

Stay-at-home dads

Katherine Marshall

Over the past two decades, the proportion of single-earner husband-wife families¹ with children at home has decreased from 59% to 31%. During this period, some characteristics of these families have also changed. For example, in 1976, wives were breadwinners in only 4% of all single-earner husband-wife families with children; 21 years later, that figure had increased to 16% (see *Data sources and definitions*).

Does this imply a rise in the number of “stay-at-home” dads? There may well be more fathers without a paid job and at home – both by choice and by default (because they are unemployed or have returned to school). Whatever the reason, a rise in the number and proportion of families with a father at home has social and economic implications. The reversal of traditional sex roles, for example, even if positive in the long term, may initially create personal and family tension or provoke social discrimination.² Furthermore, family finances may be affected. Families headed by female breadwinners have traditionally reported lower annual incomes.

Based on a selected definition of “stay-at-home” (see *In search of the stay-at-home parent*), this article examines the characteristics of fathers who stay at home in husband-wife families with children under 16. Some comparisons are made with stay-at-home mothers and with employed parents. An overview of recent changes in family types, use of parental leave, and time use among single-earner families puts the analysis in context.

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Feeding a black squirrel in High Park, Toronto, 1917

Changing families and the roles within

Since the advent of industrialization, women have been largely responsible for most household and family work, and men for paid work. However, with the long-term rise in women’s labour force participation, and more recently, men’s growing involvement in child care, parents’ roles are becoming less traditional (see *Parental leave and Time use of stay-at-home parents*).

The shift in roles reflects the changing structure of families. For example, the percentage of dual-earner families with children under 16 rose from 34% in 1976 to 56% in 1997 (Chart A). The percentage of lone-parent families doubled from 5% to 10% – owing mainly to an increase in female lone parents – and families in which the wife was sole earner grew from 2% to 5% of all families. These changes contributed to the steep decline in the percentage of families in which the husband was sole earner (from 54% to 23%).

This increase in dual-earner and lone-parent families means that many parents face a greater challenge in balancing work and family responsibilities. In order to meet this challenge, some may decide to pay for child care or other household services, and/or to alter their work arrangements (Marshall, 1994 and Statistics Canada, forthcoming). Others may opt to have one parent leave the labour force and remain at home. This article focuses on the last approach, and in particular, on families in which the father becomes the stay-at-home parent.

Why families have only one earner

The number of single-earner two-parent families with children under 16 at home declined steadily between 1976 and 1997, from 3.3 million to 1.8 million (Table 1). Families with a non-earning mother decreased from 3.2 million to 1.5 million over the same

Data sources and definitions

The monthly Labour Force Survey (LFS) collects labour market information for all household members aged 15 and over, as well as demographic and family relationship information for all household members, making it possible to derive family types.

The core content of the 1992 General Social Survey was time use. That survey collected data over 12 months from a random sample of about 9,000 respondents aged 15 and older. Each person completed a diary of activities over a 24-hour day, noting the duration of each primary activity, as well as when, where and with whom it had taken place.

The Employment Insurance Statistics database at Statistics Canada uses

administrative data from Human Resources Development Canada. HRDC provides a monthly file on all claims for insurance benefits, which includes such variables as age, sex, occupation, earnings and province of beneficiary, as well as type of benefit, weekly insurable earnings, and weeks of insurable employment.

Single-earner family: in this study, a husband-wife family with children under 16 at home, who, at the time of the LFS, reported that only one spouse was employed, either part time or full time, while the other was unemployed or not in the labour force.

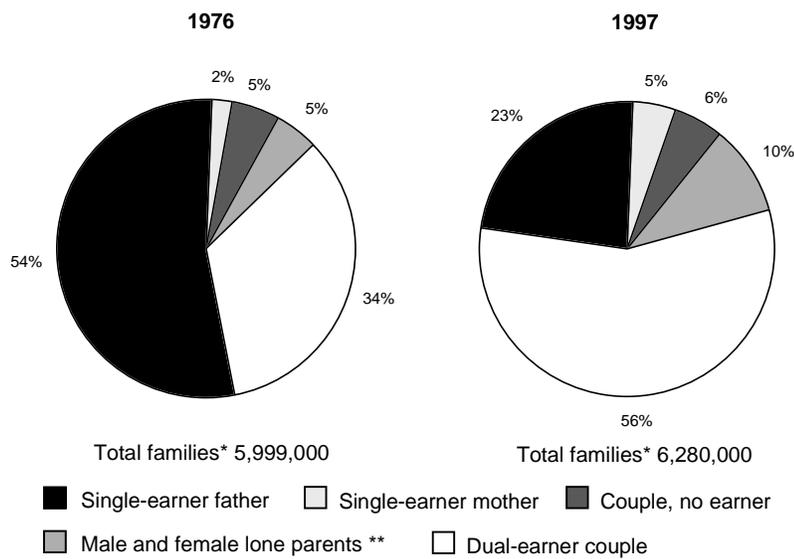
Stay-at-home parent: a person in a husband-wife family with children under 16 at home, who did not have a job or busi-

ness at the time of the LFS, was not looking for work, was not attending school, and was not permanently unable to work. (For more discussion see *In search of the stay-at-home parent.*)

Discouraged worker: a person not in the labour force who wanted to have a job, but was not looking for one in the belief that no work was available.

Permanently unable to work: a respondent who reported that he or she had not worked at a job or business because of a long-term physical or mental illness or other disability. This designation is not a measure of medical disability; rather, it allows the respondent to skip over most of the questionnaire.

Chart A
The family structure has changed considerably over the past two decades.



Source: Labour Force Survey
 * Couples and lone parents with at least one child under 16 at home.
 ** Includes both employed and not employed.

period, while those with a non-earning father increased from 0.1 million to 0.3 million.

