



MOTHERS' RETURN TO WORK AFTER CHILDBIRTH AND THE ROLE OF SPOUSAL INVOLVEMENT AT HOME

Gaëlle Simard-Duplain and Tímea Laura Molnár

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Authors

Gaëlle Simard-Duplain
Department of Economics, Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada
gaelle.simardduplain@carleton.ca

Tímea Laura Molnár
Department of Economics and Business
Central European University
Vienna, Austria
molnartl@ceu.edu

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The Vanier Institute of the Family is located on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people, who have protected this land since time immemorial and who continue to live and work here today. We strive to support decolonization by amplifying voices and research that highlight the ongoing impacts of colonialism, displacement, and systemic racism on Indigenous family and community.

The Vanier Institute of the Family
94 Centrepoin Drive
Ottawa, Ontario K2G 6B1
613-228-8500
www.vanierinstitute.ca

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ABSTRACT

Several studies document the effects of policies that may assist mothers' return to the workplace after childbirth. But, little is known about how mothers' mental health changes after their return, and about the mediating role of spouses' involvement at home in mothers' mental health, their careers, and their parenting practices. We examine the trajectories of mothers by taking advantage of the natural variation in return to work after childbirth resulting from two Quebec childcare reforms. Both policy changes affected the price of childcare and mothers' labour supply after giving birth. We analyze data from three datasets: the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), the Canadian Census of Population, and the Longitudinal and International Study of Adults (LISA), for two-parent households with young children. We find that mothers eligible for affordable daycare, and whose spouse is less involved in at-home duties, experience an increased depression score and have worse parenting practices. At the same time, for mothers with more involved spouses, mental health and parenting practices either do not deteriorate or even improve, leading to their children experiencing less anxiety. We also find that eligible mothers with an involved spouse choose more managerial and ambitious careers. These results highlight the importance of considering maternal labour supply along with broader measures of maternal, child, and family wellbeing when evaluating policies that support mothers' return to the workplace. The findings also suggest that policies which encourage fathers to be more involved in housework and childcare (e.g., paternity leave policies) may help mothers in different dimensions, and potentially ease the "child penalties" known to affect mothers' career paths.

Keywords

maternal labour supply, mothers' occupational choice, mothers' mental health, child development, spousal involvement in childcare, daycare subsidies

BACKGROUND

There is a large and still growing number of academic studies showing that mothers experience a “child penalty.” That is, their earnings level off and often decrease following childbirth to an extent not experienced by fathers. This leads to a large and growing gender pay gap linked to the timing of childbirth.¹⁻⁵ Considerable attention has therefore focused on policies that may assist mothers’ return to the workplace,⁶⁻⁸ such as those that make daycare more affordable. Prominent examples in Canada are the “CPE” policy in Quebec in 1997 (*centres de la petite enfance*, or centres for young children)⁹ and the very recent “\$10 a Day ChildCareBC program” in British Columbia.¹⁰

There is strong evidence, even when focusing on the 1997 Quebec policy, that affordable daycare helps families use more daycare and that it eases mothers’ return to work.^{6, 11-13} Still, little research has explored the effects of this return to work on the mental health of mothers of young children. Even then, findings are mixed. One study found that, on average, eligibility for cheap daycare for two-parent families led to worse parenting practices and to increased maternal depression and family dysfunction in Quebec after 1997,⁶ but such averages mask large differences across family structures, child ages, and genders in the same policy context.^{14, 15} These effects also differ by education, with some research having found higher levels of stress, more sleeping problems, and worse work-life balance for low-educated mothers who were eligible for cheap daycare.¹⁶

Even less research has explored how mothers’ mental health and career paths interact with the length of their absence from and the timing of their return to work. One notable exception is evidence from Austria suggesting that mothers who take longer maternity leave are more likely to face mental health problems.¹⁷ Still, no prior research explored the role that spousal involvement at home can play in this relationship. At the same time, understanding potential tradeoffs between labour force participation and mental health following childbirth is particularly important, considering the role that motherhood norms can play in mediating the relationship between working for pay and starting a family.^{18, 19} Given the large labour market involvement of mothers with small children, it seems key to consider how being successful in the labour market, mental wellbeing, and the role of family circumstances in early childhood are interrelated, and how they affect children’s current and future wellbeing.

