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Analyzing Canadian Women Working after Childbirth as Lifecourse Transition

Research Brief No. 10

Summary

This research focussed on Canadian mothers who had a first child between 1970 and 1999, and the probability of these mothers working shortly after childbearing. Authors Stéphanie Gaudet, Martin Cooke and Joanna Jacob studied the change and underlying dynamics with two main questions. First, what are the characteristics that affect Canadian women's employment? And how have women's employment transitions after the birth of a first child changed over time? The investigators probed the effects of socio-economic characteristics on labor force withdrawal using the 2001 General Social Survey, Cycle 15 on Family History. Employment transition was viewed through a type of lifecourse analysis for six cohorts of mothers over the 30-year span. Gaudet, Cooke and Jacob attempted to understand underlying inter-cohort differences through individual characteristics such as level of education, age at childbearing, employment before childbearing, and spousal income. The researchers concluded that since the mid-1980s, mothers with low educational attainment are largely excluded from the labor market during the two years following the birth of their first child.

Key Findings

- On average, only 41% of Canadian women who had first children between 1970 and 1999 were working within 24 months of the birth of their first child. Therefore, nearly 60% of women who had their children over this period were out of the labor force for more than two years. The percentage of women working within two years of their first births rose from 28.5% for the 1970 to 1974 cohort to 61.3% for the 1995 to 1999 cohort. An implication is that the assumption of a "full adult worker model" (with roughly equal gender representation in paid work) was not achieved in 1999. This can yield severe economic consequences for women and their children. In the long term, it can affect women's retirement savings and their career and human capital development.
- Labor market transitions varied across the cohorts from 1970 to 1999, which means that the choices women made with respect to work cannot be understood using only economic rational choice theories. Such theories conceive that difficult economic circumstances (i.e., the economic crises of early 1980s and 1990s) would hasten the return to work, and robust economic circumstances would trigger the inverse. The authors found a substantial overall increase over the period, however, and no decreases. This implies that women's choices are the result of a more complex weaving of factors including education, available work, cultural values, gender roles and the economic context.
- Higher levels of education might be shaping why some Canadian women are working within two years after the birth of a first child. Women with low education could be bearing the burden of fewer employment prospects in a knowledge economy and changes from the 1990s labor market (post economic crisis). Understood through a lifecourse perspective, an important implication for women with lower education is that negative effects of not working within two years (i.e., loss of access to extended benefits such as medical insurance) can accumulate and reduce the resources available to cope with other negative events.



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Working after Childbirth as Lifecourse Transition

Background

Breaks in employment can have strong implications for women's individual lifecourses, as well as for gender equity in employment. The length of an absence from paid work after childbirth is of critical importance to individual women's long-term economic well-being, their opportunities for human capital development (Kenjoh 2005), their subsequent professional mobility (Felmlee 1995), and eventual retirement. It also has important effects on families' well-being. Women's full-time employment before birth and return to work within 24 months after birth have been found to be strongly protective against poverty among Canadian families (Juby et al. 2005). This research contributes to understanding the characteristics of women who are more likely to remain out of the workforce for some time.

Objectives

The article explored two main questions:

- What are the characteristics that affect Canadian women's employment?
- How have women's employment transitions after the birth of a first child changed over time?

Methodology

Data were retrieved from Statistic Canada's 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) Cycle 15 on Family History (GSS 15). Because the object of study (employment transition as the dependent variable) involved two options (dichotomous variable, either having transitioned to employment *before*

24 months following childbirth (ref), or not), the authors used binary logistic regression models. The independent and control variables used in the two sets of models (1st set from 1970 to 1999 and 2nd set from 1995 to 1999) are detailed in Box 1, including the reference variable (ref).

In brief, the methodology allowed for comparisons of how women who began childbearing in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s differed in the probability of remaining out of the paid labor force for at least 24 months after their first birth, and how this was affected by family and personal characteristics. The 24-month time period post childbirth (Hynes and Clarkberg 2005) is especially relevant because it extends considerably beyond the maximum duration of paid maternity leave.

