

Female lone parents in the labour market

[\(1\)](#)

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The changing structure of the family in Canada is evident in the rising number of lone-parent families, most of them headed by women. And although lone parenthood tends to be a temporary state, [\(2\)](#) for many women this period is likely to be a time of financial hardship. Female lone parents, in fact, are among the most economically disadvantaged Canadians.

In 1990, 59% of all families headed by women parenting alone were below the low income cut-offs. [\(3\)](#) In part, this was because only about half of these women were employed, [\(4\)](#) well below the proportion for other parents. And among those who worked, many had low-paying jobs.

This article outlines trends in the labour market activity of female lone parents since the mid-1970s. It focuses on comparisons with mothers in two-parent families and on the factors affecting lone parents' labour force participation.

A fast-growing group

In the recent past, few segments of Canadian society have grown faster than lone-parent families headed by women. From 1976 to 1991, the number of women who had children under age 16 and were parenting alone increased 66% from 267,000 to 444,000. There was a particularly sharp rise among those with children younger than age 6, [\(5\)](#) their ranks almost doubling from 96,000 to 190,000. Female lone parents whose youngest child was aged 6 to 15 also increased, but more slowly (up 48%), from 171,000 to 254,000.

While lone-parent families headed by women were still vastly outnumbered by husband-wife families [\(6\)](#) with children under age 16, the same period saw a slight overall decline in the latter (from 2.8 million to 2.7 million). As a result, female-headed lone-parent families accounted for a larger proportion of all families with children under age 16 in 1991 than in 1976: 14% versus 8%.

Personal characteristics differ

Women parenting alone tend to be younger and to have less formal education than wives in two-parent families ([Table 1](#)). But female lone parents are not a homogeneous group. While close to a third of them became lone parents as a result of an out-of-wedlock birth, for the majority lone parenthood stemmed from a marriage break-up ([Table 2](#)). As well, although over a third had not graduated from high school, almost as many were community college or university graduates.



Table 1 Characteristics of female lone parents and wives in two-parent families, by age of youngest child, 1991

Source: *Labour Force Survey*



Table 2 Characteristics of female lone parents by age, 1991

Source: *Labour Force Survey*

Therefore, some lone parents, usually those in the younger age groups, are single mothers with relatively little education. Their labour force prospects are restricted not only by the presence of children, but also by their lack of training, work skills, and experience. On the other hand, a substantial share of female lone parents - typically somewhat older, and usually divorced or separated - have postsecondary credentials. These women are often better qualified to participate in the labour market.

Thus, the labour force activity of female lone parents can vary, depending on the characteristics of the women involved. Nonetheless, the main factor affecting female lone parents' participation in the job market is the age of their children.

Low labour force participation

Women parenting alone are less likely to be in the labour force than are wives in two-parent families. In 1991, the labour force participation rate of female lone parents was 63%. The corresponding figure for wives in two-parent families was 72%. This was a considerable change from 1976, when the labour force participation rate of female lone parents substantially exceeded that of wives (53% compared with 42%).

Regardless of the presence of a spouse, women with pre-school age children tend to have lower labour force participation rates than do those with older children. This tendency, however, is more pronounced among lone parents. In 1991, half of female lone parents with children under age 6 were in the labour force, compared with 72% of those whose youngest child was aged 6 to 15. The corresponding figures for wives were 66% and 77%.

To some extent, educational attainment lessens the effect of young children on lone parents' labour force participation. For example, in 1991, the participation rates of female lone parents with university degrees were 79% for those with pre-school age children and 87% among those whose youngest child was aged 6 to 15. And at this level of education, the participation rates of lone parents were virtually the same as those of wives in two-parent families.

The reasons why female lone parents did not participate in the labour force also reflect the influence of young children. In 1991, 30% of non-participant lone parents with children younger than age 6 had left their last job because of personal or family responsibilities. However, those with children aged 6 to 15 cited personal or family responsibilities less frequently (8%).

High unemployment

Not only are a relatively large number of female lone parents out of the labour force, but among those who are participants, unemployment is higher than among wives in two-parent families. In 1991, the unemployment rate of lone parents was 16.8%, compared with 9.6% for wives. As well, this difference of more than 7 percentage points was much wider than the 1 percentage point gap that separated the two groups in 1976 ([Chart A](#)).



Chart A The gap between the unemployment rates of female lone parents and wives had widened in recent years.

Source: Labour Force Survey

Unemployment rates are especially high among lone parents with pre-school age children. In 1991, the rate for female lone parents with children under age 6 was 22.6%, compared with 13.8% for those with children aged 6 to 15. Unemployment rates of wives in two-parent families did not differ so sharply with the ages of their children; the gap in 1991 amounted to just 2 percentage points: 10.7% versus 8.7%.