From a theoretical standpoint, mothers’ return to work after childbirth may affect their mental health through various channels. First, mothers must share their time and energy across a greater number of responsibilities. Second, it may clash with mothers’ own norms and values regarding motherhood, or with their view of what is expected of them. Both channels may affect mothers’ mental health negatively. Importantly, fathers’ involvement in childcare is expected to reduce the effect of the first channel, while possibly worsening the second channel. Returning to work may also improve mothers’ mental health if employment enhances their sense of identity, their social life, or their influence in household decision-making, or help them to achieve their career dreams. In this case, the impact of fathers’ childcare involvement is less clear.

Finally, while there is extensive academic research on mothers’ work/career decisions after return to work following childbirth,^{2, 20, 21} there is no evidence on what role spouses play in in this process. Are mothers with young children, for instance, more likely to pursue managerial and ambitious career tracks if their spouse is more involved in childcare or housework?

Objective and Research Questions

This study examines the impacts of mothers’ return to work after childbirth by answering the following research questions:

1. To what extent does return to work after childbirth affect mothers’ mental health?
2. How does this affect the development of their young children (0-4 years old)?
3. Do mothers tend to pursue occupations with specific characteristics upon returning to work?
4. Do these effects differ based on the time fathers spend on housework and childcare duties?

METHOD

We take advantage of the natural variation in mothers' return to work after childbirth, resulting from two childcare reforms adopted at different points in time in Quebec. Both policy changes affected the price of childcare and, therefore, mothers' labour supply after giving birth.

First, to improve mothers' labour force participation, child development, and equality of opportunity, in 1997 the government of Quebec granted access to centre-based or home-based government-provided, regulated, institutional daycare in daycare centres and nurseries, for four-year-old and younger children, at the price of \$5 per day. The access was universal, regardless of the parents' labour market status, and without entry requirements or financial eligibility screening. The phase-in was gradual by age: in 1997 all four-year-olds were eligible. In the three years that followed, eligibility was extended to three-, two-, and zero- to one-year-old children. The price was later increased to \$7 per day.

Second, in the 2015 budget, the government of Quebec announced that parents whose children were in subsidized daycares (as described above) had to pay an additional amount based on their 2014 family income (combined net income for both spouses).^{22, 23} The additional contribution started at an extra \$0.70/day for family income between \$50,000 and \$75,000,²⁴ then increased by roughly 3.9% for every dollar of family income above \$75,000. It reached a maximum of \$12.70/day for a family income of \$155,000 and above.²⁵ The additional amount was reduced by 50% for second children, and by 100% for third and additional children.

We use standard Difference-in-Differences models to estimate how eligibility for the first policy, as well as mothers' return to work, affects mothers' mental health, children's development, and mothers' occupational choices. A standard Difference-in-Differences model estimates the effect of a treatment (e.g., a new policy is enacted). It compares changes over time experienced by a group impacted by a policy or program with changes experienced by a group that was not impacted.²⁶ Specifically, we compare the outcomes of mothers with children aged 0–4 in two-parent households in Quebec with the rest of Canada, before and after 1997, respectively.

The main assumptions necessary for this approach to produce estimates of the causal effect of eligibility for the affordable daycare policy are that:

1. Without the policy, the patterns of parental labour supply, daycare use, mental health, occupational choices, and child development in Quebec would have evolved in parallel to that in the rest of Canada, and that;
2. The daycare price policy was unexpected for parents.

Our strategy accounts for differences in children's age and gender, household size, as well as parents' age and education levels. In other words, we compare mothers who have identical families along these factors. To identify mothers for whom this policy most likely affected their labour supply, we develop a prediction model for a binary outcome (where one indicates the mother is employed and zero indicates the mother is not employed) in a pre-policy sample period. For instance, in the census data, this would correspond to the 1996 cycle. We then predict the likelihood of employment for the entire sample. We refer to this as the predicted propensity to work in the absence of the affordable daycare policy. Then, we limit the estimation sample to mothers who are unlikely to work for pay without access to affordable childcare. These mothers' participation in the labour market is most likely to be influenced by the policy.

To estimate the impact of eligibility for the second policy, we compare the outcomes of mothers with children aged 0–4 in two-parent households, who differ in their family income and number of children, in Quebec versus the rest of Canada, before and after 2016. This approach resembles a triple-differences framework, as the subsidy percentage varies by province, income, and number of children, and over time.

