

Hours of working couples

Dan Charrette

Among the widely recognized trends in Canadian labour markets are the rise in women's participation rate (making dual earners the majority of husband-wife families), growth in the percentage of women with full-time jobs, and longer hours for more workers. Viewed in isolation, each of these trends has implications for the hours that family members spend on the job, but their overall effect on the proportion of family time devoted to the labour market can only be surmised.

This article brings these trends together by providing a direct measure of the **combined** weekly hours usually worked by dual-earner couples with and without children (see *Data source and definitions*). Do the characteristics of couples who work long hours differ from those of other dual earners? On average, how many hours do husbands and wives in dual-earner families work each week? How does this vary with the age of their children?

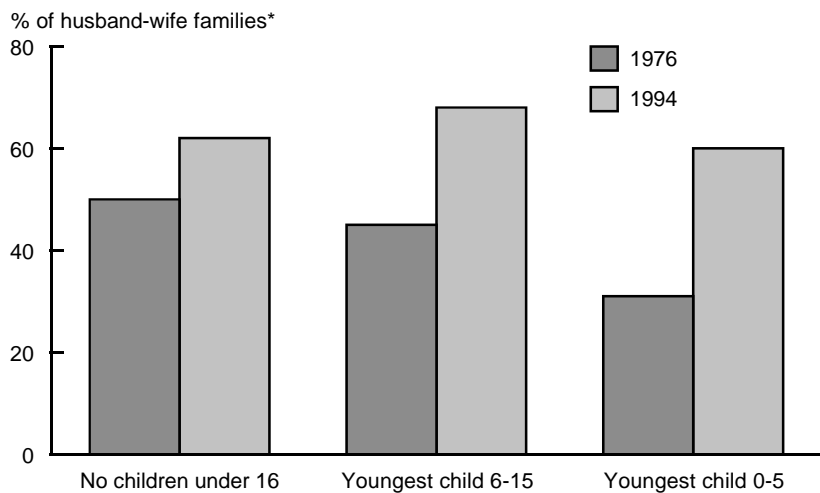
Most couples dual earners

In 1994, families in which both spouses worked outside the home outnumbered those with just one employed spouse: 3.3 million versus 1.9 million. Less than 20 years earlier, most husband-wife families were single earners, especially if they had children of preschool age (five or younger). In fact, in 1976, among families with at least one preschool child, single earners outnumbered dual earners by more than two to one (Chart A).

Most dual-earner couples (more than two-thirds) worked a combined 60 to 89 hours a week in 1994. Another 12% had combined weekly

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Chart A
Regardless of the presence or age of children, the proportions of dual-earner families have increased sharply.



Source: Labour Force Survey
* With at least one earner

hours totalling less than 60, while a somewhat larger group (20%) worked 90 or more hours (Chart B).

Who works long hours?

Certain characteristics of the 665,000 couples working long hours (90 or more per week) set them apart from other dual earners (Table 1). Well-educated wives are more prevalent among families usually working long hours.¹ In 1994, 24% of wives in dual-earner couples working 90 or more hours a week had a university degree; the proportion of degree-holding wives was smaller (about 17%) in couples with shorter combined work weeks.

The relatively large percentage of degree-holding wives among couples working long hours prevailed regardless of the presence of children. Among dual earners working 90 or

more hours a week, the proportion of wives with degrees was 24% in families without children, 23% in those whose youngest child was aged 6 to 15, and slightly higher (26%) in those with at least one child of preschool age. These long hours may reflect the higher proportions of university graduates in professional² or managerial positions. Workers with management responsibilities or specialized technical skills are often encouraged, or even required, to put in long hours (Sunter and Morissette, 1994).

Average combined work week

In 1994, the average combined work week of all dual-earner couples varied only slightly with the presence and age of children: 76.5 hours for those with preschoolers, 78.5 hours

Data source and definitions

The data in this article are annual averages from Statistics Canada's monthly Labour Force Survey (LFS), a sample survey of about 59,000 households. Information for 1994 is contrasted with 1976, the earliest year for which comparable data are available.

