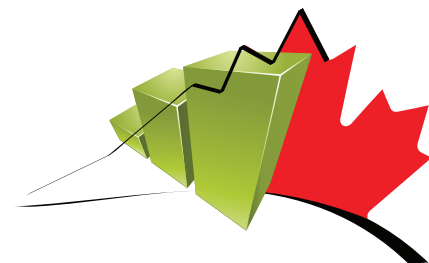


Economic and Social Reports

A comparison of parenting concerns in Canada and the United States during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic



by Stacie Kerr, Mila Kingsbury, Sihong Liu, Philip Fisher, and
Dafna Kohen

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Abstract

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian and American parents of young children have faced unique stressors, such as additional homeschooling and caregiving responsibilities, and families in both countries have experienced pandemic-related deteriorations to mental health (Gadermann et al., 2021). This paper examines the parenting concerns of parents of young children in the United States and Canada during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic based on data from Statistics Canada's Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians - Parenting During the Pandemic crowdsource survey and the University of Oregon's Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development – Early Childhood (RAPID-EC) survey, and explores contextual factors that might explain the similarities and differences between Canadian and American parents' pandemic experiences. Findings suggest that Canadian parents were highly concerned about their families' well-being, while American parents were moderately concerned. Parents of a child with a disability in both the United States and Canada were more likely to express concerns regarding parenting, including concerns for their children's learning and behaviour. Canadian and American teleworkers were more likely than those not working or working outside the home to report concern for their children's behaviour, but only Canadian teleworkers were less likely to report concern for their children's academic success. Closures of schools, day cares, and other programs for children may have contributed to similar parenting concerns across the two countries, while other contextual factors, including differences in child care use and access to employment supports, may partially explain differences between Canadian and American parents' concerns.

Authors

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Introduction

This paper considers how contextual similarities and differences between the U.S. and Canada during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic may have shaped the concerns of parents of young children. Closures of schools, daycares, and other programs for children was a reality for both Canadian and American parents in the Spring of 2020, but differences in child care use, access to employment supports, and other factors may provide a partial explanation for differences in the parenting concerns that were expressed. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures have resulted in a multitude of changes to the lives of families. School and day care closures, as well as a rise in telework, represent a significant change in routine for families with children. Research is beginning to examine the impacts of such changes for mental health and well-being. However, questions remain about the specific concerns experienced by parents, and how these concerns might differ across different contexts. How might concerns differ between parents of young children in Canada and the United States? What contextual factors might explain differences in parents' experiences?

To answer these questions, this study uses data from two comparable surveys. First, Statistics Canada's Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians - Parenting During the Pandemic survey, which is an online crowdsourced questionnaire administered between June 9 and 22, 2020, was used to examine the experiences of 19,936 parents with one or more children 0 to 5 years of age. Data from the United States were drawn from the University of Oregon's Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development – Early Childhood (RAPID-EC) survey. For comparability with the Canadian sample, data for a subgroup of 2,375 parents of children 0 to 5 years of age who responded to the survey between April 6 and May 18, 2020, were analyzed.

Readers should note that a large proportion of the sample of Canadian participants were women (89.9%), were born in Canada (86.1%), and had completed a bachelor's degree or higher (76.2%). A similarly large proportion of survey participants were women in the U.S. sample (81.4%). Though questions on country of birth and education were not asked of participants during the collection period for the U.S. sample, data from the larger RAPIC-EC survey suggest that over half of the U.S. sample had completed a bachelor's degree or higher (56.5%) and a large proportion were born in the United States (90.7%).

The U.S. RAPID-EC sample, though not nationally representative, was designed to include racially and ethnically diverse groups (especially Black and Hispanic or Latinx participants), lower-income families, and households from all U.S. geographic regions.

It is worth noting that the ethnicity of those who identified as a visible minority varied between the two samples. For example, 39.4% of visible minority respondents identified as Black/African American in the U.S. sample, compared with 12.5% in the Canadian sample (see Appendix Table A for more information on sample demographics).

Canadian parents were highly concerned about their families' wellbeing and American parents were moderately concerned

Overall, Canadian participants with children 0 to 5 years of age reported a high degree of family-related concerns during the early stages of the pandemic. About three-quarters (74.9%) of parents of young children in the Canadian sample were very or extremely concerned about balancing child care, schooling, and work; 58.9% were very or extremely concerned about managing their children's behaviour and emotions; and 31.4 % were very or extremely concerned about their children's school year or academic success.