Our sample includes only mothers living in families with two heterosexual parents. As described in previous research, other policy changes happened around the time of the 1997 reform, which complicate the analysis for single-parent families. For instance, in both Ontario and Quebec, there was a sharp increase in benefits for low-income singles in the second half of the 1990s, when the federal Canada Child Tax Benefit was expanded and the National Child Benefit was introduced. Further, in Quebec there was a large additional increase for low-income singles from 1998, due to the Family Policy's new family allowance that targeted low-income women.²⁵

We estimate multivariate linear regression models using the STATA quantitative data analysis software package and the Ordinary Least Squares method.

Data and Measurement

DATASETS AND SAMPLE

We use three data sets in the Carleton University and University of Ottawa Research Data Centres (RDCs), which are part of the Canadian Research Data Centre Network (CRDCN).

1. National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)—cycles 1–7 (1994–1995 to 2006–2007)
2. Canadian Census of Population—cycles 1996, 2001, and 2006
3. Longitudinal and International Study of Adults (LISA)—cycles 2 to 5 (2014 to 2020)

We also use the Canadian Tax and Credit Simulator (CTaCS) in the secure analysis environment at the RDCs, linked to the LISA. CTaCS was developed by Prof. Kevin Milligan (University of British Columbia, Vancouver School of Economics).²⁷ It includes a set of data files that incorporate essential features of federal and provincial tax and transfer systems, as well as syntax files that can be used to apply these parameters to personal income tax records to calculate a series of variables (e.g., marginal tax rate, federal and provincial taxes paid, etc.). We use CTaCS to simulate the daycare price subsidy available to parents around the 2015–2016 reform, based on their combined net family income and number of children, following the steps described by Milligan.²⁵

We link the Occupation Information Network Database (ONET) to the census, which contains the task contents of, as well as skills required to be successful in, a wide range of detailed occupation categories.²⁸

MEASUREMENT OF KEY VARIABLES

Eligibility variable for the 1997 Quebec “\$5/day” daycare policy (“policy”)

We define one of our key explanatory variables, eligibility for the 1997 Quebec policy, as follows:

- In the NLSCY, no child below age five is eligible in cycles 1 and 2 (1994–1995 and 1996–1997); in cycle 3 (1998–1999), three- and four-year-old children living in Quebec are eligible; and in later cycles, all children living in Quebec are eligible.
- In the census, the pre-policy year is 1996, and the post-policy years are after 1997 (i.e., 2001 and 2006). Children in provinces other than Quebec are not eligible.

The variable takes a value of one for eligible children, and zero otherwise.

INDICATOR VARIABLE FOR FATHER BEING INVOLVED AT HOME (“1[FATHER INVOLVED AT HOME]”)

The census collects information on fathers’ involvement at home. To explore fathers’ role in mediating effects measured using the NLSCY, we impute fathers’ involvement at home in the NLSCY using a model estimated with the census.

The time-use outcome variables measured in the census are based on the following questions designed to reflect household activities. Specifically, respondents were asked how many hours in total last week they spent on “a) doing unpaid housework, yard work or home maintenance for members of this household, or others/Some examples include: preparing meals, washing the car, doing laundry, cutting the grass, shopping, household planning, etc./” and “...b) looking after own children, without pay/Some examples include: bathing or playing with young children, driving children to sports activities or helping them with homework, talking with children about their problems, etc./”.

We sum these two responses of fathers in the census, develop a prediction model for this outcome in the 1996 Census cycle, and apply this model to predict fathers’ hours spent on childcare and housework in the NLSCY. Fathers are categorized as being involved if their predicted hours are above the 90th percentile within the estimation sample.

MOTHERS’ MENTAL HEALTH: (STANDARDIZED) MATERNAL DEPRESSION SCORE

The NLSCY asks respondents about their experience of 10 symptoms of depression. These can be combined to form the maternal depression score. For each of the following questions, mothers in the NLSCY could answer (per week) “1: rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)”, “2: some or a little of the time (1-2 days)”, “3: occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)”, or “4: most or all of the time (5-7 days)”:

How often you have felt or behaved this way during the past week:

1. *I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.*
2. *I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends.*
3. *I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.*
4. *I felt depressed.*
5. *I felt that everything I did was an effort.*
6. *I felt hopeful about the future.**
7. *My sleep was restless.*
8. *I was happy.**
9. *I enjoyed life.**
10. *I felt that people disliked me.*

