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The likelihood and timing of mothers' return to work and child care arrangements after parental leave, revisited



by Youjin Choi

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The likelihood and timing of mothers' return to work and child care arrangements after parental leave, revisited

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Abstract

Background: This study examines the likelihood and timing of mothers' return to work following parental leave, as well as their child care arrangements, with particular attention to recent policy changes to the Employment Insurance (EI) parental benefit program and the introduction of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care system.

Data and methods: This study draws on data from the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey from 2020 to 2023 and focuses on mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who were employed prior to the birth of their child, had worked as an employee in the past two years and took leave from work following childbirth or adoption. Two main sets of outcomes were examined: (1) the likelihood and timing of returning to work, and (2) the types and monthly costs of child care arrangements used.

Results: The overall percentages of mothers who had returned or planned to return to work within a known length of time were similar whether mothers chose the EI standard or extended benefits. Mothers who had a higher-quality job—characterized as a permanent job, with union membership or collective agreement coverage and higher hourly wages—were more likely to return to work following parental leave. Mothers who chose the EI extended benefits tended to return to work later than mothers who chose the EI standard benefits. A higher percentage of mothers who chose the EI extended benefits relied or intended to rely on the child's other parent for care when returning to work, compared with mothers who chose the EI standard benefits.

Interpretation: This study's findings underscore the role of job quality and flexible parental benefits in understanding the employment of mothers with young children after parental leave.

Keywords: maternal employment, parental leave, Employment Insurance, child care arrangements

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Introduction

While mothers' human capital and advanced position in their career are major factors in their decision to return to work after having children, social policy levers—such as parental leave benefits, child care subsidies and child benefits—also play a significant role in shaping their labour market participation during the early years of child rearing (Hofman et al. 2020). Recent research indicated that in 2019, mothers in Canada had a higher level of education and made more investments in their career before childbirth, compared with mothers a decade earlier (Choi 2023). Recent mothers were also more likely than mothers a decade earlier to return to work following parental leave and to take advantage of longer leave. Regional differences in social policies appeared to influence the timing of mothers' return to work. Mothers residing in Quebec with an infant—where low-cost child care options were already in place in 2019 and a shorter parental leave option was available—were more likely to return to work within 12 months than mothers in Ontario (Choi 2023).

To further support working mothers and their growing families, the federal government has introduced a series of policy measures over the last decade. A notable example is the enhancement of the Employment Insurance (EI) program, which expanded parental benefits to offer greater flexibility in leave duration. As of December 2017, parents had the option of extended parental benefits, allowing mothers to receive benefits for up to 18 months. In 2019, parents who shared EI parental benefits became eligible for additional weeks of benefits as a sharing bonus. Another significant policy initiative is the introduction of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system in 2021, which aims to provide families with young children access to low-fee, flexible, inclusive and high-quality child care across the country. The CWELCC system seeks to reduce fees for regulated child care to \$10 per day by 2026 nationwide.

This study examines the likelihood of mothers returning to work following parental leave, as well as the child care arrangements among mothers who worked before the birth of their child, with a particular focus on recent policy changes. It draws on data from the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey (EICS) from 2020 to 2023. The expanded sample, which included mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger, and the addition of information on whether they chose EI standard or extended parental benefits (available as of the 2020 EICS) enabled an analysis of mothers' return-to-work patterns and child care arrangements following parental leave separately, by benefit type.

Policy background

Whether, and when, a mother returns to work after childbirth or adoption is closely tied to the availability and structure of paid parental leave policies (Rønsen and Sundström 2002; Baker and Milligan 2008; Baxter 2009; Del Rey, Kyriacou and Silva 2021; Ziegler and Bamieh 2025). On December 3, 2017, the EI program introduced an extended parental benefit option, alongside the existing standard option. Although the total financial amount of parental benefits remains broadly unchanged, parents who choose the extended option receive lower weekly payments over a longer period—33% of their average weekly earnings for up to 61 weeks—compared with those who choose the standard option, which provides 55% of their average weekly earnings for up to 35 weeks. Including 15 weeks of maternity benefits, mothers who choose the standard or extended options can receive EI parental benefits for up to approximately 12 months and 18

months, respectively.¹ The purpose of this change was to help working parents balance their work and family responsibilities by offering them the flexibility to choose the EI parental benefit option that best meets their family's needs. On March 17, 2019, the EI program introduced additional weeks of benefits for parents who share their benefits. When parents share standard benefits, they are eligible for 5 extra weeks, bringing the total to 40 weeks for two parents. Those who share extended parental benefits are eligible for 8 additional weeks, resulting in a total of 69 weeks.

These benefits apply to parents living in all provinces and territories other than Quebec, where the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) replaced the EI parental benefits in 2006. Compared with EI parental benefits, the QPIP has a lower eligibility threshold (minimum earnings of \$2,000), a higher payout (up to 75% of annual earnings, depending on the selected plan) and specific benefits designated for fathers. The QPIP offers parents two benefit plans—the basic plan, which gives a mother up to 50 weeks of benefits (18 weeks of maternity benefits and 32 weeks of parental benefits), and the special plan, which provides higher payments over a shorter duration (up to 40 weeks for mothers). The extended parental benefit option available under the EI program was not offered in Quebec because the QPIP did not introduce a comparable plan. Instead, in 2020, the QPIP extended the period during which benefits could be taken—from 52 to 78 weeks following the birth of a child—while maintaining the same total number of parental benefit weeks as before. For example, under the basic plan, parental benefits could be used within 78 weeks after the birth of a child,² while the maximum combined duration of maternity and parental benefits for mothers remains at 50 weeks (without a sharing bonus). In that year, a four-week bonus (three weeks under the special plan) was introduced when each parent uses at least eight weeks of sharable benefits (six weeks under the special plan).

Mothers' decisions about whether and when to return to work are also influenced by the availability and cost of child care. In 2021, the federal government introduced a five-year plan to build the CWELCC system. As part of this initiative, all provinces and territories established a bilateral agreement with the federal government and began implementing the first phase of child care fee reduction for children aged 0 to 5.³ The five-year plan aimed to lower fees for regulated child care to \$10 per day by 2026 across provinces and territories, while also giving families with young children access to flexible, inclusive and high-quality child care. One of the key goals of this policy is to increase women's labour force participation, thereby helping to expand the workforce in the Canadian labour market (Government of Canada 2021).

Previous findings

An earlier Canadian study (Choi 2023) examined characteristics associated with the likelihood and timing of mothers' return to work, categorizing mothers into two categories—those returning within 12 months of leave and those returning after. This previous study focused on mothers with an infant aged 12 months or younger and found that mothers' immigrant status, receipt of parental benefits, receipt of employer top-up payments and job tenure were associated with whether

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1. Maternity benefits are available only to mothers who are away from work because of pregnancy or recent childbirth and are provided for up to 15 weeks. Parental benefits cover mothers and fathers of a newborn or newly adopted child. If parental benefits are not shared between two parents, one parent can receive up to 35 weeks under the EI standard option and 61 weeks under the EI extended option. References to 12- or 18-month parental benefits in this study included the 15 weeks of maternity benefits.
 2. The period that maternity benefits could be claimed was extended from 18 to 20 weeks after the birth of a child.
 3. Quebec established an asymmetrical agreement with the federal government. This agreement does not follow the principles of the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework or the \$10-per-day plan, as child care fees in the province are below that amount.

mothers returned to work following parental leave. For the timing of return, province of residence was a significant predictor. Mothers residing in Quebec were 17 to 31 percentage points more likely to return to work within 12 months of leave, compared with those in Ontario and Western Canada, although the overall likelihood of returning to work was similar across all provinces. The study also found that mothers in the 2019 survey cohort were more likely to take parental leave that was longer than 12 months than those in the 2018 cohort. The study suggested the availability of extended parental benefits for all mothers in 2019 as a possible explanation for this difference, while some mothers in the 2018 cohort gave birth to or adopted a child before the extended option became available.

Although the extended parental benefit option and the sharing bonus were implemented before the previous study was conducted, relevant information was unavailable in the EICS at the time. Until 2020, the EICS limited its target population to mothers with an infant aged 12 months or younger (versus 18 months or younger). Additionally, the survey did not collect information on the specific type of EI parental benefit plan selected by mothers. As a result, the previous study was unable to analyze mothers' return-to-work patterns separately for the two EI parental benefit options.

A recent Austrian study (Ziegler and Bamieh 2025) examined whether providing a flexible parental leave option encourages maternal employment. In 2008, Austria introduced two shorter leave options—18 and 24 months—with higher benefit levels, supplementing the existing option of up to three years of leave. While the policy context in Austria differs substantially from that of Canada, the study found that, although the flexible leave options affected mothers' leave duration, they did not lead to an increase in maternal employment.

