

# Who's looking after the kids?

*Susan Crompton*

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Most tasks associated with child care have traditionally fallen on the shoulders of women. But women now comprise close to half the workers in Canada and many of them are mothers of children under 13. Too young to look after themselves while their parents are at work, these children add to the countless other parental responsibilities, the task of organizing adult supervision for them during their parents' absence.

Having their children well taken care of while they work is essential to women's continuing or increasing participation in the labour force. The child care debate today centres on the search for the most effective and satisfactory method of balancing work and child care responsibilities. This article examines data from the National Child Care Survey (NCCS) on the two most common non-parental child care arrangements women use while they are working: sitters and day care centres.

By restricting the analysis almost exclusively to mothers, this report does not intend to ignore the contribution men make to child-rearing; however, working men are chiefly responsible for child care in only 6% of families. Data on these men are examined briefly under a separate heading at the end of this article (see [Fathers](#)).

## Situations of working mothers

In late 1988, there were over 2.7 million families in Canada with at least one child under the age of 13. Slightly more than 86% of these families had two parents in the home; the remainder were one-parent households, 9 in 10 of which were headed by the mother. The majority of all of these families had only one child (46%) or two children (40%) under the age of 13, for a total of almost 4.7 million children. Almost 47% of them were no more than 5 years old, and 38% were between 6 and 10 years old.

With women's mass entry into the labour force in the 1970s and 1980s, it is no surprise that in 56% of these 2.7 million families, the mother worked outside the home. Not only were the majority of mothers of young children working, most of them were employed full time. Over 70% of working mothers had full-

time jobs (30 or more hours a week) while the remainder held part-time positions (less than 30 hours a week). [\(1\)](#)

Although so many women with pre-teen children were employed, their annual income in 1987 was not very high. About one-third had an income of no more than \$10,000; a further 31% reported an income between \$10,001 and \$20,000. Only 13% stated they had an income of more than \$30,000 a year ([Table 1](#)).



## Table 1 **Distribution of working mothers and their families in 1988, by annual income in 1987**

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

The large majority of working mothers were partners in two-parent families in which the husband worked full time. The impact of the husband's earnings on the family is profound and can be seen in the joint annual income figures of the parents ([Table 1](#) data include lone-parent families). In almost 4 in 10 families where the mother worked, the parental income ranged between \$30,001 and \$50,000 in 1987; and 35% of families had parental incomes over \$50,000. Nevertheless, 14% of families in which the mother worked outside the home reported an annual income of \$20,000 or less.

For the remainder of this article, "income" refers to "parental" income, that is, the joint income of both the working mother and her partner, or the income of the mother only in the case of lone-parent families.

## **Child care options**

The NCCS collected data on eight types of non-parental child care; for purposes of this article, they have been collapsed into four basic categories ([Table 2](#)). Since more than one type of arrangement is made for some children, the data include double-counting. For example, a child may spend 30 hours a week with a sitter and another 15 hours in a kindergarten or nursery school program; in this case, the child appears in the totals for both types of care. This double-counting is not problematical, however, since the purpose here is to portray the use of different types of care.



## Table 2 **Distribution of children in non-parental child care arrangements, 1988**

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

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This article focuses on two of these options: care by a sitter, whether a relative or non-relative, and care in a day care centre. The reason for examining sitter care is that this option is used for far more children than any other type of non-parental care arrangement during the mother's absence at work. Day care centres were chosen for study because even though they have a smaller enrolment than kindergarten/nursery school programs, 70% of children are there while their mothers are working, compared with 33% of children in kindergarten/nursery school. Furthermore, since kindergarten/nursery school is generally offered part day only, and the majority of mothers work full time, full-day access to care is an important requirement for women.

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## Table 3 **Profile of children under 13 in 1988, by parental income in 1987**

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

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## Care by a sitter<sup>(2)</sup>

In 1988, approximately 814,000 women left at least one of their children in the care of a sitter while they were working. This accounted for an estimated 1,042,000 children under the age of 13, 58% of whom were less than 6 years old. Almost 12% of the children, some 120,000, came from lone-parent families.

