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Canadian Families Working Non-Standard Hours Struggle with Child Care, Report Finds

Many Canadian parents of young children don't work typical 9-to-5 work hours and face serious challenges finding child care – and the crisis is likely to grow, concludes a new report co-written by a University of Guelph child care policy expert.

The comprehensive report found that nearly 4 in 10 (39 percent) of Canadian families with a child under the age of six have at least one parent who works non-standard hours. That works out to approximately 1.5 million parents in Canada.

“Many parents with young children work non-standard hours or have rotating shifts that may include nights or weekends. Some have jobs in which they little advance notice of schedule changes. All these situations play havoc with parents’ ability to secure high-quality child care,” said the report’s first author Donna Lero, professor emerita in U of G’s Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition.

Lero worked alongside four child care policy researchers from across Canada to draft the 160-page report for Employment and Social Development Canada, which also funded the research.

They included: Susan Prentice, Professor of Sociology at the University of Manitoba; Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit; Brooke Richardson, post-doctoral fellow at Brock University; and Ley Fraser, a doctoral student at the University of Manitoba.

The team worked collaboratively with Statistics Canada to analyze data from the General Social Survey on Families, spoke to parents juggling non-standard work hours, assessed federal and provincial child care initiatives and policies, profiled child care programs that offer non-standard hours care, and made recommendations for changes.

What they found was that working non-standard or “unsocial” hours is no longer unusual in Canada. More than one in four mothers (27 percent) and one in four fathers (also 27 percent) worked non-standard hours at their job or business in 2016-2017. They worked in such diverse fields as retail and food service, manufacturing, law enforcement, health care and more.

Parents working these non-standard hours face challenges that resemble those experienced by other parents across Canada but are enormously magnified. Finding child care to allow them to work means they may have to rely on unstable combinations of child care arrangements, including “tag-teaming” work and care in couples, relying on family members, or using child care arrangements that may or may not be regulated on an irregular basis.

“So often, it’s mothers who bear the heaviest burden. Our research suggests mothers organize most of the child care arrangements and are typically the ones to experience the stresses involved,” said Lero.

“Several mothers we spoke to who worked non-standard hours shifted from full-time to part-time work or sacrificed career opportunities and promotions in order to balance work and child care responsibilities.”

Parents who are able to secure licensed child care programs, even if they don’t match all their work hours, can find that it serves as a stable anchor for themselves and their children.

Child care centres that offer extended hours past 6 p.m. or before 7 a.m. are rare across Canada, the researchers found. Based on the limited available data, they estimated that fewer than 2 percent of child care centres provided some form of service during non-standard hours. Of those, most provided only limited non-standard hours, such as slightly earlier opening or later closing times. Finding child care on weekends or overnight is even more challenging.

Child care centres offering non-standard hours face challenges too. Such centres are more costly to operate than those that offer regular hour services, require more administration, and experience more challenges recruiting and retaining staff than standard child care programs.

Providing “flexibility” for parents with less predictable schedules is especially difficult. Pilot projects and short-term funding make these services vulnerable, and many have opened and closed over the years.

The number of Canadians working non-standard hours is predicted to increase in coming years as more workers are involved in temporary work or self-employment including freelance or gig work, the report authors said.

“The good news is that the federal government, as well as provincial and territorial governments are becoming more attentive to the need for non-standard hours child care and to the importance of developing innovative approaches to make high-quality early learning and child care programs more accessible to children and families who are excluded,” said Lero.

The researchers concluded that a stable core system of quality, affordable, accessible and inclusive services is required as a foundation to tackle the challenges of providing more difficult-to-sustain non-standard hours services in a major way.

As well, the research concludes, serious consideration needs to be given to modifying employment policies to respond to the growing share of workers with non-standard and precarious work

The report, “Non-standard Work and Child Care in Canada: A Challenge for Parents, Policy Makers, and Child Care Provision,” [is available here.](#)

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