Current study

This study revisits the previous study and leverages the expanded target population of the EICS, as well as new survey questions related to parental benefit plans since 2020. It examines the likelihood of mothers returning to work following parental leave among mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger and considers return-to-work patterns separately for mothers who chose the EI standard or the extended option. In addition, the child care arrangements that mothers used or expected to use after returning to work are analyzed by parental benefit type to highlight how types of EI parental benefits are related to child care arrangements. In particular, the current study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Were mothers who chose different parental benefit plans more or less likely to return to work following parental leave?
2. Are mothers who chose different parental benefit plans different in terms of their sociodemographic and job characteristics?
3. Are there unique characteristics associated with the likelihood of mothers returning to work following parental leave (versus no planned return)?
4. Are there characteristics associated with the timing of mothers returning to work following parental leave (that is, returning to work within 12 months of leave versus 12 to 18 months of leave)?
5. What type of child care arrangements did mothers use or expect to use after returning to work? Did parents who chose different parental benefit types use or expect to use different types of child care arrangements?

Data and methodology

Data sources

This study uses data from the EICS for 2020 to 2023. The EICS was designed to understand EI benefit coverage for the Canadian population, including maternity and parental benefits. The survey is administered to a subsample of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and is cross-sectional and nationally representative, except for the territories. One of many changes in the target population of the EICS in 2020 was expanding the target population from mothers with an infant aged 12 months or younger to parents with a child aged 18 months or younger during the LFS reference week. This expansion added two groups to the target population: mothers with a child aged 13 to 18 months and fathers with a child aged 18 months or younger who were living in a household with no female parent. However, because the number of fathers in the data was too small to be analyzed separately, fathers were excluded from this study.

The EICS collects information on whether parents returned to work after a break following the birth or adoption of a child and whether they intended to return if they had not yet done so. The survey also collects information on what type of child care arrangements parents used after returning to work or what type of child care arrangements they expected to use if they had not yet returned to work but intended to return to work within 18 months. If parents had returned to work, the survey also collects information on the cost of child care for their youngest child.

The main sample for the analysis of the timing and likelihood of returning to work is mothers who worked as an employee in the past two years and took leave from work following childbirth or adoption. Leave includes not only paid leave but any kind of leave, such as unpaid parental leave, sick leave or vacation days, and possibly quitting. Some mothers may end their employment but still return to the same employer at a later time.

Because of data availability, the sample for the analysis of child care arrangements was further limited to mothers who worked as an employee in the past two years, took leave from work following childbirth or adoption, and had returned or planned to return to work within 18 months of leave. The information on child care arrangements was collected only from parents who had already returned or intended to return to work within 18 months.

Parents' return to work and child care arrangements (both actual and expected) might have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the survey years 2020 to 2022. The collection for the 2020 EICS was completed during the first year of the pandemic in Canada. In the main sample, one-third of mothers in the 2020 EICS data gave birth to or adopted a child after the pandemic began. For mothers in the 2021 EICS data, almost 90% did so.

Measures

Three measures of return to work were created based on the time frame of returning to work after childbirth or adoption. As in a previous article by Choi (2023), the first descriptive measure indicated whether a mother had returned to work or planned to **return to work after any length of leave**. Those who responded that they had no plan to return to work and those who did not know or did not state the planned duration of their leave (i.e., unknown length of leave) were coded as 0, and thus the return-to-work measure provided a conservative estimate. It reflected mothers' general intentions of returning to the labour market after parental leave, possibly with a long career break after childbirth or adoption. This measure was the main dependent variable used to analyze the likelihood of mothers returning to work. The second measure, **return to work within 12 months**, was coded as 1 if the mother had returned or planned to return to work within 12 months of leave. This measure was coded as 0 if mothers had no plan to return to work or had a plan to return to work after an unknown length of time or after 12 months or more of leave. The third measure, **return to work within 18 months**, was similarly defined.

In the EICS, **child care arrangements** were reported as (1) private daycare centre, (2) government-funded daycare centre, (3) home-based daycare or child care, (4) your child's other parent, (5) you will work from home with your child at home, (6) care by a friend or relative, (7) care by a non-relative in your home, (8) other, (9) have not decided and (10) not stated. The sum of the first three categories was presented as "private or public daycare" where necessary to avoid residual disclosure.

For working mothers who took leave after the birth or adoption of their child and who had someone other than themselves or their spouse take care of their child when they returned to work, the **monthly cost of child care for their youngest child** (expressed in 2023 dollars) was analyzed for each type of child care arrangement.

The likelihood and timing of mothers' return to work measured in this study were based on mothers' intentions in terms of whether and when they would return to work, and actual return-to-work decisions if they did return. Similarly, child care arrangements are based on mothers' actual or anticipated decisions.

Key characteristics considered in the study

Mothers in the sample were grouped into four categories depending on whether they received parental benefits and, if so, the type of parental benefits: (1) did not receive maternity or parental benefits, (2) received QPIP benefits, (3) received EI standard benefits and (4) received EI extended benefits.⁴ This grouping was named **mothers' parental benefit type**. While the main comparison of interest is between mothers who chose the EI standard benefits and those who

4. When mothers did not receive parental benefits, their parental benefit type was classified as "did not receive maternity or parental benefits," regardless of whether their spouse received parental benefits. In some families where mothers did not receive maternity or parental benefits, their partners received parental benefits.

chose the EI extended benefits, mothers who did not receive maternity or parental benefits and mothers who received the QPIP benefits were also analyzed to provide information on a broader sample of mothers. Mothers in Quebec do not have access to EI maternity and parental benefits, while mothers outside Quebec do not have access to the QPIP benefits. Mothers who did not receive maternity or parental benefits, regardless of their province of residence, likely differ from benefit recipients in terms of eligibility constraints, labour market attachment and job quality. Non-receipt may therefore reflect ineligibility rather than choice.

Sociodemographic characteristics considered in this study included age, education, immigrant status (Canadian citizen by birth, landed immigrant and other), region of residence (Atlantic region, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia), and couple family status.⁵ For mothers living in a couple family, characteristics related to their children and spouse included the number of children aged 0 to 5 years and whether they had children aged 6 to 12, their spouse's education, and their spouse's parental benefit use (used or not) and duration (five weeks or less, six to eight weeks, and nine weeks or more). Also, total household income before childbirth or adoption was analyzed to consider the household's financial situation in mothers' return-to-work decisions.

Job characteristics considered in this study included whether mothers received additional payments from their employer (top-ups) while taking leave after the birth or adoption of a child, whether they had a permanent job, whether they worked full time, and whether they were union members or covered by a collective agreement. Industry of employment based on a variant of the North American Industry Classification System Canada 2022 for labour force (collapsed into seven categories as in Table 3), job tenure (the number of months spent working continuously at a job) and hourly wages (expressed in 2023 dollars) were also considered.⁶

As in the previous article by Choi (2023), the job referred to in the EICS was not necessarily the same as the pre-childbirth job. For mothers who had not returned to work, job characteristics refer to the job they held before their leave. For mothers who had returned to work, job characteristics referred to the job they held at the time. If mothers returned to the same employer, job characteristics likely remained the same. For mothers who returned to work for a new employer after their leave, the characteristics of the job they held before their leave were unavailable in the data, except for industry. Their job characteristics are observed after their return to work. About 35% of mothers in the main sample had returned to work, and most (89%) of them returned to the same employers.

Analytical approach

First, descriptive statistics on mothers' return-to-work patterns were examined. This included trends in the rate of mothers returning to work by survey year and differences by parental benefit type to address whether mothers who chose different parental benefit plans exhibited distinct patterns of returning to work. Mothers' characteristics were also analyzed by type of parental benefits to identify any differences in demographic and employment-related characteristics between the two groups of mothers.

5. Racialized status is available only in the 2023 EICS and was not considered in this study.

6. The coding system for occupations changed to the National Occupational Classification 2022 in the 2022 version of the EICS. For consistency during the entire study period, occupation was not considered.

Child care arrangements were examined by survey year and parental benefit type to highlight recent trends and explore whether mothers' choices of child care arrangement varied depending on the benefit plans selected by mothers.

Regression analysis was used to examine sociodemographic, job and family characteristics associated with the likelihood and timing of mothers returning to work. Logistic regression models were estimated with the binary outcome of returning to work versus having no planned return (including not knowing when they would return to work). The regression models included mothers' age and age squared,⁷ education, immigrant status, region of residence, couple family status, parental benefit use, receipt of employer top-up payments, permanent job status, full-time job status, union status, industry of employment, job tenure and hourly wages, and survey year indicators as explanatory variables.

Three models were estimated. Model 1 included a variable indicating whether mothers received parental benefits. Model 2 included the type of parental benefits received by mothers, to explore whether the likelihood of returning to work varied among mothers who chose different benefit plans, controlling for sociodemographic and job characteristics. Model 3 added total household income before childbirth as a control variable to consider its high correlation with other variables in the model, such as mothers' receipt of parental benefits (through eligibility criteria for parental benefits), couple family status (through the number of potential earners in the household) and mothers' hourly wages. The same models were also estimated for the sample excluding mothers in Quebec to focus on those residing in the regions where maternity and parental benefits were covered by the EI program. In Quebec, workers are eligible for regular EI benefits but are ineligible for EI maternity and parental benefits because the province has run its own parental insurance program since 2005.