## Hours in care

Children spent an average of 20 hours per week in sitter care. As many generalizations do, however, this one masks a more complicated pattern of use. One-fifth of these children spent, at most, 5 hours a week with the sitter; another fifth spent between 6 and 10 hours. Such few hours may suggest that they were receiving 1 or 2 hours of care before and/or after the school day (especially in the case of children over 5, who comprised the large majority of those in sitter care for 10 hours or less). Nevertheless, 59% of children were left with a sitter for more than 10 hours a week; of these 613,000 children, over one-fifth spent more than 40 hours with one.

Although 41% of all children in a sitter's care were there for no more than 10 hours a week, those from

families in the higher income groups spent longer hours with the sitter: 17% of children with parents in the \$70,001-and-over category spent more than 40 hours a week in a sitter's care, significantly more than the 13% average.

## Parental expenditures on care

Finding child care that is not an undue strain on the family finances is a significant concern for many working mothers. Sitter care appears to be an affordable option. For almost one-third of all children, sitters cost nothing; for over one-third, sitters cost between \$1 and \$25 per week and for one-fifth they cost \$26 to \$50. In other words, the mothers of over 85% of children in a sitter's care were paying no more than \$50 a week per child. The average out-of-pocket expenditure was \$1.27 per hour per child for those children whose mothers paid for the service. <sup>(3)</sup> (The dependence on relatives to provide child care, which doubtless defrays some of the costs of sitter care, is outlined in the following section.)

Not surprisingly, families in the lower income groups were much more likely to pay nothing for a sitter; close to half the children in the \$1 to \$20,000 family income group and 39% of those in the \$20,001 to \$30,000 range were cared for free of charge, but almost one-quarter of those from families with incomes exceeding \$50,000 were also looked after gratis. Less than 5% of all children cost their parents over \$75 for their weekly care, although higher income families were more likely than other families to pay rates at the high end of the scale.



### Chart **Hours per week in sitter care while mother working, 1988.**

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

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## Relatives as sitters

The high volume of free babysitting observed may not be surprising when the sitter's family ties to the child are considered. Almost 40% of children in sitter care were cared for by a relative while their mother was away at work; in the majority of these cases, this person was a grandparent. Grandparents were relied upon more frequently by low- to middle-income families: close to one-quarter of all children from families with \$50,000 or less were regularly looked after by their grandparents. The proportion was lower in the higher income groups but stayed in the 14% to 20% range. Aunts and uncles were the next "relative of choice" for working mothers using other family members to supervise their children, accounting for about 8% of all children in a sitter's care.



## Chart **Weekly expenditures on sitter care while mother working, 1988.**

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

## Care in a day care centre

The perception that formal day care is used principally by the well-to-do and subsidized low-income mothers is something of an exaggeration. About 128,000 working mothers sent at least one of their children to a day care centre, and 57% of them had parental incomes between \$20,001 and \$60,000. The assumption that only very young children are placed in day care is, however, correct; 89% of the 141,000 children in day care while their mothers were working were no more than 5 years old. Almost one in five, 18%, of day care children came from lone-parent families.

## Hours in day care

Working women with children in a day care centre generally made far greater use of these facilities than did women using sitter care. Children spent an average 31.4 hours a week in day care. Children from higher income families were slightly more likely to spend long hours (over 30 per week) at a centre than were those from families with incomes up to \$50,000 ([Table 4](#)). A significant aberration in this general pattern is found among children from families in the \$20,001 to \$30,000 range, almost 36% of whom spent over 40 hours a week at day care.