The LFS includes questions on the weekly hours (whether paid or unpaid) individuals usually work at their main job and any other job. "Usual hours" are combined paid and unpaid hours at all jobs for paid workers, the self-employed, and unpaid family workers. For multiple jobholders, respondents who usually work 40 hours per week at their main job and another 15 hours at a second job would have a usual work week of 55 hours.

Common-law relationships are included among husband-wife families.

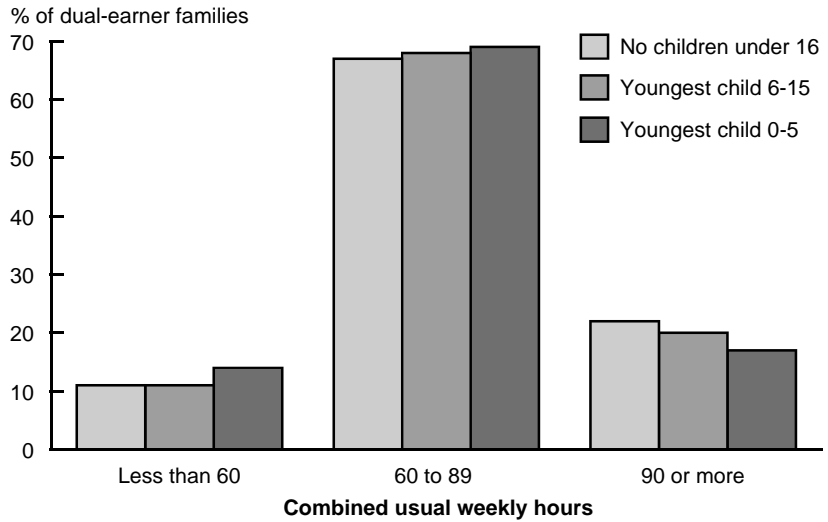
for couples whose youngest child was aged 6 to 15, and 79.2 hours for those with no children under age 16.

These relatively small differences in combined work weeks were solely attributable to the hours worked by wives. As could be expected, wives with children worked fewer hours outside the home than did those with no children. The latter group averaged 35.6 hours per week. Among mothers whose youngest child was aged 6 to 15, the average declined to 33.6 hours a week, and for those with preschoolers, to 32 hours. Thus, while children no longer have much influence on whether a family has one or two earners, they do play a role in determining hours worked by wives. By contrast, for dual-earner husbands the presence and age of children made almost no difference in work weeks, which averaged 44 to 45 hours.

Range of hours

The differing effect of children on work patterns is even more evident in the distribution of dual-earner husbands and wives by hours usually worked. In 1994, about a quarter of dual-earner husbands usually worked 50 or more hours a week whether or

Chart B
In 1994, about 20% of dual-earner couples worked at least 90 hours a week.



Source: Labour Force Survey

Table 1
Combined usual weekly hours of dual-earner couples, 1994

| | Combined usual weekly hours | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| | Total | Less than 60 | 60 to 89 | 90 or more |
| All dual-earner couples ('000) | 3,299 | 395 | 2,239 | 665 |
| Wife with university degree (%) | 19 | 16 | 17 | 24 |
| No children under 16 ('000) | 1,643 | 183 | 1,107 | 354 |
| Wife with university degree (%) | 18 | 13 | 17 | 24 |
| Youngest child 6-15 ('000) | 883 | 101 | 603 | 179 |
| Wife with university degree (%) | 17 | 16 | 16 | 23 |
| Youngest child 0-5 ('000) | 773 | 111 | 529 | 132 |
| Wife with university degree (%) | 22 | 22 | 20 | 26 |

Source: Labour Force Survey

not they had children. Very few dual-earner husbands worked part time (less than 30 hours a week): 5% of those without children, compared with 3% of those with children.

By contrast, the presence of children tended to be associated with part-time work among wives (Marshall, 1994). Whereas 21% of

dual-earner wives without children worked part time, the figure was 30% among those with children at home.

The presence of children did not have as strong an effect on the proportions of wives working long hours: 9% without children had work weeks of 50 hours or more, compared with 6% of those with children.