For mothers living in couple families, additional explanatory variables were added to Model 3: the spouse's education and parental benefit use, the number of children aged 0 to 5, and an indicator for having children aged 6 to 12 in the household.⁸ Regarding the spouse's parental benefit use, Model 4 included a variable indicating whether the spouse received parental benefits. Model 5 included the number of weeks for which the spouse received parental benefits.

A final logistic regression analysis also examined characteristics associated with the timing of the return to work (returning to work within 12 months of leave, compared with 12 to 18 months of leave). Because of data availability, the sample for this analysis was limited to mothers who had returned or planned to return to work within 18 months of leave to include the type of child care arrangements as an explanatory variable. Explanatory variables considered in this analysis included the same set as Model 3, as well as the type of child care arrangements.

Increased uncertainty around labour market conditions and disruptions to child care availability during the pandemic likely affected the dependent variables (mothers' actual and anticipated return to work) and some key explanatory variables (such as their jobs held before childbirth or adoption and their actual and anticipated child care arrangements).

7. Mothers' age was included in quadratic form in a regression model to account for its potential non-linear relationship with the outcome variable.

8. The number of children was available only for mothers who were the reference person or the spouse of the reference person for the LFS. This information was unavailable for some mothers in one-parent families, especially those living with their parents or relatives. For this reason, this variable was examined only for mothers in couple families.

For results to be nationally representative (except for the territories), survey weights were applied for all analyses. Bootstrap weighting was used to estimate standard errors and coefficients of variation with 1,000 bootstrap replicates.

Results

Mothers' return to work, 2020 to 2023

Table 1 shows that during the period from 2020 to 2023, 46% of mothers had returned or planned to return to work within 12 months of leave, while 77% had done so or planned to do so within 18 months of leave. About 82% of mothers had returned or planned to return to work with a defined return timeline. Compared with 2019, the percentage of mothers returning to work was lower for all three measures of return to work. For example, the percentage of mothers returning to work within 12 months of leave decreased from 60% in the 2019 survey year to 46% in 2020. Some of the decrease in return to work may have been related to increased uncertainty about return timing during the pandemic. The percentage of mothers who did not know when they would return to work increased by 7 percentage points for the 2020-to-2023 period, compared with 2019.

Table 1
Mothers' return to work and duration of leave following childbirth or adoption by survey year

	2019			2020 to 2023			2020			2021			2022			2023		
	95% confidence interval		Proportion	95% confidence interval		Proportion	95% confidence interval		Proportion	95% confidence interval		Proportion	95% confidence interval		Proportion	95% confidence interval		
	Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper	
percent																		
Percentage of mothers returning to work																		
Within 12 months, a+b+c	59.6	59.9	69.7	48.0	45.6	50.4	46.3	41.5	51.0	49.6	44.8	54.5	47.1	42.40	51.8	48.9	44.1	53.7
Within 18 months, a+b+c+d	82.0	78.2	85.8	77.1	75.1	79.1	76.1	72.0	80.2	76.4	72.1	80.7	78.5	74.7	82.3	77.2	73.2	81.3
Within any known length of leave, a+b+c+d+e	88.4	78.2	86.4	82.3	80.4	84.1	81.9	78.1	85.7	81.4	77.6	85.1	83.6	80.1	87.1	82.2	78.4	85.9
Duration of leave (actual or planned)																		
0 to 4 months, a	3.1 ^E	1.4	5.5	5.5	4.4	6.6	4.7 ^E	2.7	6.8	6.3 ^E	4.0	8.5	5.0 ^E	3.0	5.5	5.9 ^E	3.7	8.0
5 to 8 months, b	5.3 ^E	4.7	10.2	5.5	4.3	6.7	4.8 ^E	2.5	7.1	6.2 ^E	3.1	9.4	5.2 ^E	3.2	10.2	5.6 ^E	3.4	7.8
9 to 12 months, c	51.2	49.3	58.6	37.1	34.7	39.5	36.7	32.2	41.2	37.1	32.3	41.9	36.9	32.2	58.6	37.5	32.6	42.3
13 to 18 months, d	22.5	18.7	26.2	29.1	26.8	31.3	29.8	25.3	34.2	26.8	22.3	31.3	31.5	26.8	26.2	28.3	24.0	32.6
More than 18 months, e	6.4 ^E	3.7	9.0	5.2	4.1	6.3	5.8 ^E	3.5	8.2	5.0 ^E	2.5	7.4	5.1 ^E	3.1	9.0	4.9 ^E	2.8	7.1
Do not plan to return to work	4.6 ^E	6.4	13.8	3.1	2.3	4.0	2.5 ^E	1.2	3.9	3.1 ^E	1.6	4.7	3.1 ^E	1.3	13.8	3.6 ^E	1.6	5.6
Do not know or not stated	7.0 ^E	5.1	10.1	14.6	12.9	16.3	15.6	11.9	19.2	15.5	11.8	19.3	13.3	10.2	10.1	14.2	10.8	17.6

^E use with caution

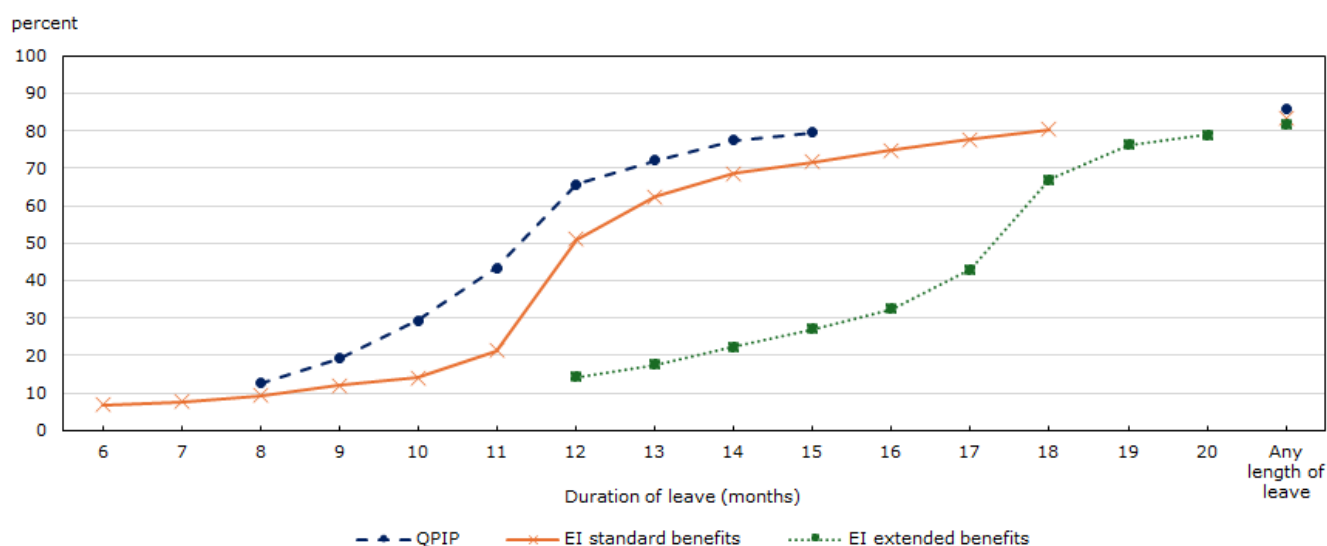
Notes: The sample for this table is mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption. The survey weights were applied to estimates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2019 to 2023.

Because of a change in the target population in 2020 from mothers who had a child aged 12 months or younger to mothers who had a child aged 18 months or younger,⁹ estimates before 2020 may not be directly comparable to estimates in 2020 and onward. However, when the analysis was limited to mothers with a child aged 12 months or younger from 2020 to 2023, the results were similar—the same percentage of mothers returned within 12 months of leave (46% in 2020, not presented in Table 1), and a higher percentage reported not knowing when they would return (18% from 2020 to 2023, not presented in Table 1). The increased uncertainty regarding when to return to work could be because of reduced child care availability resulting from daycare closures and uncertain labour market conditions during the pandemic.

Chart 1 displays the cumulative rates of mothers returning to work by duration of leave for three groups of mothers who chose different parental benefit types. Some data points (e.g., before 12 months for those who took EI for 18 months) are not presented because of the low-quality level of estimates.

Chart 1
Cumulative rates of mothers returning to work by duration of leave and parental benefit type



Notes: QPIP stands for Québec Parental Insurance Program. EI stands for Employment Insurance. The sample for this chart is mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption. The survey weights were applied to estimates. The data beyond 20 months were suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*.
Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Mothers who received QPIP parental benefits tended to return to work earlier than mothers who received EI parental benefits. The earlier return could be because of the QPIP special benefit plan, which offers higher amounts of benefits during a shorter period, compared with the QPIP basic plan and the EI standard benefits. The two QPIP plans (basic and special) could not be analyzed separately because of their small sample sizes. About 30% of mothers who used the QPIP returned to work within 10 months of leave and another 36% of mothers returned within 10 to 12 months of leave. The cumulative rate of returning to work gradually increased to 86% of mothers.