## Table 4 **Distribution of children of working mothers, by weekly hours in day care, child care expenditures and parental income**

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

## Parental expenditures on day care

Given that a large proportion of children spent many hours in day care, it seems surprising that the weekly expenses reported by mothers contradicts so much of the anecdotal evidence. With payments

averaging \$1.59 per hour per child for the parents being charged, the working mothers' out-of-pocket expenditures on day care were competitive with paid sitter care. Only 6% of children in day care cost their families more than \$100 a week (and in most of these cases no more than \$125); almost the same proportion cost their families nothing at all, most probably because their places were subsidized. Of the remaining 89% of children, day care payments for half were between \$1 and \$50 a week, and from \$51 to \$100 for the other half.

Day care expenditures for children from families in the lower income groups were generally smaller. A high proportion (63%) of children whose families had incomes of \$50,000 or less had been placed in centres whose direct cost was no more than \$50 a week. In fact, 12% of children from families reporting \$30,000 or less received free day care, and 45% were paying \$1 to \$25 a week.

One of the reasons why parents' direct outlays on day care may be lower than expected is subsidization; one in five children is subsidized by the government to some extent. Subsidization is restricted almost exclusively to lower income families; 31% of children from families in the \$1 to \$50,000 income range received subsidies in 1988, with almost half (49%) of those from families with \$30,000 or less having some degree of financial assistance. (A number of DAs did not know or did not say if they received subsidies, which makes it likely that these estimates are low.)

## Type of day care

The direct cost of day care to the working mother may also be linked to the nature of the organizer or sponsor of the centre. Almost 67,000 of the children in day care (47%) were in privately run centres; but more than 34,000 (24%) used facilities run by community or day care agencies. Over 13% of children were in programs sponsored by municipal governments, and another 11% were in school- or church-run facilities.

As might be expected, lower income families made less use of privately run facilities. About 45% of children from families with incomes of \$50,000 or less had places in a private centre, compared with 51% of those from the over-\$50,000 income group. On the other hand, children from lower income families comprised almost all the "patrons" of centres run by municipal governments and made more use of facilities operated by a community or day care agency ([Table 5](#)). This pattern is even more noticeable among children from families with an income of \$30,000 or less: one-third of them attended centres sponsored by community or day care agencies, and another one-fifth were in municipal facilities, rates of use far above the average for these two types of centres.



## Table 5 Proportion of children in day care while mother is working, by operator/sponsor of day care centre and parental income

Source: National Child Care Survey

## Satisfaction with care arrangements

Sitter care and day care centres were used for about 80% of children for whom non-parental child care arrangements were made. And for the most part, mothers were happy with the care their children were receiving. Mothers of 70% of children in day care and of 77% of those with a sitter had "no reservations" about their children's well-being while they were away at work.

This general satisfaction with the quality of care is common to working mothers using all types of arrangements. (4) Almost 85% of all children were in care that their mothers considered somewhat or very satisfactory.

One of the major difficulties working mothers face is changing care arrangements because their children have outgrown a program, or they are not happy with the present sitter, or want to follow their favourite day care "teachers" if they change jobs, and so on. The upheaval caused by such moves can be considerable, and it happens with a fair degree of frequency. Of all children needing care while their mothers were working, the majority stayed with one main care arrangement throughout the year. However, over three-quarters of a million children C 770,000 C were dislocated at least once during the year when new care arrangements were made.

The most common reason for terminating an arrangement was the availability or unavailability of a program or care giver; this happened to 34% of children whose main type of care was cancelled. The beginning or ending of school holidays signalled the end of care for almost 19% of children. Less than 9% of children whose main care arrangement was terminated had to change care givers because their mother was dissatisfied with the care her child was receiving.

## Fathers

Although working women with young children took the lion's share of child care responsibilities, some working men also accepted the job. In 1988, just over 102,000 men were chiefly responsible for child care arrangements in their families (that is, the designated adult). They accounted for slightly more than 6% of the total number of working adults charged with such a trust. Fully 97% of working fathers were employed full time. On average, their individual incomes were higher than those of women, with over half having total incomes between \$20,001 and \$50,000 a year (41% for women working full time).

Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of working fathers, 38%, reported incomes of \$20,000 or less in 1987.

Working fathers also heavily favoured sitter care over day care: they placed over 61,000 children in the care of a sitter, compared with just under 8,000 in day care. For these men, general use of sitter care does not differ significantly from use by working women; the number of hours, the weekly expenditures per child and the cost of care per hour are comparable. An interesting divergence from the "norm" is that over one-quarter of these children were from lone-parent families, compared with less than 12% of those with working mothers.

The use of day care centres by children of working fathers does differ in some particulars. For example, the children were far less likely to be from lone-parent families they also spent slightly fewer hours per week in day care. The weekly expenditure per child was generally higher, however, probably because fathers were more likely to use privately run centres; the care for 67% of children of working fathers cost \$51 to \$100 per week, compared with 44% of children with working mothers.

## Conclusion

Sitters and day care centres were the two most common types of non-parental child care chosen by working mothers in 1988. That year, over 1 million children under the age of 13 were supervised by a sitter and about 140,000 were placed in day care. About 60% of children in sitter care were less than 6 years old, compared with 89% of those in day care.

Generally speaking, children in sitter care were there fewer hours per week than those in day care. About 40% of children with a sitter were being cared for by a relative or family member. Just over 47% of children in day care were in privately run centres.

Men were chiefly responsible for child care in 6% of families. On the whole, patterns of use by working fathers did not differ from those of working mothers.

Both mothers and fathers were generally satisfied with the care their children were receiving, but the question remains: were they content with the status quo because it offered what they wanted, or because they had no practical alternative to it? [ ]

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## Glossary

**Designated Adult (DA)** – the adult, male or female, chiefly responsible for making the care arrangements of children in the family, as self-identified in the National Child Care Survey. In cases where both parents shared child care tasks equally, the mother was chosen to be the DA. This aspect of the survey design means that men's involvement in child care is not fully represented.

**Mother** – a female DA who is the natural, step or foster mother of the children in her care. Since 99% of women DAs fit this definition of "mother", the word "mother" is synonymous with "female DA" in this article.

**Father** – a male DA who is the natural, step or foster father of the children in his care. Because 99% of male DAs meet this definition of "father", "father" is used as a synonym for "male DA".

**Parent** – the mother or father of the child, generally taken to mean the DA in this article.

**Spouse** – the legal or common-law partner of the DA. In most two-parent families, the spouse is the husband.

**Family** – two or more persons living in the same dwelling who are related by blood, marriage or adoption. In this article, at least one member of the family is a child under the age of 13.

**Relative** – any person related to the child by blood, marriage or adoption except a sibling or a parent living in the same household.

**Sitter** – a relative, neighbour, friend or other adult entrusted with care of the child during the DA's absence. This includes nannies and trained family day care providers operating licensed home day care facilities.

**Child care arrangement** – the type of care chosen for the supervision of the child during the DA's absence at work. Data are for the arrangements used during the reference week, unless otherwise indicated in a note.

**Parental expenditures** – the dollars the DA reported paying directly out of her or his pocket for child care during the reference week. The amounts reported exclude any subsidies. Furthermore, the amounts are based on the parents' best estimate of payments made and not on receipts provided by the care giver.

**Working mother, father or parent** – a female or male DA who had a job during the reference week, either full-time or part-time. He or she was not necessarily employed throughout the preceding 12 months.

**Annual income** – income from all sources in 1987. This includes gross wages and salaries, net income from self-employment, government transfer payments (Family Allowance, UI benefits, social assistance, etc.), investment income and other income.