In the U.S. sample, about half (50.5%) of parents of young children agreed or strongly agreed that they often felt they could not handle things very well in regards to parenting, 11.6% indicated they were "very

much” concerned (vs. “somewhat” and “not at all”) about their child’s behaviours, and 9.4% were “very much” concerned about their child’s learning and development.

In Canada, complete closures of child care centres were lifted in most jurisdictions just before or during the survey data collection period, albeit with additional health and safety guidelines in place (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2020). Despite the reopening of licensed centres, few parents in the Canadian sample reported using child care during the pandemic (13%), with the most common reason for not using care being concern for household members’ health (61.9%). In contrast, 33.3% of parents in the U.S. sample reported using child care at the time of data collection. Additional caregiving responsibilities among Canadian parents may partially explain the relatively high level of parenting concerns in the Canadian sample.

This difference may also be partly explained by disparities in the availability of paid leave across the two countries at the time of data collection. While public school closures were in effect in both Canada and the United States at the time of data collection, federally funded paid leave was made available to American parents whose employer was covered under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and whose child care provider or school was closed because of COVID-19 in April 2020. In contrast, federal funding for employed Canadians unable to work because of the closure of schools or day cares was made available later, only as of September 2020. Parents of young children in the United States may have opted to take paid leave if they felt unable to simultaneously juggle work, child care, and schooling responsibilities, while parents in Canada may not have had this option at the time of data collection.

In both Canada and the United States, parents of a child with a disability reported higher concerns

Logistic regression was used to identify predictors of parents’ concerns in the Canadian and American samples, including demographic variables and variables likely to be influenced by the pandemic (i.e., job loss, working from home, use of child care).

Table 1
Results of logistic regression predicting Canadian parents' concerns

	Concern for managing behaviour and emotions			Concern for balancing child care, schooling, and work			Concern for children's schooling or academic success		
	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval		Odds ratio	95% confidence interval		Odds ratio	95% confidence interval	
		From	To		From	To		From	To
Number of children (ref = 1)									
2	1.81 ‡	1.58	2.06	0.81 ‡	0.70	0.94	1.45 ‡	1.22	1.72
3 or more	1.49 ‡	1.23	1.80	0.62 ‡	0.50	0.76	1.63 ‡	1.30	2.05
Presence of child age 0 to 3	0.91	0.77	1.08	1.11	0.92	1.35	1.10	0.92	1.32
Presence of child age 4 to 5	1.23 ‡	1.08	1.41	1.49 ‡	1.28	1.73	1.57 ‡	1.35	1.83
Presence of child age 6 to 14	1.17 ‡	1.02	1.35	1.70 ‡	1.44	2.00	2.60 ‡	2.22	3.04
Parent education (ref: high school or less)									
More than high school and less than bachelor's degree	1.00	0.81	1.24	1.47 ‡	1.17	1.84	1.05	0.83	1.33
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.75	0.61	0.93	1.81 ‡	1.46	2.25	0.67	0.53	0.84
Parent age group (ref: 25 to 34)									
18 to 24	0.50	0.23	0.23	0.63	0.25	1.61	1.78	0.64	4.98
35 to 44	1.24 ‡	1.12	1.07	1.49 ‡	1.33	1.67	1.06	0.93	1.20
45 to 54	1.09	0.85	1.40	1.04	0.79	1.37	1.36 ‡	1.04	1.77
55 to 64	1.11	0.48	2.58	0.74	0.28	1.98	1.76	0.65	4.80
65 and older	0.61	0.18	2.12	0.57	0.13	2.48	1.13	0.29	4.40
Respondent gender female	1.03	0.88	1.19	0.91	0.76	1.09	0.89	0.74	1.08
Visible minority	1.29 ‡	1.12	1.47	1.16	0.99	1.35	1.77 ‡	1.53	2.05
At least one child with a disability	2.16 ‡	1.83	2.56	1.25 ‡	1.05	1.49	1.95 ‡	1.67	2.29
Rural residence	0.89	0.76	1.04	1.06	0.89	1.26	0.95	0.79	1.13
Single parent	1.53 ‡	1.23	1.91	1.67 ‡	1.31	2.14	1.37 ‡	1.09	1.72
Used child care during the pandemic	0.89	0.77	1.01	1.54 ‡	1.29	1.83	1.20 ‡	1.03	1.40
Someone in the family working from home	1.27 ‡	1.14	1.42	3.33 ‡	2.96	3.75	0.85 ‡	0.75	0.97
Lost job or reduced hours	1.09	0.99	1.19	1.05	0.94	1.17	1.05	0.94	1.17

‡ significant odds ratios (p < 0.05)

Source: Statistics Canada, Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians - Parenting During the Pandemic survey.