Among mothers who chose the EI standard benefits, 22% returned to work within 11 months of leave. In addition, 30% of mothers returned within 12 months of leave and another 10% of mothers returned within 13 months of leave. The cumulative rate of returning gradually increased to 83% when considering all mothers who returned or planned to return to work after any length of leave.

9. While the sample in this study focused only on mothers, this change also included fathers in one-parent families or two-father families with a child aged 18 months or younger in the target population.

Among mothers who opted for the EI extended benefits, 14% returned to work within 12 months of leave. Another 30% of mothers returned within 12 to 17 months of leave. While mothers who chose the extended benefits could receive up to 18 months of benefits (including maternal and parental benefits), some mothers may have returned to work before 18 months of leave because they shared parental benefits with their spouse or partner. Approximately one-quarter (24%) of mothers returned in the month following 18 months of leave, and another 9% returned in the month following 19 months of leave.

The two groups of mothers who received EI parental benefits had similar overall rates of returning to work after any length of leave (83% for the EI standard option and 82% for the extended option).

Not all mothers received parental benefits while on leave after childbirth or adoption, possibly because they did not have insurable employment or meet eligibility criteria for EI or QPIP benefits. Of those who did not receive parental benefits, 42% returned to work within 12 months of leave and 56% returned within 18 months of leave (Table 2). When any length of leave before returning was considered, 65% returned or planned to return to work. This figure was 18 percentage points lower than the average rate for all mothers. These findings suggest that a majority of mothers who worked before childbirth or adoption returned to work after taking leave, regardless of whether they received parental benefits.

Table 2

Percentage of mothers returning to work within 12 months, 18 months or any length of leave by parental benefit type

	Return to work within 12 months			Return to work within 18 months			Return to work within any length of leave		
	95% confidence interval			95% confidence interval			95% confidence interval		
	Proportion	Lower	Upper	Proportion	Lower	Upper	Proportion	Lower	Upper
All mothers	48.0	45.6	50.4	77.1	75.1	79.1	82.3	80.5	84.1
Did not receive parental benefits	41.8	33.1	50.6	55.7	46.9	64.5	64.6	56.0	73.3
Received QPIP benefits	65.8	60.8	70.8	83.7	79.9	87.4	86.0	82.3	89.6
Received EI standard benefits	51.0	47.7	54.4	80.3	77.8	82.8	83.3	81.0	85.7
Received EI extended benefits	14.3 ^E	8.4	20.2	66.9	61.0	72.8	81.8	77.0	86.5

^E use with caution

Notes: QPIP stands for Québec Parental Insurance Program. EI stands for Employment Insurance. The sample for this table is mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption. The survey weights were applied to estimates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Mothers' characteristics by parental benefit type

Mothers who chose the EI standard or extended option had similar sociodemographic and job characteristics (Table 3), except for region of residence and industry of employment. Among those who chose the EI extended option, 58% lived in Ontario, while 48% of mothers who chose the EI standard option lived in the province. Mothers who chose the EI extended option were less concentrated in the Prairie provinces (8% in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and 10% in Alberta), compared with mothers who chose the EI standard option (12% in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and 16% in Alberta). For industry of employment, mothers who chose the extended option (25%) were more concentrated in educational services and public administration than those who chose the standard option (18%).

Table 3
Demographic and job characteristics of mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger by parental benefit type

Characteristics	Did not receive	Received QPIP	Received EI	Received EI
	parental benefits	benefits	standard benefits	extended benefits
	number			
Average mother's age	31.0	32.2	32.6	32.4
15 to 29	32	28	24	26
30 to 34	45	41	44	41
35 and older	23 ^E	31	33	33
	percent			
Mother's education				
High school diploma or less	23.1 ^E	8.8 ^E	9.9	15.2 ^E
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	31.5	36.7	30.3	29.7
Bachelor's degree	27.9	33.7	42.1	36.1
Graduate degree	17.4 ^E	20.8	17.7	19.0
Immigrant status				
Canadian citizen by birth	53.6	76.4	68.8	70.5
Landed immigrant	38.8	x	28.0	x
Other	7.6 ^E	F	3.1 ^E	F
Region				
Atlantic region	6.6 ^E	0.0	7.8	7.3
Quebec	6.4 ^E	100.0	0.0	0.0
Ontario	51.9	0.0	49.2	58.3
Manitoba and Saskatchewan	8.1 ^E	0.0	11.9	7.9
Alberta	17.6 ^E	0.0	16.4	10.1 ^E
British Columbia	9.4 ^E	0.0	14.7	16.4
Household income before childbirth or adoption				
Less than \$2,500 per month	15.0 ^E	6.6 ^E	4.9	9.3 ^E
\$2,500 to less than \$5,000 per month	35.9	28.1	24.3	21.6
\$5,000 to less than \$7,500 per month	15.4 ^E	28.0	25.3	24.6
\$7,500 to less than \$10,000 per month	10.0 ^E	16.3	18.2	14.7
\$10,000 to less than \$12,500 per month	F	8.6 ^E	8.9	x ^E
\$12,500 or more per month	8.2 ^E	10.5 ^E	15.2	19.3
Not stated	x ^E	1.8 ^E	3.2 ^E	F
Couple family status				
Not a couple family	15.8 ^E	3.9 ^E	5.9	9.2 ^E
Couple family	84.2	96.1	94.1	90.8
Number of children aged 0 to 5				
One child	51.4	59.0	64.8	51.6
Two children	35.4	35.7	32.5	40.8
Three or more children	13.2 ^E	5.3 ^E	2.8 ^E	7.6 ^E
Had children aged 6 to 12				
No	78.9	80.5	87.4	85.6
Yes	21.1 ^E	19.5	12.6	14.4
Spouse's education				
High school diploma or less	18.1 ^E	12.2	20.6	16.6 ^E
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	36.9	46.9	33.5	38.1
Bachelor's degree	31.5 ^E	26.4	30.0	28.2
Graduate degree	13.5 ^E	14.5	15.9	17.1
Spouse's receipt of parental benefits				
No	69.5	13.8	70.7	59.5
Yes	30.5 ^E	86.2	29.3	40.5
Duration of spouse's parental benefits				
Five weeks or less, including not stated	29.9 ^E	68.1	74.6	24.1 ^E
Six to eight weeks	33.8 ^E	10.7 ^E	10.9 ^E	44.2
Nine weeks or more	36.3 ^E	21.3	14.5 ^E	31.7 ^E

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

^E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

Notes: QPIP stands for Québec Parental Insurance Program. EI stands for Employment Insurance. The sample for this table is mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption. The survey weights were applied to estimates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Table 3
Demographic and job characteristics of mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger by parental benefit type (continued)

Characteristics	Did not receive parental benefits	Received QPIP benefits	Received EI standard benefits	Received EI extended benefits
	percent			
Received additional payments from employer				
No	88.9	59.1	55.0	52.0
Yes	11.1 ^E	40.9	45.0	48.0
Had a permanent job				
No	24.6	10.3 ^E	7.1	8.0 ^E
Yes	75.4	89.7	92.9	92.0
Worked full time				
No	35.0	8.9 ^E	12.3	15.6
Yes	65.0	91.1	87.7	84.4
Was a union member or covered by a collective agreement				
No	73.5	54.1	67.8	61.3
Yes	26.5 ^E	45.9	32.2	38.7
Industry				
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil, gas, utilities, construction and manufacturing	8.8 ^E	8.2 ^E	7.8	10.1 ^E
Wholesale and retail trade	15.0 ^E	9.7 ^E	10.8	11.9 ^E
Finance; insurance; real estate; rental; leasing; and professional, scientific and technical services	14.0 ^E	19.3	21.5	16.6 ^E
Educational services and public administration	20.1 ^E	19.7	18.2	25.2
Health care and social assistance	16.0 ^E	28.3	25.8	22.2
Accommodation and food services	11.4 ^E	2.4 ^E	3.8	2.5 ^E
Other, including not stated	14.7 ^E	12.2 ^E	12.0	11.3 ^E
Tenure				
0 to 12 months or not stated	43.2	21.7	18.8	15.2
13 to 24 months	8.3 ^E	11.8	12.3	15.6 ^E
More than 24 months to 5 years	25.8 ^E	31.0	29.0	21.8
6 to 10 years	14.9 ^E	22.8	29.1	34.9
11 years or more	7.9 ^E	12.7	10.8	12.5 ^E
Hourly wages (in 2023 dollars)				
Less than \$15 or not stated	18.5 ^E	4.0 ^E	3.4 ^E	4.3 ^E
\$15 to \$19	29.4	12.3	15.3	18.5 ^E
\$20 to \$29	23.1 ^E	35.8	26.1	23.9
\$30 to \$39	15.4 ^E	28.2	22.5	23.9
\$40 or more	13.6 ^E	19.7	32.7	29.4

^E use with caution

Notes: QPIP stands for Québec Parental Insurance Program. EI stands for Employment Insurance. The sample for this table is mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption. The survey weights were applied to estimates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Another noticeable difference between the two groups of mothers who received EI parental benefits was in their spouses' use of parental benefits. For mothers who chose the EI standard option, 30% of their spouses claimed or expected to claim parental benefits. The percentage was 41% for mothers who chose the extended option. When parents shared parental benefits, fathers claimed parental benefits for a longer period among parents who chose the extended option than those who chose the standard option.