These answer options are rescaled to 0 to 3 (i.e., the category “rarely” is scored as 0, the category “some or a little of the time (1-2 days)” is scored as 1, etc., with those indicated with * reversed so that a higher score denotes worse mental health). The scores are summed. A score of 0 represents the absence of any depressive symptom, and a score of 30 indicates the highest depressive symptoms. Finally, the variable is standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

CHILD DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

Mothers in the NLSCY were also asked about symptoms used to identify three issues among children (emotional disorders, separation anxiety, and physical aggression). For each of the three child developmental scores, mothers could answer: "1: never", "2: about once a week or less/less than half the time", "3: a few times a week/about half the time", "4: one or two times a day/more than half the time", or "5: many times each day/all the time". Answers are rescaled to 0 to 4 (i.e., the category "never" is scored as 0, the category "about once a week or less/less than half the time" is scored as 1, etc.). The scores are summed. A score of 0 represents the absence of a problem and the highest possible score represents the fullest extent of a behavioural problem. All the child developmental outcomes listed below are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Child developmental outcome (1): (standardized) emotional disorder—anxiety score

How often would you say that [child's name]:

1. Seems to be unhappy, sad, or depressed?
2. Is not as happy as other children?
3. Is too fearful or anxious?
4. Is worried?
5. Is nervous, high-strung or tense?
6. Has trouble enjoying him/herself?
7. Appears miserable, unhappy, tearful, or distressed?

Child developmental outcome (2): (standardized) separation anxiety score

How often would you say that [child's name]:

1. When another child accidentally hurts him/her (such as by bumping into him/her), assumes that the other child meant to do it, and then reacts with anger and fighting?
2. Clings to adults or is too dependent?
3. Kicks, bites, hits other children?
4. Does not want to sleep alone?

Child developmental outcome (3): (standardized) physical aggression score

How often would you say that [child's name]:

1. Destroys his/her own things?
2. Gets into many fights?
3. Destroys things belonging to his/her family, or other children?
4. Doesn't want to sleep alone?
5. When another child accidentally hurts him/her (such as by bumping into him/her), assumes that the other child meant to do it, and then reacts with anger and fighting?
6. Physically attacks people?
7. Threatens people?
8. Is cruel, bullies, or is mean to others?
9. Kicks, bites, hits other children?

PARENTING PRACTICE OUTCOMES

Mothers in the NLSCY were also asked how often various indicators of hostile and consistent parenting practices happen for them. For each of the questions below, mothers could answer: "1: never", "2: about once a week or less/less than half the time", "3: a few times a week/about half the time", "4: one or two times a day/more than half the time", or "5: many times each day/all the time". Answers are rescaled to 0 to 4 (i.e., the category "never" is scored as 0, the category "about once a week or less/less than half the time" is scored as 1, etc.). The scores are summed. For instance, a score of 0 for the hostile parenting practice outcome represents the least hostile parenting practice, and the highest possible score represents the most hostile parenting practice. All parenting practice outcomes listed below are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Parenting practice outcome (1): (standardized) parenting hostility score

1. How often do you get annoyed with your child for saying or doing something he/she is not supposed to?
2. Of all the times you talk to your child about his/her behaviour, what proportion is praise?
3. Of all the times you talk to your child about his/her behaviour, what proportion is disapproval?
4. How often do you get angry when you punish your child?
5. How often do you think the kind of punishment you give your child depends on your mood?
6. How often do you feel you have problems managing your child in general?
7. How often do you have to discipline your child repeatedly for the same thing?

Parenting practice outcome (2): (standardized) parenting consistency score

1. When you give him/her a command or order to do something, what proportion of the time do you make sure that he/she does it?
2. If you tell him/her he/she will get punished if not stopping to do something, and he/she keeps doing it, how often will you punish?
3. How often is he/she able to get out of a punishment when he/she really sets his/her mind to it?
4. How often when you discipline him/her, does he/she ignore the punishment?

OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE OUTCOMES (ONET VARIABLES)

By using the raw ONET scores, we check the extent to which mothers select occupations in which the job/occupation...

