

The Impact of Child Care Problems on Employment: Findings From a National Survey of US Parents

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVES: Many parents struggle to secure high-quality, consistent child care services, and this may impact employment decisions. Our objectives were to determine the type of employment problems that parents attribute to difficulties in securing child care and to identify whether having a child with behavior problems and/or chronic illness is independently associated with child care-related employment problems in the United States.

METHODS: This study included parents of children aged 0 to 13 years by using household-level sampling from the nationally representative random digit dial survey Gallup panel. We included 9 measures of child care-related employment problems. Poststratification weights were applied based on census region, income, and education by using Stata's poststratification commands.

RESULTS: A survey was conducted of 1431 households with at least 1 parent employed. Overall, 46% of households reported 1 or more child care-related employment change. Being absent from work (21%) and changing the work schedule (27%) were the most prevalent changes reported. Two-parent house-

holds were significantly less likely to report child care-related employment changes compared with single parent households. Households with a stay-at-home parent were less likely to report child care-related absenteeism but more likely to report recently quitting work compared with households without a stay-at-home parent. Having a child with behavior problems or a serious chronic health condition was associated with double to triple odds of many child care-related employment problems.

CONCLUSIONS: Child care-related employment problems are common among families with a child with chronic illness or behavior problems. These findings support the need for pediatricians and policy makers to strive for the implementation of more parent-friendly labor conditions.

KEYWORDS: behavior problems; child care; conduct disorder; health survey; parental employment; single parent; United States

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WHAT'S NEW

About half of US households with young or school-age children report that childcare problems impacted their employment. In particular, families of children with chronic health conditions or behavior problems were more likely to suffer childcare-related employment changes.

MANY PARENTS OF young or school-age children struggle to secure high-quality, consistent child care services outside the home.¹ Much child care research has concentrated in understanding maternal responses to child care price changes and targeted subsidies, as well as the determinants of child care choice.²⁻⁹ Difficulties with obtaining child care and its associated effects on parent employment have been investigated as part of the welfare-to-work transition studies, particularly for mothers of young children.^{10,11} There is evidence, however, that many families outside of the welfare system face similar child care and employment challenges, particularly if they have a child with special needs or emotional or behavioral disorders.¹²⁻¹⁴

In fact, a nationally representative study demonstrated that mothers have lower rates of employment and higher-employment instability if they have a child with special needs.¹² In addition, if a child has behavior problems, there is evidence that meeting child care needs becomes even more difficult as child care providers and parents both report expulsions from child care.^{15,16} In this context, parents are often left with limited options as the system of care fails to accommodate and meaningfully include children with behavioral problems.

These negative effects on employment are not concentrated exclusively on families with young children; rather, mothers of children with special needs aged older than 6 years are more likely to have unstable job arrangements or no employment at all than all other groups.¹² This is not surprising, since the need for programs for school-age children in the general population has grown faster than the available supply of programs, in spite of large federal investments.¹⁷ Importantly, parental concerns about after-school care are associated with parental stress and poor psychological well-being,¹⁸ and thus, are likely to have a broad impact, including a negative impact on employment.

Consistent with previous research,¹⁹⁻²³ Emlen²⁴ has theorized a child care decision-making framework where

flexibility in both employment and child care arrangements is the essential factor to balance work, family life, and child care. The framework has successfully explained why parents may use absenteeism from work as an informal source of flexibility. Thus, we hypothesize that parents who have children that are more challenging to care for both in and outside the home than the average child, such as those with chronic health conditions or behavior problems, will lack flexibility and will be more likely to report that child care problems impact their employment.

Our study includes a national panel sample of 1431 parents of children aged 0 to 13 years living in all regions of the United States, collected during late fall 2008 as the American economy severely contracted. The research objectives were the following: 1) to determine the type of employment problems that parents directly attribute to difficulties in securing child care by using a household approach, and 2) to identify whether having a child with behavior problems and/or chronic illness is independently associated with child care-related employment problems in the United States.

METHODS

SAMPLE

This study used household-level sampling from the nationally representative random digit dial survey Gallup panel. The Gallup panel is constructed to be nationally representative of the noninstitutionalized US population and has ongoing recruitment. Our sample is a subset of households that met eligibility criteria (having a child aged 0–13 years) and consented to a 15- to 20-minute telephone survey regarding child care and employment. Thus, this sample is best characterized as a national panel sample that provides reasonably accurate national information for the United States. This data source is part of an ongoing longitudinal study. At the end of the grant period, the data will become publicly available to the research community. The study was approved by the University of Rochester's Human Subjects Review Board.

ANALYTIC SAMPLE

To aid with interpretability of results, we restricted the study to households in which at least 1 parent was employed. There were 1431 households (92.85%) in the analytic sample.

MEASURES

CHILD CARE-RELATED EMPLOYMENT PROBLEMS

In this survey, *child care* was defined broadly, including standard child care arrangements and “before and after school activities or programs, babysitters, etc.” *Regular child care arrangements* were defined as a regularly attended program, activity, or arrangement that occurs at least once a week.

We had 9 measures of child care-related employment problems. Respondents were asked, “As a result of

problems with child care during this school year, has a parent in your household (a) quit a job, (b) been absent from work, (c) decreased job performance, (d) changed a work schedule, (e) looked for a different job, (f) modified current job substantially, (g) turned down a job, (h) stopped looking for work, and (i) made decisions that will negatively impact future employability.” We created an overall impact measure that identifies households who had 1 or more impacts versus those who had none. Because of the wording and timing of the survey, these variables ask about child care-related employment changes in the previous 2 to 3 months.

BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS AND CURRENT SERIOUS HEALTH CONDITION

The presence of behavior problems was determined by combining the following 2 parts of the question: “Has a doctor or health professional ever told you that [your child has/any of your children have] any of the following conditions? (1) defiant, aggressive behavior or conduct problems and (2) behavior problems”. Using the same stem, parents were asked if any of their children had a “serious chronic health condition that warranted medical treatment in the last 12 months.”

PRESENCE OF A STAY-AT-HOME PARENT, AND 2-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS

Presence of a stay-at-home parent in the household was measured with the following question: “Are any of the following statements true for you [or your spouse or partner]? (a) A stay-at-home parent.” If the parents responded affirmatively to the question “Is this a two-parent household?” we coded the household as a 2-parent household; all other households (eg, parent with grandparent) were coded as non-2-parent households.

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Sex and race (coded as minority [black or Hispanic] vs all others) of the respondent were collected as part of the standard demographic questions of the panel. Households that indicated that the highest level of household education was high school graduate or less were defined as having low parental education. Households were considered to be low income if their annual income was less than \$35 000.

WEIGHTS

The Gallup Organization provided poststratification weights based on census region, income level, and highest level of education obtained by anyone in the household based on population estimates from the Census Population Survey and the National Survey of Children's Health, 2003.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

All analyses are weighted using Stata's (StataCorp LP, College Station, Tex) poststratification commands. Listwise deletion was used whenever missing data were

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