For mothers who chose the standard option, 75% of their spouses used parental benefits for five weeks or less, 11% for six to eight weeks, and 14% for nine weeks or more. For mothers who chose the EI extended option, 68% of their spouses used parental benefits for eight weeks or less, including 44% who used them for six to eight weeks, and 32% used them for nine weeks or more. The majority of spouses used the additional weeks of parental benefits that are provided when two parents share parental benefits (five weeks for the standard option and eight weeks for the extended option).

Compared with mothers who received parental benefits, the characteristics of mothers who did not receive parental benefits were different in many respects. Mothers who did not receive parental benefits were younger and more likely to be immigrants and in one-parent families, compared with mothers who received parental benefits. Mothers who did not receive parental benefits had lower household income. Approximately 50% had a household income of less than \$5,000 per month before childbirth or adoption, compared with 30% among mothers who received EI parental benefits. Mothers who did not receive parental benefits were more likely to have a temporary job and to work part time and less likely to be covered by a collective agreement. They tended to have a short tenure, including 43% with 0 to 12 months of experience at their jobs. They were more concentrated in a low-paying sector like accommodation and food services and less concentrated in a higher-paying sector like health care and social assistance, compared with mothers who received parental benefits. Their median hourly wage was \$22, which was \$10 lower than mothers who received EI parental benefits (\$32).

Additionally, the distribution of mothers by parental benefit type among those in the EI coverage regions was analyzed to assess how benefit choices (between EI standard and extended benefits) varied among mothers with different sociodemographic and job characteristics (Table A1 in the appendix). Overall, 91% received EI parental benefits, with 70% choosing standard benefits and 21% choosing extended benefits. Some groups showed higher rates of receiving extended benefits than others. Mothers in the Prairie provinces (14% in Alberta and 15% in Manitoba and Saskatchewan) had lower rates than those in Ontario (23%). Mothers with three or more children aged 0 to 5 years (34%) had higher rates than those with one child in that age range (17%). Receiving extended benefits was less common in the accommodation and food services sector (12%) than in the educational services and public administration sector (26%).

The main reasons why mothers chose a specific benefit plan were analyzed (results were not presented in a table). Among mothers who chose the EI standard benefits, 59% answered that the main reason for their choice was to receive more money each month, while for 33% it was to return to work sooner. Among mothers who chose the EI extended benefits, 77% made their choice mainly because they wanted to stay home longer with their children, while 14% made their choice because child care was unavailable or too costly.

Child care arrangements and costs after mothers' return to work

Table 4 shows the types of child care arrangements that mothers used or planned to use on their return to work after childbirth or adoption for each survey year from 2020 to 2023. Among the most recent cohort (2023) of mothers, 3% worked from home and took care of the child themselves, or planned to do so, while 15% relied or planned to rely on their child's other parent (spouse or partner, in most cases). About half of mothers (48%) used or planned to use private or public daycare, including 21% for private daycare centres, 17% for government-funded daycare centres and 10% for home-based daycare or child care. Approximately 20% relied or planned to rely on a friend or relative to care for the child.

Table 4
Planned or current child care arrangements by survey year

	2020	2021	2022	2023
	percent			
Private or public daycare	45.7	45.6	50.4	47.5
Private daycare centre	18.6	27.4	24.4	20.6
Government-funded daycare centre	10.9 ^E	10.0	16.6	17.1
Home-based daycare or child care	16.2	8.2 ^E	9.4 ^E	9.9 ^E
Your child's other parent	12.8	16.9	10.8	15.2
You will work from home with your child at home	F	5.2 ^E	6.9 ^E	3.2 ^E
Care by a friend or relative	20.0	16.7	15.9	21.1
Care by a non-relative in your home	F	F	F	F
Other	F	F	F	F
Have not decided	15.2	9.7 ^E	11.7	9.5 ^E
Not stated	F	F	F	F

^E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

Notes: The sample for this table is mothers of a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years, who took a break from work following childbirth or adoption and who intended to return to work within 18 months of leave or had already returned. The survey weights were applied to estimates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

When child care arrangements were compared across survey years, the percentage of mothers who used or planned to use government-funded daycare centres increased from 11% in 2020 and 10% in 2021 to 17% in 2022 and 2023, possibly because of the introduction of the CWELCC system. The use or planned use of private daycare centres decreased from 27% in 2021 to 21% in 2023, although this change was not statistically significant.

The percentage of mothers who had not decided what type of child care arrangement to use decreased from 15% in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, to around 10% in the following years. Compared with 2020, uncertainty was lower in 2023, as time passed.

Most mothers used or planned to use some form of child care to return to work, regardless of whether they received parental benefits and the type of parental benefits they chose (Table 5). Among mothers who chose the EI standard option, 45% used or planned to use private or public daycare (23% for private daycare centres, 12% for government-funded daycare centres and 11% for home-based daycare or child care) and 2% used or planned to use care by a non-relative in their home, such as a nanny. Approximately 22% of mothers used or planned to use care by a friend or relative. Meanwhile, 20% of mothers relied or planned to rely on either taking care of their child themselves while working from home (7%) or the child's other parent caring for the child (13%).

Table 5
Planned or current child care arrangements by parental benefit type

	Did not receive parental benefits	Received QPIP benefits	Received EI standard benefits	Received EI extended benefits
		percent		
Private or public daycare	20.0 ^E	62.8	45.2	38.3
Private daycare centre	F	26.2	22.9	22.4
Government-funded daycare centre	9.0 ^E	22.3	11.6	8.5 ^E
Home-based daycare or child care	F	14.3	10.7	7.4 ^E
Your child's other parent	21.9 ^E	11.6 ^E	12.6	20.4 ^E
You will work from home with your child at home	F	F	6.7 ^E	F
Care by a friend or relative	36.2 ^E	6.2 ^E	21.5	20.6 ^E
Care by a non-relative in your home	F	F	2.4 ^E	F
Other	F	F	x	F
Have not decided	F	15.6	8.8	16.1 ^E
Not stated	F	0.0	F	F

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

^E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

Notes: QPIP stands for Québec Parental Insurance Program. EI stands for Employment Insurance. The sample for this table is mothers of a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years, who took a break from work following childbirth or adoption and who intended to return to work within 18 months of leave or had already returned. The survey weights were applied to estimates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Mothers who chose the EI extended parental benefits (20%) were more likely than mothers who received the EI standard parental benefits (13%) to use or plan to use care by their child's other parent after returning to work. This may relate to the fact that mothers who chose the extended option were more likely than other mothers to have a spouse who received parental benefits and who received these benefits for a longer period (see Table 3). Just under 40% of mothers who opted for the extended option used or planned to use private or public daycare (22% for private daycare centres, 9% for government-funded daycare centres and 7% for home-based daycare or child care).

Compared with parents who received EI benefits, parents who received QPIP benefits were much more likely to use or plan to use private or public daycare (63%) and less likely to rely or plan to rely on care by a friend or relative (6%). Among mothers who received QPIP parental benefits, 26% used or planned to use a private daycare centre, 22% used or planned to use a government-funded daycare centre and 14% used or planned to use home-based daycare or child care.

Compared with mothers who received parental benefits, mothers who did not receive parental benefits were less likely to use or plan to use private or public daycare and were more likely to rely or plan to rely on care by a friend or relative. While 20% used or planned to use private or public daycare, about 60% relied or planned to rely on their child's other parent (22%) or a friend or relative (36%).

Monthly child care costs for the youngest child, expressed in 2023 dollars, were examined among mothers who had already returned to work and used child care provided by someone other than themselves or their spouse. Mothers who used care by a non-relative in their home (e.g., a nanny) spent

the most—an average of \$2,260 per month (ranging from \$1,640 at the 25th percentile to \$2,130 at the median and to \$2,580 at the 75th percentile). Mothers who used care by a friend or relative spent the least—an average of \$230 per month—although 65% did not pay at all. For private daycare centres, mothers' monthly costs ranged from \$760 at the 25th percentile to \$1,320 at the 75th percentile, with an average cost of \$1,050 (median of \$1,030). Home-based daycare or child care cost less than private daycare centres, ranging from \$610 at the 25th percentile to \$970 at the 75th percentile, with an average cost of \$790 per month (median of \$770). Government-funded daycare centres cost the least, at \$390 per month, ranging from \$180 at the 25th percentile to \$200 at the median and to \$540 at the 75th percentile.