Findings

An estimated 41% of Canadian women who had first children from 1970 to 1999, were working within 24 months of first childbirth. The percentage who reported working rose across childbirth cohorts, from less than a third in the 1970 to 1974 cohort, to more than 61% in the youngest cohort (1995-1999). Overall therefore, women's employment transitions after the birth of a first child has increased over time. Comparing the 93% return to work in Marshall (1999) to 61% for the youngest cohort draws attention to the strength of labour market connection; Marshall used a sample of women who had worked three months prior to childbirth. In addition, for all cohorts, 80.5% of women reported not working 12

Box 1: Variables in the analysis

1st Set of Models (1970-1999) (N=4,889)

Independent variables:

- Six five-year childbirth cohorts (1970-1974 to 1995-1999)
- Women's educational attainment in the year before the birth of their first children (5 categories from less than high school to university degree)

Control variables:

- Mother's age at first birth
- Mother's place of birth in Canada (ref) or outside of Canada

- Having worked (ref), or not, in the 12 months before the first birth
- Having a second birth, or not (ref), within 24 months following the first birth

2nd Set of Models (1995-1999) (N=592)

In addition to 1st set variables, added:

Independent variable:

Estimated spousal income (5 categories from less than \$20,000 to \$80,000 or more)

Control variables:

- Lone parenthood or with spouse (ref)
- Region of residence



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months before childbirth, whereas this was only 26.8% for the youngest cohort.

Employment Lifecourse Transition by Cohort

Figure 1 helps shed light on the cohort as predictor of odds of working within 24 months of childbirth. The likelihood of a woman working within 24 months of childbirth rose so that women who had their first children between 1995 and 1999 were 2.8 times as likely to work within 24 months, as those in the 1970 to 1974 cohort. The increase was particularly strong after the 1985 to 1989 childbirth cohort, with most of the total increase over the last 15 years of the period.

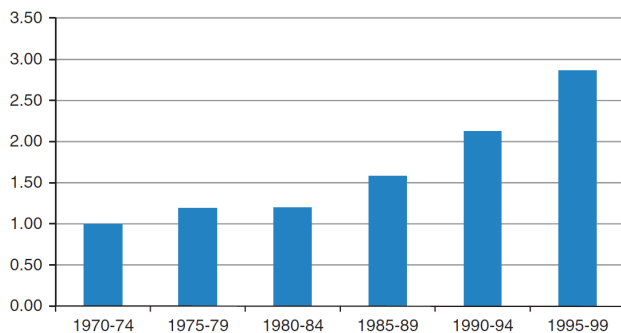


Figure 1: Odds ratios of working within 24 months of first child, by childbirth cohort (Model 1).

Employment Lifecourse Transition by Education

Looking to education as predictor (Figure 2), a woman's education had a clear effect on the likelihood that she was working within two years of her first child. Women with less than a high school diploma had the lowest odds of working within this time. The odds of having worked within two years increased with education level, although there was no significant difference between

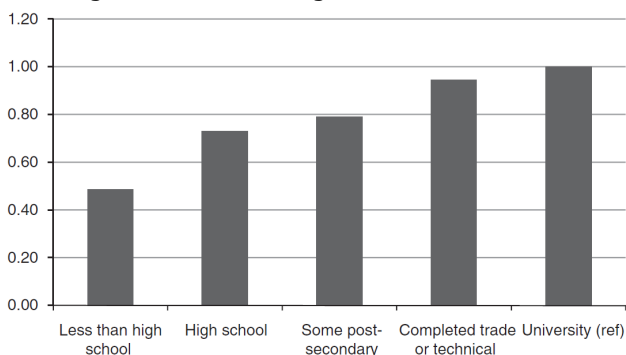


Figure 2: Odds ratios of working within 24 months of first child, by education (Model 1).

tween women with university degrees and those with completed non-university qualifications.

Employment Lifecourse Transition by Spousal Income

Looking at the 1995 to 1999 cohort, and turning to estimated spousal income, Figure 3 shows that women with estimated spousal incomes in the middle categories (between \$30,000 and \$79,999) in 2001 were significantly less likely to have been engaged in paid work within two years following the birth of the first child, roughly a third as likely as women with estimated spousal income in the highest category (\$80,000 or more). Women with estimated spousal incomes in the lowest categories were the most likely to have worked within 24 months (no significant statistical difference from \$80,000 or more).

