Canada 2020). Given dramatic growth in caseloads and the reality that vaccine rollouts will take time, the spectre of systemwide closures and shifts to online learning remains. Without policy explicitly incentivizing equal sharing of care, this may undo recent progress.

Moreover, recovery has been challenging for Canada's largely privatized and piecemeal child care system (Friendly, Forer, and Vickerson 2020). Capacity was lost, likely contributing to the more limited employment rebound for mothers with a child under 6 years. Indeed, their employment dropped in October, perhaps because of pressure to prioritize safety and keep children out of congregate settings as cases mounted. Feminist scholarship highlights the essential role that child care plays for women's employment (Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann 2016; Prentice 2009). Limited availability of high-quality affordable child care is associated with lower maternal employment, and school systems that provide care for shorter periods make it more difficult for mothers to work full-time (Boeckmann, Misra, and Budig 2015; Ferragina 2019; Keck and Saraceno 2013; Ruppanner, Moller, and Liana 2019). The pandemic has underscored this lesson. A robust and affordable child care system that also provides care when children are out of school is clearly critical for ensuring a just recovery.

Conflicts between employment and care among mothers of children under 6 years appeared most challenging for the least educated. Although educational differences narrowed over the summer, they widened in fall as employment dipped and hours recovered less for the least-educated mothers. In the face of rising COVID-19 caseloads, relatively risky and poorly paying jobs combined with high child care costs likely disincentivized employment. This highlights the importance of an intersectional lens when assessing pandemic impacts. Class differences mattered. More research on how workplace, family, and community resources and constraints shaped pandemic experiences differently for women across class and other dimensions of inequality will be important to understand the lasting impact of the pandemic.

NOTES

1. Health is a joint federal-provincial responsibility, and cross-provincial industries are regulated via federal employment standards.

2. For a list of all pandemic-related emergency measures in Canada, see <https://www.mccarthy.ca/en/insights/articles/covid-19-emergency-measures-tracker>.

3. Demographic controls are age (25–29, 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, 50–54 years), marital status (married/common-law, previously married, never married), immigration status (immigrant who arrived ≤ 10 years prior, immigrant who arrived > 10 years earlier, nonimmigrant), and student status (nonstudent, full-time student, part-time student). Job and employer characteristics refer to the current job for those employed and the last job held for others and include tenure with employer (in months), occupation (40 categories), industry (21 categories), full- or part-time status, and class of worker (public sector, private sector, self-employed). We also control for province. In analyses of work hours, we do not control for full- or part-time status.

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