Characteristics associated with the likelihood of mothers returning to work

To better understand the characteristics associated with the likelihood of mothers returning to work, regression models were estimated for all mothers (Table 6). The results reflect the likelihood of a mother returning to work after any length of leave, compared with having no plan to return (including not knowing or not stating the planned duration of their leave).

Table 6

Marginal effects from logistic regression analyses on the likelihood of mothers' return to work (continued)

Variables	All mothers			All mothers, except those in Quebec
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 3
predicted difference in probability				
Mother's education				
High school diploma or less (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	-0.018	-0.019	-0.019	-0.001
Bachelor's degree	-0.005	-0.006	-0.012	0.012
Graduate degree	0.057	0.055	0.049	0.078
Immigrant status				
Canadian citizen by birth	...	...	...	...
Landed immigrant	-0.027	-0.027	-0.019	-0.011
Other	-0.053	-0.049	-0.045	-0.061
Region of residence				
Ontario (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Atlantic region	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.003
Quebec	0.002	-0.129	-0.152	...
Manitoba and Saskatchewan	-0.009	-0.010	-0.008	-0.008
Alberta	-0.063	-0.059	-0.061	-0.070
British Columbia	-0.076 *	-0.067 *	-0.073*	-0.082 *
Couple family status				
Not a couple family (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Couple family	-0.034	-0.034	-0.064 *	-0.045
Household income before childbirth or adoption				
Less than \$2,500 per month	...	...	-0.103 *	-0.060
\$2,500 to less than \$5,000 per month (reference group)	...	...	...	...
\$5,000 to less than \$7,500 per month	...	...	0.032	0.012
\$7,500 to less than \$10,000 per month	...	...	0.015	0.003
\$10,000 to less than \$12,500 per month	...	...	0.024	0.007
\$12,500 or more per month	...	...	0.024	-0.002
Not stated	...	...	-0.130	-0.109
Observations	2,934	2,934	2,934	2,304

... not applicable

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.01$)

Notes: Mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption were analyzed. The model also included mothers' age (and age squared), full-time status, industry and survey year indicators as explanatory variables. Bootstrap standard errors were calculated with completed replicates out of 1,000 bootstrap replicates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Table 6

Marginal effects from logistic regression analyses on the likelihood of mothers' return to work (continued)

Variables	All mothers			All mothers, except those in Quebec
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 3
predicted difference in probability				
Mother's education				
High school diploma or less (reference group)	---	---	---	---
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	-0.018	-0.019	-0.019	-0.001
Bachelor's degree	-0.005	-0.006	-0.012	0.012
Graduate degree	0.057	0.055	0.049	0.078
Immigrant status				
Canadian citizen by birth	---	---	---	---
Landed immigrant	-0.027	-0.027	-0.019	-0.011
Other	-0.053	-0.049	-0.045	-0.061
Region of residence				
Ontario (reference group)	---	---	---	---
Atlantic region	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.003
Quebec	0.002	-0.129	-0.152	---
Manitoba and Saskatchewan	-0.009	-0.010	-0.008	-0.008
Alberta	-0.063	-0.059	-0.061	-0.070
British Columbia	-0.076 *	-0.067 *	-0.073 *	-0.082 *
Couple family status				
Not a couple family (reference group)	---	---	---	---
Couple family	-0.034	-0.034	-0.064 *	-0.045
Household income before childbirth or adoption				
Less than \$2,500 per month	---	---	-0.103 *	-0.060
\$2,500 to less than \$5,000 per month (reference group)	---	---	---	---
\$5,000 to less than \$7,500 per month	---	---	0.032	0.012
\$7,500 to less than \$10,000 per month	---	---	0.015	0.003
\$10,000 to less than \$12,500 per month	---	---	0.024	0.007
\$12,500 or more per month	---	---	0.024	-0.002
Not stated	---	---	-0.130	-0.109
Observations	2,934	2,934	2,934	2,304

... not applicable

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.01$)

Notes: Mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption were analyzed. The model also included mothers' age (and age squared), full-time status, industry and survey year indicators as explanatory variables. Bootstrap standard errors were calculated with completed replicates

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Results from Model 1 indicate that mothers who received maternity or parental benefits were 9 percentage points more likely to return to work than those who did not receive such benefits. However, Model 2 did not reveal statistically significant differences between non-recipients and mothers who selected a specific benefit plan or among mothers who chose different types of benefit plans.¹⁰

Three job characteristics were statistically significantly associated with the likelihood of mothers returning to work. In Model 2, mothers with a permanent job were 11 percentage points more likely to return to work than mothers with a temporary or seasonal job. Mothers who were union members or covered by a collective agreement were 5 percentage points more likely to return to work than mothers who were not. Mothers whose hourly wages were \$15 to \$19 were 9 percentage points less likely to return to work, compared with those earning \$20 to \$29 per hour. Other employment-related factors—including receiving additional payments from their employer, working full time versus part time, industry of employment and job tenure—did not show statistically significant differences.

10. It is difficult to draw a clear conclusion from these results because the sample sizes for each group, especially for QPIP benefits and EI extended benefits, may be influencing the findings.

In terms of demographic characteristics, mothers living in British Columbia were 7 percentage points less likely to return to work, compared with mothers living in Ontario (Model 2). Mothers residing in other regions showed a similar likelihood of returning to work as those in Ontario. Neither immigrant status nor education level were associated with statistically significant differences. There were no noticeable differences across survey years 2020 to 2023.

When household income before childbirth or adoption was included in Model 3, mothers from households earning less than \$2,500 per month were 10 percentage points less likely to return to work, compared with those in the reference group—households earning \$2,500 to less than \$5,000 per month. The likelihood of returning to work for mothers from higher-income families was similar to that of the reference group. Additionally, living in a couple family with a spouse or partner was statistically significant in Model 3. Mothers in couple families were 6 percentage points less likely to return to work than other mothers.

When Model 3 was estimated for the sample of mothers residing in the EI coverage regions (i.e., excluding Quebec), the likelihood of returning to work was positively associated with having a permanent job, being a union member or covered by a collective agreement and having higher hourly wages. It was negatively associated with living in British Columbia—as in the sample of all mothers—but household income and couple family status were not statistically significant.

Among mothers living in couple families, further analysis was conducted to examine family and spousal characteristics, such as the number of children and the spouse's use of parental benefits (Table 7). In Model 4, whether a spouse received parental benefits was not associated with the likelihood of mothers returning to work. However, in Model 5, the number of weeks a spouse received parental benefits was statistically significant. Specifically, mothers whose spouse or partner received six to eight weeks of parental benefits were 13 percentage points less likely to return to work than those whose spouse or partner did not use any parental benefits. This finding may reflect a tendency for fathers to take parental leave when mothers do not. In this subsample, a permanent job, union membership or coverage by a collective agreement and household income before childbirth or adoption remained statistically significant predictors of mothers returning to work, but hourly wages did not (Model 5). The number of children younger than 6 and the spouse's education level were not statistically significant.

Table 7

Marginal effects from logistic regression analyses on the likelihood of mothers' return to work, mothers in couple families

Variables	All mothers		All mothers, except those in Quebec	
	Model 4	Model 5	Model 4	Model 5
predicted difference in probability				
Benefit plan				
Did not receive maternity or parental benefits (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Received QPIP benefits	0.222	0.210	...	...
Received EI standard benefits	0.091	0.079	0.108	0.093
Received EI extended benefits	0.055	0.063	0.070	0.076
Had a permanent job				
No (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Yes	0.110 *	0.106 *	0.117 *	0.116 *
Was a union member or covered by a collective agreement				
No (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Yes	0.057	0.062 *	0.072	0.075 *
Job tenure				
0 to 24 months or not stated (reference group)	...	...	...	...
More than 24 months to 5 years	0.022	0.020	0.010	0.009
6 to 10 years	0.034	0.030	0.011	0.007
11 years or more	0.038	0.036	0.022	0.021
Hourly wages (in 2023 dollars)				
Less than \$15 or not stated	-0.074	-0.072	-0.131	-0.132
\$15 to \$19	-0.072	-0.070	-0.094 *	-0.095 *
\$20 to \$29 (reference group)	...	...	...	...
\$30 to \$39	0.053	0.055	0.053	0.052
\$40 or more	0.021	0.024	0.028	0.033
Household income before childbirth or adoption				
Less than \$2,500 per month	-0.153 *	-0.146 *	-0.084	-0.083
\$2,500 to less than \$5,000 per month (reference group)	...	...	...	...
\$5,000 to less than \$7,500 per month	0.036	0.031	0.010	0.003
\$7,500 to less than \$10,000 per month	0.023	0.020	0.010	0.007
\$10,000 to less than \$12,500 per month	0.028	0.025	0.006	0.002
\$12,500 or more per month	0.029	0.027	-0.004	-0.006
Not stated	-0.115	-0.115	-0.108	-0.108
Spouse's receipt of parental benefits				
No (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Yes	-0.029	...	-0.021	...
Duration of spouse's parental benefits				
Did not use parental benefits (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Five weeks or less, including not stated	...	0.004	...	0.023
Six to eight weeks	...	-0.125 *	...	-0.144 *
Nine weeks or more	...	-0.034	...	-0.024
Number of children aged 0 to 5				
One child (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Two children	-0.013	-0.011	-0.009	-0.006
Three or more children	-0.026	-0.025	0.09 *	0.084 *
Had children aged 6 to 12				
No (reference group)	...	...	...	...
Yes	0.021	0.020	0.07 *	0.069 *
Observations	2,706	2,706	2,104	2,104