1. Requires training others
2. Requires guiding/directing/motivating subordinates
3. Is achievement-oriented
4. Requires initiative
5. Requires leadership skills
6. Requires cooperation with others
7. Requires having concern for others
8. Requires social orientation toward others
9. Requires self-control
10. Requires stress tolerance

11. *Requires adaptability and flexibility*
12. *Requires dependability on others*
13. *Requires having attention to detail*
14. *Requires integrity*
15. *Requires independence*
16. *Requires analytical thinking*
17. *Involves much impact of decision-making*
18. *Involves frequent decision-making*
19. *Involves degree of automation*
20. *Involves much time pressure*
21. *Has a regular work schedule*
22. *Duration of job/occupation's typical work week*

So, for instance, a higher ONET score in category 13 suggests that performing well in a particular occupation requires more attention to detail, while a higher ONET score in category 18 indicates that the occupation involves more frequent on-the-job decision-making.

RESULTS

Table 1A shows the estimated impact of the policy on the likelihood of employment among mothers eligible for affordable daycare. The sample is restricted to mothers who would be unlikely to work if affordable daycare was not available. Effects are estimated separately by the age of the mothers' youngest child. For instance, column (1) indicates that introducing affordable daycare in Quebec increased work among mothers of children in their first year of life by 8.8 percentage points. Using the Difference-in-Differences approach described earlier ensures that this effect accounts for any overall trends in maternal employment in Canada over the period studied, that is, the change in Quebec is defined relative to changes taking place in the rest of Canada among mothers of children under age one. The corresponding estimate for eligible mothers in Quebec whose child is in their second and fourth year of life is 9.9 and 11 percentage points, respectively. These estimates do not significantly differ in families in which the father is more involved in childcare and housework. These results suggest that being eligible for affordable, subsidized daycare encourages mothers to return earlier to work, but that fathers' involvement at home does not mediate this relationship.

Table 1A

Effect of Being Eligible for Affordable Daycare, on an Indicator of the Mother Working; Difference-in-Differences Policy Impact by Child Age

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	By Child Age				
	0	1	2	3	4
Policy	0.0881***	0.0989***	0.0606***	0.1080***	0.0474***
	[0.0181]	[0.0139]	[0.0182]	[0.0156]	[0.0146]
Policy X 1 [Father Involved at Home]	-0.145	-0.1572	-0.3219**	-0.0634	-0.3127***
	[0.0892]	[0.0947]	[0.1173]	[0.0844]	[0.0817]
R-squared	0.093	0.096	0.095	0.093	0.076

Notes:

[1] Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

[2] Data: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), cycles 1-7 (1994-2006).

[3] Sample: Mothers with children aged 0-4, living in two-parent households, who would be unlikely to work in the absence of an affordable daycare policy.

Table 1B shows the estimated effect of daycare subsidies on mothers' hours worked, by child's age. Mothers in Quebec receiving a daycare subsidy increase their working hours, especially when their child is in their second and fourth year of life (columns (2) and (4)).

Table 1B

Effect of a Daycare Price Subsidy on Working Hours; Triple-Differences Policy Impact by Child Age

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	By Child Age				
	All	1	2	3	4
Percent Subsidy	10.59***	23.37***	6.402	16.62**	1.29
	[3.188]	[8.522]	[5.447]	[7.858]	[5.488]
R-squared	0.091	0.164	0.106	0.258	0.121

Notes:

[1] Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

[2] Data: Longitudinal and International Study of Adults (LISA) – cycles 2-5.

[3] Sample: Mothers with children aged 0-4, living in two-parent households, who would be unlikely to work in the absence of an affordable daycare policy.

Table 2 uncovers important differences in the mental health impacts of encouraging mothers' return to work by improving the affordability of childcare. Again, the sample is limited to mothers who would be unlikely to work if affordable daycare was not available. The first coefficient estimate in column (1) indicates that eligibility for affordable daycare increases the depression score of mothers whose spouse is less involved in at-home duties by 7.3 percent of a standard deviation. At the same time, the second estimate reveals that the depression score of mothers whose spouse is involved in at-home duties decreases by 4.7 percent (7.3-11.9). These results suggest that mothers with a supportive spouse experience an improvement in their mental wellbeing.

According to columns (2) and (3), mothers whose spouse is less involved in at-home duties not only experience poorer mental health, but also become more hostile and less consistent in their parenting practices (by 15 and 13 percent of a standard deviation, respectively). Again, these effects are not only mitigated but in fact reversed among mothers with a supportive spouse. That is, they become considerably less hostile and more consistent in their parenting practices.