Table 2
Results of logistic regression predicting U.S. parents' concerns

	Concern for children's behaviours			Cannot handle things well with regards to parenting			Concern for children's learning and development		
	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval		Odds ratio	95% confidence interval		Odds ratio	95% confidence interval	
		From	To		From	To		From	To
Number of children	1.11	0.86	1.41	0.96	0.80	1.13	0.96 ‡	0.72	1.22
Presence of child age 0 to 3	0.48 ‡	0.29	0.77	0.86	0.62	1.19	0.49 ‡	0.28	0.83
Presence of child age 4 to 5	2.20 ‡	1.32	3.66	0.99	0.72	1.33	1.59	0.94	2.74
Presence of child age 6 to 18	0.79	0.49	1.22	1.44 ‡	1.09	1.91	1.22	0.77	1.93
Parent age group (ref: 25-34)									
18 to 24	1.34	0.57	2.91	1.04	0.62	1.75	0.96	0.30	2.41
35 to 44	0.76	0.49	1.16	0.87	0.68	1.13	0.71	0.44	1.11
45 to 54	0.36	0.09	1.00	0.52	0.26	1.00	0.73	0.24	1.87
55 to 64	0.62	0.03	3.97	1.13	0.27	5.74	0.74	0.03	5.10
65 and older	0.88	0.11	4.95	0.99	0.20	5.16	0.49	0.02	3.45
Poverty	1.84 ‡	1.10	2.82	1.02	0.78	1.33	1.10	0.70	1.73
Respondent female	0.94	0.51	1.82	1.56 ‡	1.02	2.41	1.03	0.53	2.15
Racial or ethnic minority	0.82	0.50	1.30	0.78	0.58	1.04	1.34	0.83	2.13
At least one child with a disability	3.89 ‡	2.48	6.04	1.18	0.83	1.70	5.52 ‡	3.52	8.67
Rural residence	0.74	0.28	1.63	0.80	0.49	1.31	0.34	0.08	1.00
Single parent	1.20	0.72	1.99	0.79	0.55	1.12	0.86	0.48	1.50
Used child care during the pandemic	0.94	0.61	1.40	1.04	0.81	1.33	1.19	0.77	1.84
Parent working from home	1.59 ‡	1.04	2.48	1.17	0.91	1.51	1.16	0.74	1.84
Lost job or reduced hours	1.03	0.59	1.75	1.06	0.77	1.49	1.33	0.70	2.29

‡ significant odds ratios (p < 0.05)

Source: University of Oregon, Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development – Early Childhood survey.

In both samples, parents of a child with a disability were more likely to report concerns regarding parenting. In Canada, parents of a child with a disability were more likely to report concern for managing child behaviours and emotions (odds ratio [OR]: 2.16; 95% confidence interval [CI]: 1.83-2.56); balancing child care, schooling, and work (OR: 1.25; 95%CI: 1.05-1.49); and children’s school or academic success (OR: 1.95; 95%CI: 1.67-2.29). In the United States, parents of a child with a disability were more likely to report concern for their children’s behaviour (OR: 3.89; 95% CI: 2.48-6.04) and learning or development (OR: 5.52; 95%CI: 3.52-8.67).

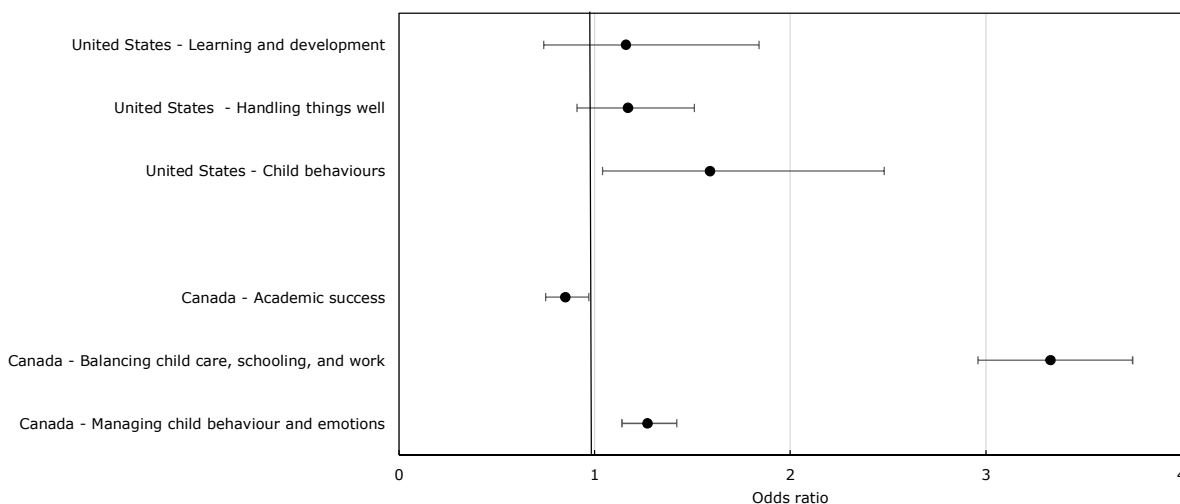
Parents of a child with a disability may have spent more time with their children because of disruptions to the availability of services, including specialized recreation programs, education assistants, and therapy centres, which in turn may have exacerbated parenting stress and concerns. Indeed, a greater proportion of Canadian parents of a child with a disability spent more than 10 hours per week helping their children engage in learning activities related to schooling (27%) than Canadian parents with no children with a disabilities (17%).

