

29 Irregular and non-standard work schedules create challenges for many families

Various aspects of family life are typically structured around schedules and routines that are beyond the control of family members, such as taking kids to school, extracurricular activities, or volunteering. But family members' degree of flexibility are often constrained if they have a non-standard or irregular work schedule.

Although there is no universally accepted definition, non-standard schedules are those in which the employees' work hours fall outside "standard" 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday schedules. These work shifts may occur during days, afternoons, evenings, and/or on weekends. The schedules may also be relatively predictable, or rotating, or irregular, or they may also be "on call" (i.e., scheduled at short notice). Reconciling these non-standard hours with the schedules and routines of family life is a challenge for many families.

Data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS)^a show that more than one in five workers (22.6%) aged 15 to 69 surveyed in February and March 2020 reported having an irregular work schedule in their current or last job.¹ More than six in 10 (62.3%) faced variation in both the schedule and the number of hours they worked.

In 2015, the most recent year for which there is publicly available data, more than one-third of employed women (39.4%) and men (36.5%) without children worked an irregular schedule.^b This changed little from the rates observed in 1998 (39.6% and 37.3%, respectively). Just over one-quarter of mothers and fathers worked an irregular schedule in 2015 (25.3% each), only slightly lower than in 1998, when 26.2% of mothers and 26.1% of fathers worked an irregular schedule.^c

In 2017, at least one parent worked a non-standard schedule in 39% of families with one or more children aged 5 and under.² Mothers with non-standard schedules have a higher degree of precarious employment. They are more likely to report having temporary, seasonal, or contract work and/or to work part-time hours than fathers with non-standard hours.

Why this matters

Managing time is an essential part of how people fulfill family responsibilities and obligations—in other words, how families "do family." Central to this is aligning or reconciling work schedules with the



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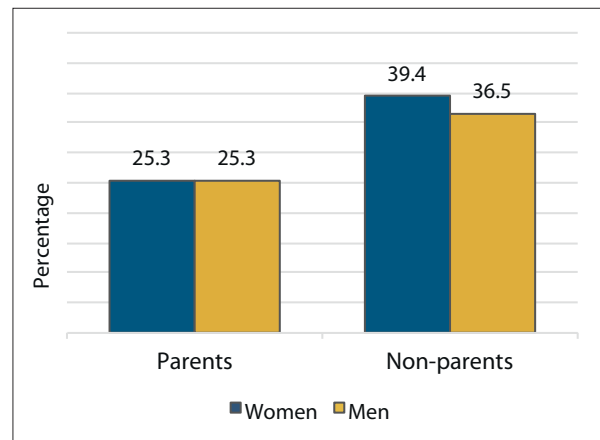
rhythms and routines of family life. But those who have work hours that fall outside the standard 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday routines are more likely to have difficulties participating in regularly scheduled activities outside of work.

Unpredictable work schedules have been associated with increased levels of work-family conflict (particularly among women) and lower levels of family and social wellbeing.²

Irregular and non-standard work schedules can make it challenging for workers to schedule health care appointments, participate in holiday celebrations, and engage in leisure activities with family and friends.³ Arranging for family needs such as childcare can be greatly complicated, since few care providers offer enough flexibility to accommodate irregular schedules. In this situation, parents are often left to create a patchwork of childcare arrangements that can include family care, non-family care (i.e., friends

and neighbours), regulated and/or unregulated childcare centres, and tag-team parental care in which parents work different but complementary schedules to manage childcare needs.² The lack of schedule predictability and stability adds an additional layer of complexity and stress that can impact the wellbeing of all family members.

Percentage of employed parents and non-parents aged 15 and older who worked an irregular schedule, by gender, Canada, 2015



Source: Statistics Canada. (2024). General Social Survey, 2015. Custom tabulation.^b

^a Data from the LFS excludes the territories, persons living on reserves, full-time members of the regular Canadian Armed Forces, and persons living in institutions.

^b Statistics Canada. (2024). General Social Survey, 2015. Custom tabulation.

^c Statistics Canada. (2024). General Social Survey, 1998. Custom tabulation.



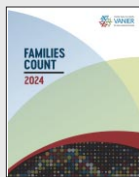
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¹ Statistics Canada. (2021, March 22). Aspects of quality of employment in Canada, February and March 2020. *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210322/dq210322a-eng.htm>

² Lero, D. S., Prentice, S., Friendly, M., Richardson, B., & Fraser, L. (2021, June). *Non-standard work and child care in Canada: A challenge for parents, policy makers, and child care provision*. <https://childcarecanada.org/publications/other-publications/21/06/non-standard-work-and-child-care-canada-challenge-parents>

³ Cho, H., Lambert, S. J., Ellis, E., & Henly, J. R. (2024, January 9). How work hour variability matters for work-to-family conflict. *Work, Employment and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170231218191>



Families Count 2024 is a publication of the Vanier Institute of the Family that provides accurate and timely information on families and family life in Canada. Written in plain language, it features chapters on diverse topics and trends that have shaped families in Canada. Its four sections (Family Structure, Family Work, Family Identity, and Family Wellbeing) are guided by the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#).

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