# Data source and limitations: The National Child Care Survey

The National Child Care Survey (NCCS) is the most comprehensive survey on child care arrangements ever carried out in Canada. Conducted in September and October 1988, the NCCS was administered as a supplement to the monthly Labour Force Survey in all households with at least one child under the age of 13. In conjunction with Statistics Canada, the survey was designed and developed by the National Daycare Research Network, a consortium of researchers from four universities sponsored by Health and Welfare Canada. The objective was to provide information on the need for child care, patterns of use, expenses, parents' preferred choice of care, and the relationships between family structure, child care choices and work demands. This article draws on a very small fraction of the data available from the NCCS. A series of publications making full use of the NCCS data is planned for release by the Research Network over the next few years (see "Sources" in *Perspectives*, Spring 1991, for more information). For a full description of the survey, contact Sue Lafrance, Statistics Canada, at (613) 951-0524, or Dr. Donna Lero, University of Guelph, at (519) 824-4120.

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## Notes

### *Note 1*

The greatest area of employment growth for women over the period from 1980 to 1990 has been in full-time work, which increased by 54%. In 1990, full-time employment accounted for 79% of all employed women over the age of 24. A slightly smaller proportion of women with pre-school age children, just over two-thirds, worked full time.

### *Note 2*

The National Child Care Survey (NCCS) allowed designated adults (DAs) to report up to four different sitters for each child, if they had used more than one sitter care arrangement during the reference week. But because fewer than 13% of children had more than one sitter during the reference week and they spent so few hours in that subsidiary care, this overview report focuses on the "first care giver", that is the sitter with whom the child spent the most number of hours.

### **Note 3**

Sitters include nannies, many of whom would live in the same house as the child, and receive room and board as well as wages for their services.

### **Note 4**

Due to the configuration of the survey file, the data on satisfaction and terminations relate to the main care arrangements of working mothers C sitter care, day care, and other types of arrangements, including care by an immediate family member such as an older sibling or spouse while the mother is working. The satisfaction rating is based on a roll-up of responses to a series of questions asking about the designated adult's level of satisfaction with such items as the care giver's sensitivity to the child's needs, play space, learning activities and staff turnover.

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## **Source**

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Table 1

**Distribution of working mothers and their families in 1988, by annual income in 1987**

	Mothers*		Families**	
	'000	%	'000	%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,532</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,532</b>	<b>100</b>
\$1 - 10,000	531	35	77	5
\$10,001 - 20,000	472	31	135	9
\$20,001 - 30,000	323	21	217	14
\$30,001 - 50,000	169	11	566	37
\$50,001 - 70,000	16	1	356	23
\$70,001 and over	9	-	179	12

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

*\* Mothers are distributed according to their annual income; figures do not add due to some mothers working in 1988 but having no income in 1987.*

*\*\* Families are distributed according to the joint income of mothers and their spouses. These data include working mothers in lone-parent families.*

Table 2

**Distribution of children in non-parental child care arrangements, 1988**

Arrangement	Total number of children in care	Children in care while mother is working
	'000	'000
Care by sitter	1,814	1,042
Kindergarten/Nursery school	578	189
Day care centre	202	141
Before-/after-school program	83	64

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

Table 3

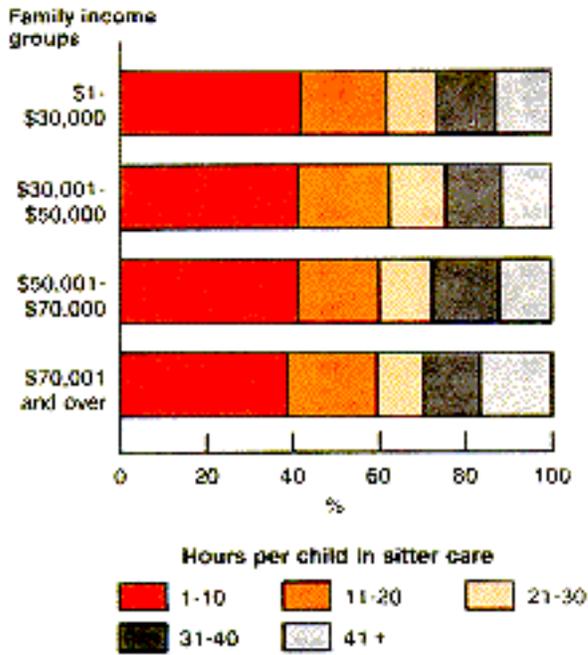
**Profile of children under 13 in 1988, by parental income in 1987**