... not applicable

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

Notes: Mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption were analyzed. The model also included mothers' age (and age squared), education, immigrant status, region of residence, receipt of additional payments from their employer, full-time status, industry, survey year indicators and spouse's education as explanatory variables. Bootstrap standard errors were calculated with completed replicates out of 1,000 bootstrap replicates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Among mothers in couple families residing within the EI coverage regions, the number of children had a statistically significant relationship with the likelihood of returning work. Mothers with three or more children younger than 6 were 8 percentage points more likely to return to work than those who had one child in that age group (Model 5). Mothers who had one or more children aged 6 to 12 were 7 percentage points more likely to return to work than those without children in that age range. A permanent job, union membership or coverage by a collective agreement and hourly wages were statistically significant predictors.

Characteristics associated with the timing of mothers returning to work

Next, logistic regression analysis was conducted to examine the characteristics associated with the timing of mothers' return to work (Table 8). To account for the type of child care arrangements that mothers used or intended to use, the analysis focused on those who had returned or planned to return to work within 18 months of leave because of the availability of such information. The results reflect the probability of a mother returning to work within 12 months of leave, compared with returning within 12 to 18 months of leave.

Table 8

Marginal effects from logistic regression analyses on the timing of mothers' return to work, mothers returning to work within 12 months of leave (versus returning between 12 and 18 months)

Variables	All mothers returning within 18 months of leave	All mothers returning within 18 months of leave, except those in Quebec
	predicted difference in probability	
Benefit plan		
Did not receive maternity or parental benefits	0.060	0.058
Received QPIP benefits	0.088	...
Received EI standard benefits (reference group)	...	...
Received EI extended benefits	-0.436 **	-0.438 **
Type of child care arrangements		
Private daycare centre	-0.161 **	-0.166 **
Government-funded daycare centre	-0.243 **	-0.25 **
Home-based daycare or child care	-0.186 **	-0.197 **
You will work from home with your child at home, or your child's other parent (reference group)	...	...
Care by a friend or relative	-0.087* *	-0.081
Other	-0.043	-0.057
Have not decided or not stated	-0.231 **	-0.234 **
Had a permanent job		
No (reference group)	...	...
Yes	-0.034	-0.086
Was a union member or covered by a collective agreement		
No (reference group)	...	...
Yes	-0.060	-0.129 **
Job tenure		
0 to 24 months or not stated (reference group)	...	...
More than 24 months to 5 years	0.067	0.076
6 to 10 years	0.028	0.037
11 years or more	0.025	0.038

... not applicable

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.01$)

Notes: Mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption were analyzed. The model also included mothers' age (and age squared), education, immigrant status, industry and survey year indicators as explanatory variables. Bootstrap standard errors were calculated with completed replicates out of 1,000 bootstrap replicates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Table 8

Marginal effects from logistic regression analyses on the timing of mothers' return to work, mothers returning to work within 12 months of leave (versus returning between 12 and 18 months)(continued)

Variables	All mothers returning within 18 months of leave	All mothers returning within 18 months of leave, except those in Quebec
	predicted difference in probability	
Hourly wages (in 2023 dollars)		
Less than \$15 or not stated	-0.162	-0.106
\$15 to \$19	-0.063	-0.101
\$20 to \$29 (reference group)	...	...
\$30 to \$39	-0.012	-0.031
\$40 or more	-0.039	-0.048
Region of residence		
Ontario (reference group)	...	...
Atlantic region	0.081	0.091 *
Quebec	0.092	...
Manitoba and Saskatchewan	0.021	0.031
Alberta	-0.048	-0.029
British Columbia	-0.063	-0.056
Couple family status		
Not a couple family (reference group)	...	...
Couple family	-0.037	-0.022
Household income before childbirth or adoption		
Less than \$2,500 per month	0.040	0.066
\$2,500 to less than \$5,000 per month (reference group)	...	...
\$5,000 to less than \$7,500 per month	-0.014	-0.049
\$7,500 to less than \$10,000 per month	-0.013	-0.014
\$10,000 to less than \$12,500 per month	0.013	-0.015
\$12,500 or more per month	-0.042	-0.089
Not stated	0.127	0.085
Observations	2,296	1,765

... not applicable

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.01$)

Notes: Mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption were analyzed. The model also included mothers' age (and age squared), education, immigrant status, industry and survey year indicators as explanatory variables. Bootstrap standard errors were calculated with completed replicates out of 1,000 bootstrap replicates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

As expected, after accounting for other characteristics, mothers who chose EI extended benefits were 44 percentage points less likely to return to work within 12 months of leave than those who chose EI standard benefits. Regarding child care arrangements, mothers who cared for their children themselves while working from home or whose children were cared for by the other parent, or who planned to use these types of child care, were more likely to return to work within 12 months of leave, compared with mothers

who used a private daycare centre, a government-funded daycare centre, home-based daycare or child care, or care by a friend or relative. No other characteristics were statistically significant.

The results for mothers residing in the EI coverage regions were similar regarding the parental benefit plans and child care arrangements. An additional finding in this subsample was that mothers who were union members or covered by a collective agreement were less likely to return to work within 12 months of leave. Also, mothers living in the Atlantic region were more likely to return to work within 12 months of leave, compared with those residing in Ontario.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to analyze mothers' return-to-work patterns and child care arrangements following parental leave among mothers who worked before childbirth or adoption, with specific consideration given to the introduction of EI extended parental benefits and the implementation of the CWELCC system.

Generally, about 82% of mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger had returned or planned to return to work after any length of parental leave. The overall rates of returning to work were comparable between mothers who opted for the EI standard (83%) and extended (82%) benefits. As expected, the timing of returning to work differed: mothers who chose the extended benefits tended to return to work later than those who chose the standard plan. Among mothers who chose the EI standard benefits, 51% returned to work within 12 months of leave. For those who opted for the EI extended benefits, 67% returned to work within 18 months of leave, with 53% returning within 12 to 18 months of leave.

These findings raise the question of whether mothers who chose different EI parental benefit plans differed in observable characteristics. While overall profiles were similar, notable differences were found. Compared with mothers who chose the standard benefits, those who chose the extended benefits were more concentrated in Ontario, more likely to work in the educational services and public administration sectors, and more likely to share the benefits with their spouses. Their spouses tended to receive parental benefits for a longer period. Their primary reason for choosing the EI extended benefits was to spend more time at home with their children.

Although return-to-work rates were similar among mothers who received the EI standard, EI extended and QPIP benefits, those who did not receive parental benefits returned to work at significantly lower rates (65%). Compared with benefit recipients, these mothers were younger and more likely to be immigrants and in one-parent families. Generally, they had lower household incomes and were more often employed in precarious jobs—characterized as temporary or part-time jobs, without union membership or collective agreement coverage, and in low-paying industries.

Turning to child care arrangements, most mothers who had returned or planned to return within 18 months of leave, regardless of whether they received parental benefits or which plan they chose, reported using or planning to use some form of child care. Those without parental benefits mainly relied on friends or relatives, including the child's other parent. Use of formal child care, such as private or public daycare, was notably higher among QPIP recipients (63%), compared with EI recipients (45% for standard benefits and 38% for extended benefits), while use of informal care provided by friends or relatives was less common among QPIP recipients. These differences are likely due to Quebec's long-standing low-cost child care program, introduced in 1997; the CWELCC system was introduced in other provinces in 2021.

Mothers who chose the EI extended benefits (20%) were more likely to rely on the child's other parent for care when returning to work, compared with those who chose the EI standard benefits (13%). This is

consistent with their greater tendency to share parental benefits with their spouse. However, the dataset used in this survey did not include information on the types of child care arrangements these mothers intended to use when their spouse's parental leave ended.