Less likely to be employed

The combination of low labour force participation and high unemployment means that relatively few female lone parents are employed. In 1991, their employment/population ratio was 52%, compared with 65% for wives in two-parent families. [\(7\)](#) This was a change from 1976 when the ratio for lone parents was substantially higher than that of wives ([Chart B](#)).



Chart B Since 1983, female lone parents have been less likely than wives to be employed.

Source: Labour Force Survey

The presence of young children in any family appears to reduce the likelihood that the mother will be employed. Again, the effect is much greater on lone parents than on wives. In 1991, the employment/population ratio of female lone parents with children under age 6 was 39%, compared with 59% for wives in two-parent families.

Part-time work

While a considerable number of lone parents are not working, those who are employed are less likely than wives in two-parent families to have part-time jobs.

In 1991, just 19% of employed female lone parents worked part time, while the corresponding proportion for wives was 29%. However, since 1976, there has been a gradual rise in the rate of part-time work among female lone parents. Over the same period, the percentage of employed wives with part-time jobs did not change substantially.

Part-time work is most prevalent among women with young children. And for lone parents, the presence of pre-school age children has been increasingly associated with working part time. By 1991, 26% of employed female lone parents with children younger than age 6 were part-timers, up from 17% in 1976 ([Chart C](#)). The increase in the rate of part-time work among lone parents with older children was more gradual (from 14% to 17%). On the other hand, during the same period, there was almost no change in the proportion of wives working part time, regardless of the ages of their children.



Chart C

The rate of part-time work among female lone parents with young children has risen substantially.

*Source:**Labour Force Survey*

Female lone parents are less likely than wives in two-parent families to work part time by choice. Fully half of lone parents who had part-time jobs in 1991 reported that this was the only work they could find. Among wives, the leading reason for part-time work was that they did not want full-time employment.

Shift work

Shift work is relatively common among female lone parents, especially those with young children. ⁽⁸⁾ In 1991, a third of female lone parents with full-time jobs and children under age 6 worked shift, almost twice the rate for wives with children in the same age range (18%). Lone parents who had older children were less likely than those with young children to work shift (21%), and the difference in their rate and that of wives with older children was negligible.

Occupation

Whether they are lone parents or wives in two-parent families, employed women tend to have similar occupational distributions. In 1991, 28% of employed female lone parents were in clerical positions, and 18% had service jobs - about the same figures as for wives in two-parent families.

Female lone parents and wives are both relatively well-represented in professional and managerial occupations. For instance, in 1991, a quarter of employed lone parents were in professional fields, and another 13% had managerial and administrative occupations. The corresponding figures for wives in two-parent families were 25% and 11%.

The occupations of employed lone parents and wives reflect their educational attainment. For instance, among women with postsecondary credentials, large proportions of lone parents and wives were in professional/managerial positions (both 59%). For wives, this proportion held whether their children were less than age 6 or aged 6 to 15. By contrast, female lone parents with older children were more likely than those with young children to be in professional/managerial occupations (61% versus 52%).

Summary

Increasingly, both parents in husband-wife families are working and sharing the costs and obligations of

child care. But for a large proportion of female lone parents, the employment option does not exist. Particularly if their children are young, the difficulties of balancing a job with child-rearing may lead lone parents to opt out of the labour market entirely.

Alternatively, female lone parents may choose jobs with hours that can be integrated more easily with domestic activities. Such jobs, however, are often associated with low pay and few opportunities for advancement. Therefore, even those lone parents who are employed may have jobs that keep many of them below the low income cut-offs.

The characteristics of individual lone parents, however, vary significantly. Some women have skills and experience that enable them to compete successfully in the labour market. Others - typically young single mothers - are disadvantaged by limited formal education, few skills, and little or no work experience.

Male lone parents

While relatively few men are parenting alone, their numbers have risen since 1976 at about the same pace as female lone parents. By 1991, 65,000 men were heading one-parent families with children under age 16. This marked a 67% increase over 1976 when male lone parents totalled 39,000. In both years, men accounted for 13% of all lone parents.

The employment situation of male lone parents tends to be more favourable than that of their female counterparts. However, male lone parents do not fare as well as husbands in two-parent families. In 1991, 71% of male lone parents were employed. This was much higher than the employment/population ratio for female lone parents (52%), but considerably below that for husbands in two-parent families (87%).

Unemployment is high among male lone parents, 15.7% of whom were unemployed in 1991. This was twice the rate for husbands in two-parent families (7.7%), but slightly below the rate for female lone parents (16.8%).