	Total	\$1- 20,000	\$20,001- 30,000	\$30,001- 40,000	\$40,001- 50,000	\$50,001- 60,000	\$60,001- 70,000	\$70,001- 80,000	\$80,001 and over
	'000								
Number of families	2,724	560	426	544	455	314	181	93	141
Number of children	4,658	909	742	953	809	534	300	157	240
Age of children									
0-5	2,165	435	351	460	367	242	132	64	106
6-10	1,787	341	283	356	317	211	117	67	93
11-12	707	133	108	137	125	81	52	27	41
Total children in sitter care	1,814	314	263	348	321	237	139	74	114
With mother working	1,042	127	140	194	199	165	92	50	75
0-5	603	71	76	122	116	98	50	28	41
6-10	371	47	53	62	69	58	36	19	27
11-12	69	9	12	10	14	9	6	--	7
Total children in day care	202	44	30	29	29	25	18	9	16
With mother working	141	23	19	18	23	21	14	8	15
0-5	126	20	17	16	21	18	14	7	13
6-10	15	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
11-12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

### Hours per week in sitter care while mother working, 1988

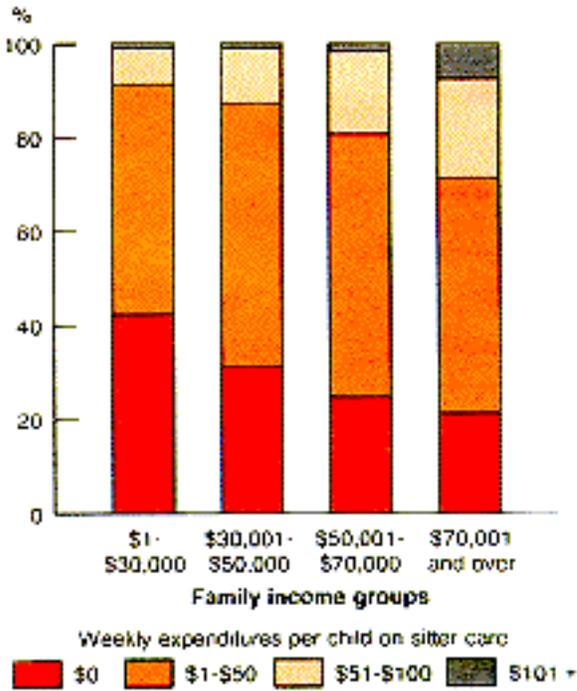
Regardless of the income group, about 40% of children spent 10 hours or less a week in sitter care.



Source: National Child Care Survey

### Weekly expenditures on sitter care while mother working, 1988

Even in the highest income group, over 20% of the children received free care.



Source: National Child Care Survey

Table 4

**Distribution of children of working mothers, by weekly hours in day care, child care expenditures and parental income**

		Total	\$1-50,000	\$50,001 and over
Number of children	('000)	141	82	58
Weekly hours in day care	(%)	100	100	100
1-10		14	15	12
11-20		14	14	15
21-30		15	17	12
31-40		28	26	32
41+		29	28	30
Weekly expenditures per child	(%)	100	100	100
\$0		5	8	--
\$1-\$50		45	55	32
\$51-\$100		44	34	57
\$101+		6	--	10

*Source: National Child Care Survey*

Table 5

**Proportion of children in day care while mother is working, by operator/sponsor of day care centre and parental income**

		Total	\$1-50,000	\$50,001 and over
Number of children	('000)	141	82	58
Private	(%)	47	45	51
Community/day care agency		24	26	22
Municipal government		13	17	--
School/Church		11	9	13
Other/Not stated		--	--	--
Total	(%)	100	100	100

*Source: National Child Care Survey*