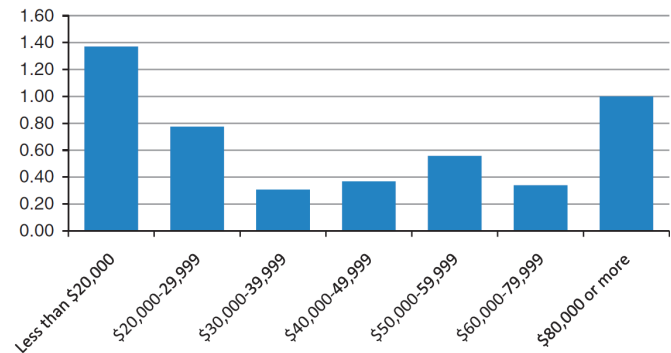


Figure 3: Odds ratios of working within 24 months of first birth, 1995-1999 cohort, by estimated spousal income (year 2000 dollars).

Conclusion

It is generally accepted that women's labor force participation has been increasing since the 1970s, and that we are approaching a "full adult worker model" with near-equal gender representation in paid work. Looking at the transitions uncovered by the researchers however, nearly 60 percent of women who had their first child from 1970 to 1999 were out of the labor force for more than two years. Viewed through a lifecourse perspective, this may have important economic consequences for women and their families as it can affect women's retirement savings, human capital development, and career advancement.

One striking finding is that educational attainment could be shaping women's work after childbirth. In the 1995 to 1999 cohort, only women with less than high school were significantly less likely to be working than were those with a university degree. To conclude, since the mid-1980s, mothers with low educational levels are largely excluded from the labor market during the two years following first childbirth.



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Policy implications and considerations

- First, women with lower levels of education were considerably more likely to have remained out of the labor force (more than two years) than women with higher education. This important social inequality trend no doubt still has impact today. Policy makers looking to reduce factors leading to poverty based on a lifecourse perspective can understand the negative effects (i.e., loss of benefits) of labor withdrawal as cumulative over the course of women's lives. Past research supports this stance where employment before the first birth and a quick return to work together represent an important protection factor against poverty (Juby et al. 2005).
- Results also point to a limitation of the common assumption that in 1999 a majority of Canadians were living in a "full adult worker" model. The abandonment of the previous "male breadwinner" model led to policies regarding work and care giving that explicitly or implicitly assume women's full labor market participation (Lewis and Giullari 2005). In contrast, results in this study showed that nearly 60% of Canadian women who had their first child from 1970 to 1999 were out of the labor force over two years. The percentage of women who transitioned to employment rose from 28.5% (1970 to 1974 cohort) to 61.3% (1995 to 1999 cohort), revealing a more nuanced "full adult worker model". For policy makers, inter-cohort differences provide insights into how lengthy absence from the labor force over a lifecourse can impact women as they enter older ages. Fluctuations in labor force activity across the lifecourse, for example, can affect later income. A case in point, viewing working after childbirth historically allows us to understand why some older Canadian women live in poverty today.
- Finally, the study does not bolster policy based on rational choice theories. Findings that labor market transitions varied across the cohorts mean that the choices women made cannot be understood solely through economic rational choices. A substantial overall increase and no decreases over the period do not support the idea that these decisions were made solely through economic calculation. Policy makers can best view women's choices as the result of a complex mix of factors: education, available work, cultural values, gender roles and the economic context (Crompton 2002).

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About the study

The research brief is based on: Stéphanie Gaudet, Martin Cooke and Joanna Jacob, 2011, "Working after Childbirth: A Lifecourse Transition Analysis of Canadian Women from the 1970s to the 2000s", *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 48 (2):153-180. The brief was prepared by Joanne Gaudet. For more information, please contact Stéphanie Gaudet at Stephanie.Gaudet@uottawa.ca. The research was funded by a standard SSHRC grant.

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