Several job characteristics were significantly associated with the likelihood of returning to work, including those related to job quality—permanent job status, union status and hourly wages. Residing in British Columbia was associated with a lower likelihood of returning to work, compared with residing in Ontario. These findings differ from those of Choi (2023), which showed that none of these characteristics were statistically significant but that Canadian citizenship, employer top-up payments and job tenure were statistically significant factors associated with the likelihood of returning to work. Mothers in couple families within EI coverage regions with three or more children younger than 6 or with children aged 6 to 12 were more likely to return to work, compared with those who had one or two children younger than 6 or those who did not have children aged 6 to 12. This may reflect that mothers who had completed their family plans were more inclined to re-enter the labour market, or that families with more children had greater financial need for additional employment income. This is a new finding not observed by Choi (2023). The reason for the different results between the two studies remains unclear, but possible explanations include differences in sample composition or changes in social and economic conditions in recent years. A few characteristics were associated with whether mothers returned to work within 12 months of leave, compared with returning within 12 to 18 months of leave. As expected, mothers who chose the EI extended benefits tended to return later. This finding aligns with those of Ziegler and Bamieh (2025), who similarly observed that flexible leave options changed mothers' leave duration but did not increase maternal employment. Mothers who cared for their children while working from home or relied on the other parent, or who planned to do so, were more likely to return earlier than those using formal child care services (i.e., centre-based or home-based daycare). In the regions covered by EI, union membership or collective agreement coverage was associated with a later return, possibly because of access to additional leave options. Mothers who are union members or covered by a collective agreement may have better access to other types of leave, such as sick leave or leave to take care of family members, that could be used to extend their leave before or after parental leave. The analysis of the timing of mothers' return to work was limited to those who had returned or planned to return to work within 18 months, excluding mothers who planned to return after 18 months or not to return at all. Therefore, the estimated relationships are based on being in the selected group and cannot be generalized to the broader population of mothers.

The findings and limitations of this study suggest some avenues for future research. Although the type of child care arrangements was considered in the analysis of the timing of mothers' return to work, this study could not determine the extent to which child care availability and affordability were linked to the timing of mothers' return to work. While the survey gathered information on the type of child care arrangements mothers used or intended to use upon returning to work, it did not collect the reason behind their choice or information about child care availability. Additionally, some parents responded based on expectations, rather than actual decisions, meaning their eventual child care arrangements and return-to-work behaviours may differ from what they initially anticipated. For example, even though some mothers anticipated that they would use government-funded child care centres, they may end up using private daycare centres or home-based daycare or child care because of availability. The current analysis treated child care arrangements as a predictor of whether mothers returned to work within 12 months versus 12 to 18 months. However, decisions about returning to work and making child care arrangements may be better viewed as jointly determined. Exploring how the timing of mothers returning to work relates to the availability and affordability of child care remains a key area for future research.

Although this study provided insight into mothers' return (or intention to return) to work considering the implementation of EI extended parental benefits, it did not examine labour market outcomes in the long term. Some mothers who opted for the extended option shared benefits with their spouse and returned within 12 months of leave. A recent study found that, in the context of the introduction of the QPIP, fathers'

use of parental benefits had positive long-term effects on mothers' and fathers' earnings after a first birth (Choi, Margolis and Holm 2025). If fathers' use of parental benefits had similar effects among parents living outside Quebec, families in which a mother and father shared parental benefits may see long-term positive economic effects. In the meantime, most mothers who chose the EI extended benefits returned later than mothers who chose the standard benefits. Some studies suggest that very long parental leave may negatively affect mothers' employment and career advancement upon their return to work (Lalive and Zweimüller 2009; Evertsson and Duvander 2011). Investigating whether the use of extended parental benefits has any impact on mothers' labour market outcomes presents an interesting avenue for future research.

Despite these limitations, this study provides new information about mothers' return to work and child care arrangements following parental leave, considering the implementation of EI extended parental benefits and the CWELCC system. While the choice of EI benefit type was associated with the timing of mothers' return to work, it did not appear to be related to their overall return-to-work rates. Mothers who had a higher-quality job—characterized as a permanent job, with union membership or collective agreement coverage and higher hourly wages—were more likely to return to work following parental leave. For the timing of return, mothers who chose the EI extended benefits tended to return to work later. Mothers who relied on or expected to rely on child care provided within the household—either from themselves while working from home or from their spouse taking parental leave—tended to return to work earlier. These findings underscore the role of job quality and flexible parental benefits in understanding the employment of mothers with young children after parental leave.

Appendix

Table A1

Types of parental benefits among mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger residing in the Employment Insurance coverage regions by demographic and job characteristics

Characteristics	Did not receive parental benefits	Received EI standard benefits	Received EI extended benefits
		percent	
Total	9.5	69.8	20.8
Average mother's age			
15 to 29	12.2	66.0	21.8
30 to 34	10.0	70.5	19.5
35 and older	6.5 ^E	71.8	21.7
Mother's education			
High school diploma or less	18.0 ^E	56.3	25.7 ^E
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	9.7 ^E	69.9	20.4
Bachelor's degree	6.6 ^E	74.4	19.0
Graduate degree	9.4 ^E	68.6	22.0
Immigrant status			
Canadian citizen by birth	7.5	70.9	21.6
Landed immigrant	12.9 ^E	67.5	19.7
Other	x	67.9	F
Region			
Atlantic region	8.8 ^E	71.3	19.9
Ontario	10.1	66.5	23.4
Manitoba and Saskatchewan	7.6 ^E	77.2	15.2
Alberta	11.6 ^E	74.7	13.7 ^E
British Columbia	6.5 ^E	70.1	23.4
Household income before childbirth or adoption			
Less than \$2,500 per month	21.7 ^E	49.8	28.5 ^E
\$2,500 to less than \$5,000 per month	13.2 ^E	68.7	18.1
\$5,000 to less than \$7,500 per month	5.7 ^E	73.1	21.2
\$7,500 to less than \$10,000 per month	6.0 ^E	75.7	18.2
\$10,000 to less than \$12,500 per month	F	73.5	x
\$12,500 or more per month	5.4 ^E	68.6	26.0
Not stated	x	60.9	F
Couple family status			
Not a couple family	20.3 ^E	54.5	25.2 ^E
Couple family	8.6	71.0	20.4
Number of children aged 0 to 5			
One child	7.2	75.5	17.3
Two children	9.2	66.7	24.1
Three or more children	22.2 ^E	43.5 ^E	34.3 ^E
Had children aged 6 to 12			
No	7.9	71.9	20.2
Yes	12.5 ^E	65.8	21.6
Spouse's education			
High school diploma or less	8.2 ^E	74.6	17.3
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	8.7 ^E	68.8	22.5
Bachelor's degree	9.1 ^E	71.6	19.3
Graduate degree	7.7 ^E	70.6	21.8
Spouse's receipt of parental benefits			
No	8.8	73.4	17.7
Yes	8.0 ^E	65.9	26.2
Duration of spouse's parental benefits			
Five weeks or less, including not stated	4.3 ^E	84.8	10.9 ^E
Six to eight weeks	13.6 ^E	33.2 ^E	53.3
Nine weeks or more	12.4 ^E	46.8	40.7

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

^E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

Notes: EI stands for Employment Insurance. The sample for this table is mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption. The survey weights were applied to estimates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

Table A1

Types of parental benefits among mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger residing in the Employment Insurance coverage regions by demographic and job characteristics (continued)

Characteristics	Did not receive parental benefits	Received EI standard benefits	Received EI extended benefits
	percent		
Received additional payments from employer			
No	14.5	66.7	18.8
Yes	2.6 ^E	73.9	23.5
Had a permanent job			
No	25.5 ^E	55.9	18.6 ^E
Yes	7.9	71.1	21.0
Worked full time			
No	21.5	56.9	21.6
Yes	7.3	72.1	20.6
Was a union member or covered by a collective agreement			
No	10.4	70.6	19.0
Yes	7.5 ^E	68.1	24.4
Industry			
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil, gas, utilities, construction and manufacturing	10.6 ^E	64.4	25.0 ^E
Wholesale and retail trade	11.7 ^E	66.5	21.8 ^E
Finance; insurance; real estate; rental; leasing; and professional, scientific and technical services	6.9 ^E	75.7	17.4 ^E
Educational services and public administration	9.7 ^E	63.9	26.4
Health care and social assistance	5.8 ^E	75.0	19.2
Accommodation and food services	26.1 ^E	61.8	12.1 ^E
Other, including not stated	11.8 ^E	68.9	19.3 ^E
Tenure			
0 to 12 months or not stated	19.6	64.8	15.6 ^E
13 to 24 months	6.4 ^E	68.0	25.7 ^E
More than 24 months to 5 years	9.2 ^E	74.2	16.6
6 to 10 years	5.1 ^E	69.9	25.0
11 years or more	F	69.4	x
Hourly wages (in 2023 dollars)			
Less than \$15 or not stated	33.4 ^E	48.4	18.2 ^E
\$15 to \$19	16.5 ^E	61.4	22.1
\$20 to \$29	8.5 ^E	71.9	19.6
\$30 to \$39	6.7 ^E	70.9	22.4
\$40 or more	4.3 ^E	75.5	20.2

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

^E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

Notes: EI stands for Employment Insurance. The sample for this table is mothers with a child aged 18 months or younger who worked as a paid employee in the past two years and took a break from work following childbirth or adoption. The survey weights were applied to estimates.

Source: Statistics Canada, Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 2020 to 2023.

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