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# ***Employment situations and child care arrangements after mothers' return to work following parental leave***

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Whether mothers return to the same employer after childbirth is important in understanding their wages and career trajectories. Mothers who keep the same job can keep their job-specific skills and are less likely to face wage penalties because of parenthood. An extension of parental leave (including maternity leave) from 6 months to 12 months in 2001 increased the likelihood of mothers returning to the same employer after childbirth (Baker and Milligan, 2008). Starting in 2017, eligible parents were given the option of extending their parental leave from 12 months to 18 months. An earlier study suggested that this policy change did not increase the likelihood of mothers' returning to work sometime after taking a leave; instead, some mothers postponed their return to work rather than returning within 12 months of leave (Choi, 2023).

There is evidence that child care arrangements facilitate mothers' involvement in the labour market. For example, access to low-cost daycare services in Quebec increased the employment of mothers with preschool-aged children (Baker, Gruber and Milligan, 2008; Lefebvre and Merrigan, 2008). However, whether mothers' job continuity and child care arrangements upon their return to work after a parental leave have changed in recent years remains to be explored. The goal of this article is to fill this information gap.

Specifically, this article examines whether mothers' employment situations and child care arrangements after returning to work differed between two cohorts of mothers. The 2009 and 2019 cohorts of mothers are based on the year, before the COVID-19 pandemic, they completed the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey (EICS).<sup>1</sup> This survey information provides a useful perspective for discussing the evolving employment patterns of women and institutional changes, such as the Canada-wide early learning and child care (CWELCC) system, that seek to increase the labour market participation of mothers with young children, among other goals.

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1. Mothers with an infant in the 2019 cohort gave birth between April 2018 and December 2019 or adopted an infant who was born during that period.

The study focuses on mothers with an infant younger than 12 months who worked as an employee before childbirth or adoption, took a leave following childbirth or adoption, and had already returned or intended to return to work after less than 18 months of leave.<sup>2</sup> Mothers who did not report information on their employment situation or child care arrangements after their leave were excluded.<sup>3</sup> The final sample size of the 2019 cohort was 630 mothers for the analysis on employment situations and 584 mothers for the analysis on child care arrangements, representing 74% and 68% of mothers, respectively, in the 2019 cohort who worked as employees and took a break after childbirth or adoption. The 2009 cohort had a slightly larger sample, with 690 mothers analyzed for employment situations and 624 mothers for child care arrangements, representing 76% and 68% of the corresponding mothers in the 2009 cohort.

## Mothers' employment patterns after a return to work are similar for both cohorts of women

Of all mothers who took a leave from their paid job after childbirth or adoption and returned to work or intended to do so within 18 months after the beginning of their leave, 91% had returned or planned to return to the same employer in 2019, and 9% returned or planned to return to a different employer. For the 2009 cohort of women, the corresponding percentages are 90% and 10% and are therefore similar.

Of all women in the 2019 cohort, 80% expected their employment situation (e.g., work hours and schedule) after childbirth or adoption to be the same (but not necessarily with the same employer) as it was before their leave. The remaining 20% had or expected some changes in their employment situation (hours, schedule or working environment). One in two of these mothers expected to work fewer hours and the remaining half expected a different schedule (shift) or other changes. Again, similar percentages were observed for the women in the 2009 cohort. Overall, maternal employment patterns after parental leave were very similar for the 2009 and 2019 cohorts.

**Table 1**

### Mothers' employment situation after a return to work

	2009	2019
	percent	
<b>Returned or planned to return to the same employer</b>		
Yes	89.5	90.9
No	10.5 <sup>E</sup>	9.1 <sup>E</sup>
<b>Employment situation after birth or adoption</b>		
Same employment situation	80.1	80.3
Different employment situation, fewer hours	10.5 <sup>E</sup>	9.2 <sup>E</sup>
Different employment situation, different schedule or other changes	9.4 <sup>E</sup>	10.5 <sup>E</sup>

<sup>E</sup> use with caution

**Notes:** This table analyzed mothers of an infant aged younger than 1 year who worked in a paid job in the past two years, who took a break from working since childbirth or adoption, who intended to return to work within 18 months of leave or had already returned, and for whom information on their employment situation after returning to work was available.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2009 and 2019.