At 85%, the labour force participation rate of male lone parents in 1991 was low compared with the rate for husbands in two-parent families (95%). Male lone parents, however, were far more likely to be in the labour force than were women parenting alone (63%).

Few men, regardless of their family status, work part time. Only 4% of employed male lone parents and 2% of husbands in two-parent families had part-time jobs in 1991. On the other hand, 19% of employed female lone parents were working part time.

Notes

Note 1

This article is based on a chapter in *Lone-parent families in Canada* ([Lindsay](#), 1992).

Note 2

The Family History Survey, conducted by Statistics Canada in 1984, estimated that the average duration of lone parenthood for women was 5.5 years. This varied according to the originating event: for women who became parents out of wedlock, the average duration was 4.4 years; for those who were separated or divorced, 5.6 years; and for those who were widowed, 7.5 years ([Moore](#), 1988).

Note 3

A family is considered to be below the low income cut-off if the proportion of their income spent on food, shelter and clothing is more than 20 percentage points above the proportion the average family spends on these items. The income data for lone parents and husband-wife families, which come from the Survey of Consumer Finances, refer to those with single children less than 18 years of age. This is not strictly comparable with Labour Force Survey data, which are based on families with children less than age 16.

Note 4

If female-headed lone-parent families had at least one earner (in the vast majority of cases, the lone parent), their incidence of low income fell to 49%. However, if such families had no earner, the low-income figure stood at 97%. By comparison, just 10% of two-parent families with children were below the low income cut-offs.

Note 5

The age of children refers to the age of the youngest child in the family. Families with at least one child younger than 6 might also have children in older age groups.

Note 6

Husband-wife families include both married and common-law couples.

Note 7

The employment population ratio for a particular group (for example, lone parents) is the number employed in that group expressed as a percentage of the population in that group.

Note 8

The information on shift work was derived from the Survey of Work Arrangements. With the exception of the data on low income (Survey of Consumer Finances), all of the other figures are from the Labour Force Survey. For a closer look at the shift work phenomenon, see the article, "Working shift" ([Sunter](#), 1993), in this issue.

References

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Source

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Table 1

Characteristics of female lone parents and wives in two-parent families, by age of youngest child, 1991

	Female lone parents			Wives in two-parent families		
	Total	Age of youngest child		Total	Age of youngest child	
		Less than 6 years	6-15 years		Less than 6 years	6-15 years
	'000					
Total	444	190	254	2,716	1,356	1,360
	%					
Age	100	100	100	100	100	100
15-24 years	12	27	--	5	10	--
25-34 years	42	56	32	43	66	20
35-44 years	38	17	54	44	23	64
45 years and over	8	--	13	8	1	15
Education	100	100	100	100	100	100
0-8 years	9	7	9	6	4	8
Some secondary	27	33	23	17	15	19
Completed secondary	22	24	21	28	29	27
Some postsecondary	10	10	11	9	9	8
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	24	21	26	28	29	27
University degree	8	5	10	12	14	11
Labour force participation rate	63	50	72	72	66	77
Employment/population ratio	52	39	62	65	59	70
Proportion working part time	19	26	17	29	32	27
Unemployment rate	16.8	22.6	13.8	9.6	10.7	8.7

Source: Labour Force Survey

Table 2

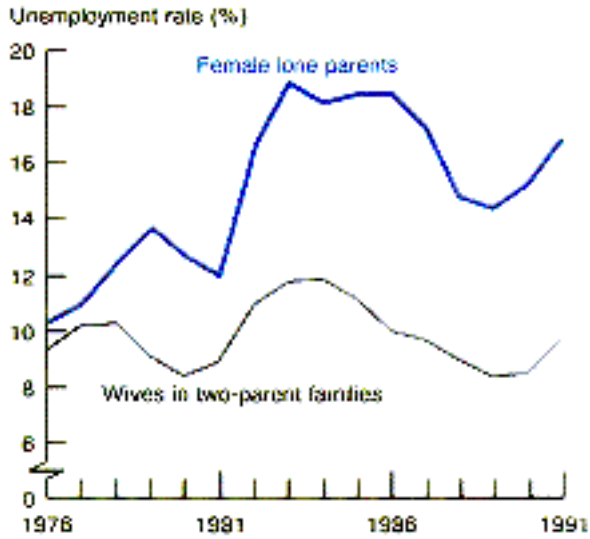
Characteristics of female lone parents by age, 1991