Working from home was a predictor of parenting concerns in both countries

Working from home during the pandemic (compared with not working or working outside the home) was an important correlate of parents’ concerns in the Canadian sample. Parents who reported at least one adult working from home were more likely to report concerns regarding managing child behaviour (OR:1.27; 95%CI:1.14-1.42) and balancing multiple roles (OR:3.33; 95%CI:2.96-3.75). However, these parents were also less concerned about their children’s academic success (OR:0.85; 95%CI:0.75-0.97), suggesting that having an adult at home who would possibly be available to supervise schooling may have had drawbacks as well as benefits.

This finding was partially replicated in the U.S. sample: parents working from home were more likely to report concern for managing child behaviour (OR:1.59; 95%CI: 1.04-2.48), but did not report increased concerns for their children’s learning and development (OR:1.16; 95%CI: 0.74-1.84) or increased feelings that they could not handle things well with regard to parenting (OR: 1.17; 95%CI: 0.91- 1.51).

Figure 1
Odds ratios for logistic regressions predicting parents' concerns:
At least one parent working from home (vs. no adults working from home)



Sources: Statistics Canada, Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians - Parenting During the Pandemic survey; and University of Oregon, Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development – Early Childhood survey.

Conclusions

A strength of the study is that the use of two large survey samples of parents of children 0 to 5 years of age allowed for comparisons between the American and Canadian respondents. An additional strength is that both countries' surveys address the unique and comparable theme of parenting experiences during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, results should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. Though speculative reasons for the differences in findings between the two samples are discussed, it should be noted that the questions used to assess parenting concerns among American and Canadian parents, while similar in theme, were worded differently in each sample. In the same vein, participants' responses were assessed on different scales—for example, some items were scored on a four-point scale in the Canadian sample, but a three-point scale in the U.S. sample. Direct comparison between samples is therefore not possible. This may explain some of the differences noted between samples in proportions of parents reporting each concern and in models predicting concerns.

Differences in sample characteristics between the United States and Canada may also explain different findings between the two samples. The Canadian data was collected via crowdsourcing and is not representative of the Canadian population as a whole. Compared with the U.S. sample, the Canadian sample was highly educated, had a smaller proportion of single parents and a smaller proportion of participants belonging to a visible minority group. Finally, the Canadian sample was notably larger than the U.S. sample, which may have provided more power to detect significant effects. Important differences may exist between provinces and territories within Canada, however, due to sample size limitations and the design of the survey we were not able to examine these comparisons.

By and large, the findings suggest that in both the United States and Canada, families experienced parenting concerns during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures are likely to have disrupted parents' routines and placed additional burdens on parents in terms of caregiving but also in facilitating children's remote learning. This burden may have been felt particularly keenly by parents of children with a disability and parents working from home during the pandemic. The concerns expressed by parents of young children in both Canada and the United States suggest that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are widespread and extend beyond the physical health impacts.

Appendix

Appendix Table A

Demographic characteristics of American and Canadian survey participants

Demographic descriptor	Parenting During the Pandemic (Canadian sample)	Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development – Early Childhood (American sample)
	percent	
Female	89.9	81.4
Visible minority	12.2	22.7
Single parent	5.0	16.2
One or more children with a disability living in the household	10.9	12.8
Born outside Canada/the United States	13.9	No data
Highest education level: less than a bachelor's degree	23.8	No data

Sources: Statistics Canada, Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians - Parenting During the Pandemic survey; and University of Oregon, Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development – Early Childhood survey.

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