- The EICS collected information on the employment situation and the child care arrangements from mothers who worked in a paid job in the past two years, intended to return within the next 18 months or had already returned after a break. The sample in this study was limited to mothers who intended to return within 18 months of leave or who had already returned to work to analyze mothers' behaviour (actual or planned) within a similar time from childbirth or adoption for all mothers. Of all mothers who were employees and took a leave after childbirth or adoption in 2019, 82% returned to work or expected to return to work within 18 months of leave (Choi, 2023).
- The percentage of mothers not reporting this information was roughly the same for the two cohorts.

## Child care arrangements after mothers' return to work change over time

What type of child care arrangements do parents consider when mothers return to work after parental leave? Table 2 groups the child care arrangements that mothers used or expected to use into five categories: (1) mother herself or shared with spouse or partner (no arrangement), (2) friend or relative, (3) private babysitter, (4) private or public daycare, and (5) other.

Of all mothers in the 2019 cohort, 14.2% planned to take care of their children themselves or with their spouse or partner. About one-quarter of mothers planned to rely on a friend or relative (23.6%), and the majority (54.2%) planned to use child care services by hiring a babysitter or sending children to a nursery or daycare. The percentage of mothers using child care services remained similar during the decade from 2009 to 2019, but there were some changes in the type of child care services mothers chose. Compared with the 2009 cohort of mothers, a smaller share of the 2019 cohort of mothers planned to hire a babysitter, with a decrease from 12.5% in 2009 to 3.7% in 2019. Instead, the percentage of mothers planning to use daycare increased from 42.3% for the 2009 cohort of mothers to 50.5% for the 2019 cohort of mothers. This figure is similar to an earlier Canadian study's finding that about 50% of mothers with a 1-year-old child used child care in 2017 (Zhang et al., 2021). That study also showed that one in two parents of children aged 1 to 3 regularly used child care, and the majority of them used it five or more days per week (Zhang et al., 2021).

When child care arrangements were examined separately for mothers in Quebec, which already had low-fee child care in place, and mothers in other regions (not presented in Table 2), the percentage of mothers planning to use daycare increased in both cases, from 50.6% for the 2009 cohort of mothers to 60.7% for the 2019 cohort of mothers in Quebec and from 39.0% to 46.7% for mothers elsewhere. The percentage of mothers relying on a friend or relative decreased in Quebec (from 19.4% to 12.5%) but increased in the rest of Canada (from 23.4% to 27.8%).

**Table 2**  
**Planned or current child care arrangement**

	2009	2019
	percent	
<b>Planned or current child care arrangement</b>		
Mother herself or shared with spouse or partner	15.7	14.2
Friend or relative will take care of the child	22.3	23.6
Private babysitter	12.5	3.7 <sup>E</sup>
Private or public daycare	42.3	50.5
Other	7.2 <sup>E</sup>	8.0 <sup>E</sup>

<sup>E</sup> use with caution

**Notes:** The sample for this table is mothers of an infant aged younger than 1 year who worked in a paid job in the past two years, who took a break from working since childbirth or adoption, who intended to return to work within 18 months of leave or had already returned, and for whom information on child care arrangements after returning to work was available.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2009 and 2019.

## **Concluding remarks**

Since the late 2000s, most Canadian mothers who were working before childbirth or adoption have intended to return to work after parental leave. Among mothers returning to work within 18 months after the beginning of their leave, 9 in 10 returned or planned to return to the same employer and 80% expected the same employment situation. Conversely, 20% of mothers expected to change their employer, work hours or work schedule to accommodate their family responsibilities. While the employment patterns of the mothers considered in this study did not change from 2009 to 2019, their child care arrangements did, with greater emphasis on private or public daycare being observed for the 2019 cohort of mothers. The increasing demand for daycare services from parents with infants paved the way for the public announcement of the CWELCC system in 2021 and its implementation in various provinces starting in 2021 and 2022. This analysis may be revisited in the future to examine whether employment patterns and child care arrangements of mothers who return to work after the CWELCC system is fully implemented differ from those of the 2019 cohort of mothers.

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