Table 2

Effect of a Daycare Price Decrease on Maternal Depression, Child Development and Parenting; Difference-in-Differences Policy Impact for All

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Standardized Scores					
	Parenting			Child Development		
	Maternal Depression	Hostility	Consistency	Em. Disorder Anxiety	Separation Anxiety	Physical Aggression
Policy	0.0728***	0.1541***	-0.1260***	0.0876***	0.0506***	0.0897***
	[0.0096]	[0.0373]	[0.0207]	[0.0105]	[0.0039]	[0.0223]
Policy X 1 [Father Involved at Home]	-0.1194**	-0.3645***	0.1667**	-0.2767***	-0.0874***	-0.1047**
	[0.0465]	[0.0628]	[0.0678]	[0.0452]	[0.0259]	[0.0482]
R-squared	0.025	0.028	0.042	0.025	0.011	0.03

Notes:

[1] Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

[2] Data: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), cycles 1-7 (1994-2006).

[3] Sample: Mothers with children aged 0-4, living in two-parent households, who would be unlikely to work in the absence of an affordable daycare policy.

The mental health and parenting impacts of being eligible for affordable, subsidized daycare mirror the changes in the development of children. According to columns (2) and (3), the children of mothers whose spouse is less involved in at-home duties show a significant deterioration in behaviour. Their emotional disorder/anxiety, separation anxiety, and physical aggression scores increase by 8.8, 5.1, and 9.0 percent of a standard deviation, respectively. At the same time, children of mothers with a supportive spouse show an improvement in the behavioural measures, especially with respect to emotional disorder/anxiety.

Table 3 shows the estimated impact of eligibility for affordable daycare on the likelihood of mothers to work in occupations with different characteristics. It shows that eligible mothers with a supportive spouse tend to choose more managerial and ambitious careers. This finding is consistent across various occupation characteristics. In particular, these mothers tend to opt for jobs that require more leadership skills, stress tolerance, adaptability-flexibility and analytical thinking, and that come with greater responsibility and impact.

Table 3

Effect of a Daycare Price Decrease on Working Mothers' Occupation Characteristics; Difference-in-Differences Policy Impact for All

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Training of Others	Guidance/Development	Achievement-Oriented	Initiative	Leadership Skills	Cooperation with Others
Panel A						
Policy	0.0267***	0.0309***	-0.0352***	-0.0231**	-0.0207**	-0.0343***
	[0.0082]	[0.0099]	[0.0119]	[0.0104]	[0.0088]	[0.0051]
Policy X 1 [Father Involved at Home]	0.1423***	0.1694***	0.1437***	0.1591***	0.1131**	0.0911***
	[0.0376]	[0.0581]	[0.0397]	[0.0413]	[0.0422]	[0.0232]
R-squared	0.044	0.032	0.085	0.091	0.039	0.156
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Concern for Others	Socialization	Self-Control	Stress Tolerance	Adaptability/Flexibility	Dependability
Panel B						
Policy	-0.0448***	-0.0247***	-0.0230***	-0.0257***	-0.0335***	-0.0199***
	[0.0056]	[0.0055]	[0.0061]	[0.0089]	[0.0078]	[0.0052]
Policy X 1 [Father Involved at Home]	0.0676***	0.1049***	0.1285***	0.1540***	0.1230***	0.0994***
	[0.0201]	[0.0286]	[0.0321]	[0.0367]	[0.0310]	[0.0237]
R-squared	0.079	0.128	0.166	0.143	0.137	0.126
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Attention to Details	Integrity	Independence	Analytical Thinking	Impact on Decisions	Frequent Decisions
Panel C						
Policy	-0.0412***	-0.0577***	-0.0236***	-0.0480***	-0.0466***	-0.0193**
	[0.0095]	[0.0112]	[0.0079]	[0.0130]	[0.0129]	[0.0084]
Policy X 1 [Father Involved at Home]	0.1069***	0.2473***	0.0981***	0.1994***	0.2670***	0.1914***
	[0.0206]	[0.0538]	[0.0207]	[0.0537]	[0.0653]	[0.0514]
R-squared	0.106	0.163	0.1	0.126	0.071	0.053

Panel D	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Degree Automation	Time Pressure	Regular Schedule	Length of Workweek
Policy	0.0246***	-0.0352**	0.0145***	-0.0183**
	[0.0076]	[0.0159]	[0.0028]	[0.0087]
Policy X 1 [Father Involved at Home]	-0.1686***	0.0177*	0.0407***	-0.0589***
	[0.0364]	[0.0096]	[0.0107]	[0.0060]
R-squared	0.092	0.042	0.019	0.154

Notes:

[1] Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

[2] Data: Canadian Census of Population, years 1996, 2001, 2006, and ONET Occupation Data.