	Age group				
	Total	15-24	25-34	35-44	45 and over
	'000				
Total	444	52	188	170	35
	%				
	100	100	100	100	100
Marital status					
Single	30	78	37	12	--
Separated or divorced	60	17	56	77	67
Widowed	6	--	3	7	24
Married*	4	--	4	4	--
Age of youngest child					
Less than 6 years	43	96	57	19	--
6-15 years	57	--	43	81	97
Education					
0-8 years	9	7	8	8	19
Some secondary	27	48	32	17	18
Completed secondary	22	25	22	24	11
Some postsecondary	10	9	11	10	11
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	24	12	23	29	26
University degree	8	--	4	13	15

*Source: Labour Force Survey*** Includes women who perceived themselves as married although no spouse was present.*

Chart A

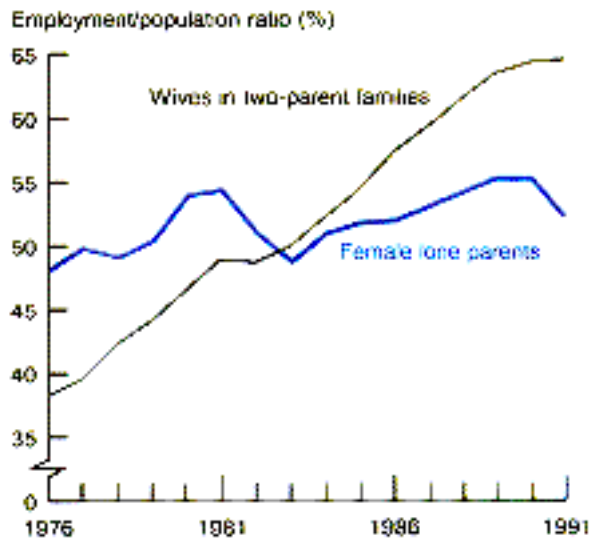
The gap between the unemployment rates of female lone parents and wives has widened in recent years.



Source: Labour Force Survey

Chart B

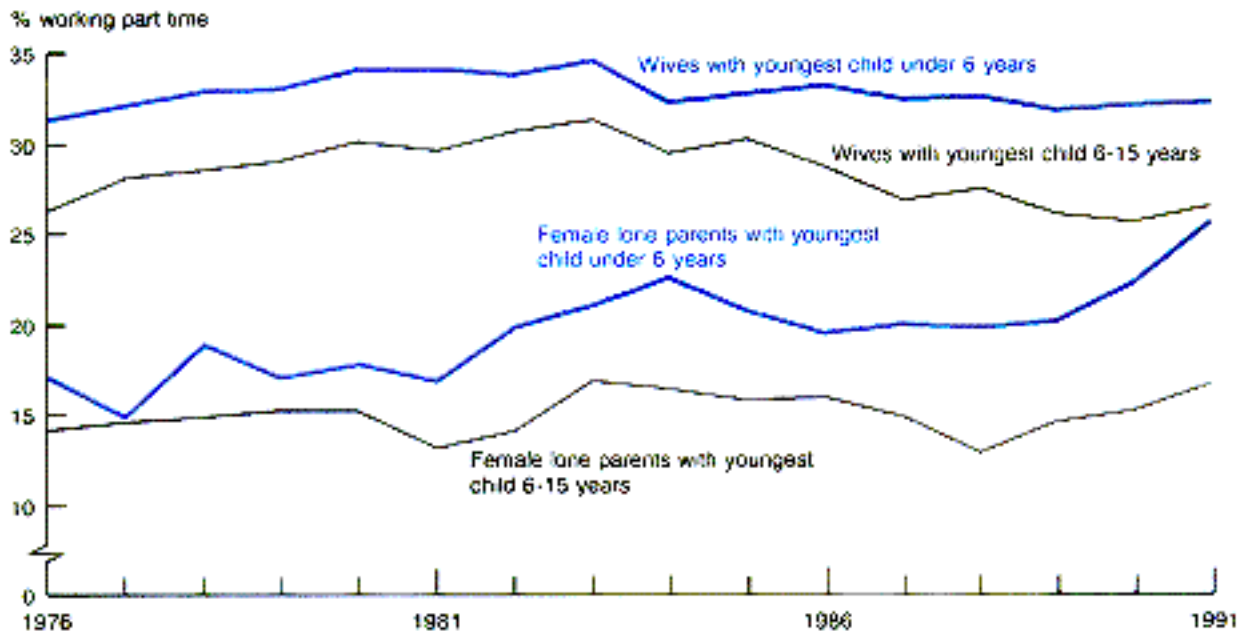
Since 1983, female lone parents have been less likely than wives to be employed.



Source: Labour Force Survey

Chart C

The rate of part-time work among female lone parents with young children has risen substantially.



Source: Labour Force Survey