[3] Sample: Working mothers with children aged 0-4, living in two-parent households, who would be unlikely to work in the absence of an affordable daycare policy.

The impact of eligibility on mothers with less supportive spouses is much more unclear. Eligibility for these mothers increases employment in jobs that require training others and guiding/directing/motivating subordinates. But, it decreases employment in occupations that are achievement-oriented, require leadership skills, stress tolerance, adaptability-flexibility and analytical thinking, or involve time pressure and frequent decision-making. These results suggest that affordable daycare helps mothers to get onto more ambitious career tracks, but only if their spouse is involved at home.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this report, we investigate the impacts of mothers' return to work after childbirth on their mental wellbeing, the types of jobs they take up, and their children's wellbeing. Our focus is on the mediating role of their spouse's involvement at home (i.e., the time fathers spend on housework and childcare duties).

From a theoretical standpoint, mothers' return to work following childbirth could be expected to contribute either positively or negatively to their mental health. In practice, we find evidence of an effect in both directions, mediated by fathers' involvement at home. Return to work is accompanied by an increase in depression symptoms among mothers whose partners are less involved at home, while the opposite holds for mothers with more involved fathers. This contrasts with the effects we find on maternal labour supply, which are not affected by the role fathers take on at home.

This has several important implications for research and policy. First, it demonstrates that more attention needs to be paid in research and policy to the intersection of maternal labour supply and mental health following childbirth. Our results show that studying employment alone is not enough to paint a clear picture of what happens to mothers—and ultimately, families—when they return to work after childbirth. Second, policies that promote mothers' employment after the birth of children rarely account for the broader family context (e.g., fathers' involvement at home). We show that this context has a direct impact on whether these policies result in positive or negative mental health outcomes for mothers.

Second, effects on maternal mental health spillover into mothers' parenting styles, which has implications for children's development. Again, this highlights the importance of considering maternal labour supply along with broader measures of maternal, child, and family wellbeing. Most importantly, this implies that estimates of the costs and benefits of policies that encourage mothers' return to work and/or policies that encourage fathers' involvement at home must consider these spillover effects. Research shows that children's mental health plays an important role in shaping their health later in life, with implications for their educational attainment and labour market outcomes.^{29, 30}

We also find that mothers who are eligible for affordable daycare and whose spouse is involved at home are more likely to pursue more managerial and ambitious careers than those whose spouse is less involved at home. This also has important policy implications. It suggests that policies that motivate fathers to be more involved in housework and childcare (such as paternity leave policies) could help mothers not only to have better mental health and improved parenting practices, but also to take up higher-paying jobs, mitigating "child penalties."

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Three elements limit the extent to which our results can support better policy making for families in Canada. In turn, these highlight important avenues for future research.

First, our classification of mothers based on their spouses' involvement at home relies on imputing data in the NLSCY based on information found in the census. While this procedure is the best that can be done with available data, it is necessarily imperfect, as some mothers may be misclassified. This points to the broader issue of data availability. Our results demonstrate the importance of spousal involvement as a factor mediating the impact of mothers' return to work after childbirth on their own and their family's wellbeing. Linking census data to datasets like the NLSCY would improve researchers' and policymakers' ability to understand and address this reality, while leveraging existing resources.

Second, the interpretation and applicability of our results is limited to two-parent families. Concurrent reforms affecting lone-parent families limit our ability to investigate the effects of mothers' return to work after childbirth on their mental health and their children's development in this report. Further research is necessary to document the experience of these families. Particularly fruitful avenues could include exploring the role that other family members may play in reducing the negative impacts of return to work on single mothers.

Third, our results do not account for differences in effects across different families, such as for racialized or Indigenous mothers, or for mothers who live in rural areas, where the money cost of childcare accounts for a smaller proportion of the overall cost of accessing childcare. Building on our work, future research may uncover policy-relevant differences in these effects, which should be considered to design inclusive policies. In turn, though, the possibility to do so depends on the characteristics that are recorded in surveys and on the sample sizes available for these groups.

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