Contrary to popular belief, not all families with only one earning spouse have chosen this arrangement in order to allow the other spouse to manage the household. For example, some spouses are unemployed and looking for work, or are permanently unable to work; these people would probably prefer to be working. Others are attending school in order to develop skills or to pursue special interests. Spouses who have most likely chosen not to work so that they may devote time to family responsibilities are, by exclusion, those who are able to work yet are neither looking for work nor attending school. In this study only these persons are assumed to be “stay-at-home” parents.

The profile of single-earner families has changed over time. The number in which the non-earning spouse is unemployed, permanently unable to work or attending school has increased from 347,000 to 542,000 over

the past two decades. This growth is mainly the result of an increase in the proportion and number of non-earning mothers and fathers looking for work or attending school (Table 1).

In contrast, the number of single-earner families in which the non-earning spouse opts to stay at home has dropped from 3.0 million to 1.2 million over the same period. Families with stay-at-home mothers have dropped by 1.8 million and those with stay-at-home fathers have increased by 36,000. Therefore, as a result of this diverging trend (Chart B), the proportion of families with stay-at-home fathers has increased from 1% in 1976 to 6% in 1997.

In search of the stay-at-home parent

The stereotypical 1950s stay-at-home mom may have worked after marriage, but once she had children she left the labour force, at least until they moved out. The image of the stay-at-home parent is more elusive today. The stay-at-home parent may be either sex, and the length of time at home may vary. Also, parents may assume the role intermittently; for example, two stretches of paid maternity leave can be viewed as two incidents of stay-at-home motherhood. However, as with the earlier definition, parents who label themselves stay-at-home moms or dads are assumed to have chosen the role, although this may not necessarily be the case.

Statistics Canada does not list "stay-at-home parent" as a possible reason for not being in the labour force. Therefore, this study uses two criteria for the category: 1) there must be dependent children at home; and 2) the stay-at-home parent must not be looking for work, but must be able to work and not attending school. However, it is impossible to know how many stay-at-home parents wished to adopt this role, and how many had no other feasible option. It is known, though, that in 1997, 1% of stay-at-home mothers and 6% of stay-at-home fathers were actually discouraged workers.

	1976	1979	1982	1985	1988	1991	1994	1997
	'000							
Total single-earner families	3,342	3,013	2,677	2,400	2,028	1,950	1,854	1,759
	%							
Earning father/non-earning mother	96	95	91	90	90	83	82	84
Earning mother/non-earning father	4	5	9	10	10	17	18	16
	'000							
Earning father/non-earning mother	3,215	2,870	2,429	2,152	1,818	1,611	1,528	1,472
	%							
Mother unemployed	6	8	11	14	15	19	18	16
Mother not in labour force								
Stay-at-home*	92	91	87	83	80	76	76	77
Attending school	2	2	2	3	4	4	5	5
Unable to work	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
	'000							
Earning mother/non-earning father	128	142	248	248	209	339	326	287
	%							
Father unemployed	52	55	68	67	54	62	58	57
Father not in labour force								
Stay-at-home*	32	31	25	25	33	26	25	27
Attending school	6	6	5	4	7	7	9	8
Unable to work	9	8	3	4	6	5	7	8
	'000							
Single-earner families with non-earning stay-at-home parent	2,996	2,647	2,168	1,846	1,526	1,316	1,245	1,217
Stay-at-home mother	2,955	2,602	2,107	1,784	1,458	1,228	1,163	1,140
Stay-at-home father	41	44	61	62	68	88	82	77
	%							
Stay-at-home mother	99	98	97	97	96	93	93	94
Stay-at-home father	1	2	3	3	4	7	7	6

Source: Labour Force Survey
* See Data sources and definitions.

Table 2
Family characteristics of single-earner husband-wife families

	Total	Stay-at-home mother (earning father)	Stay-at-home father (earning mother)
			'000
Total	1,217	1,140	77
Average number of children under 16 at home	2.0	2.0	1.6
		%	
With children under 16 at home	100	100	100
At least one child under 6 at home	58	59	40
All children aged 6 to 15	42	41	60
Canada	100	94	6
Atlantic provinces	100	88	12
Quebec	100	93	7
Ontario	100	94	6
Prairies	100	95	5
British Columbia	100	95	5
Residence	100	100	100
Urban*	80	80	73
Rural	20	20	27
Discouraged workers** by region			
Canada	2	1	6
Atlantic provinces	8	7	15
Central and western provinces	1	1	4
Urban*	1	1	5
Rural	4	3	9
		\$	
Average weekly rate of pay	773	794	502

Source: Labour Force Survey, 1997

* Population concentration of 1,000 or more and a population density of 400 or more per square kilometre.

** See Data sources and definitions.

Families with a stay-at-home dad

Families with a stay-at-home dad are less likely to have a pre-school aged child at home (40%) than are those with a stay-at-home mom (59%) (Table 2). This may be because only mothers are entitled to paid maternity leave when children are infants, and because most mothers take the parental leave benefit (see *Parental leave*).

The Atlantic region has a disproportionately high rate of families with a stay-at-home father: 12%, compared with 7% or lower for all other regions. Also, one in four such families resides in a rural area, as opposed to one in five families with a stay-at-home mother. The lower cost of living in rural regions may make it somewhat more feasible for families to afford having only the wife employed. Such families tend to have lower earnings

Parental leave

Major amendments to the *Unemployment Insurance Act (UIA)* in 1971 brought in a wide range of benefits, including, for the first time, paid maternity leave for women. This leave enabled women to receive 60% of their regular earnings, with a set maximum benefit, for 15 weeks over a 17-week period.

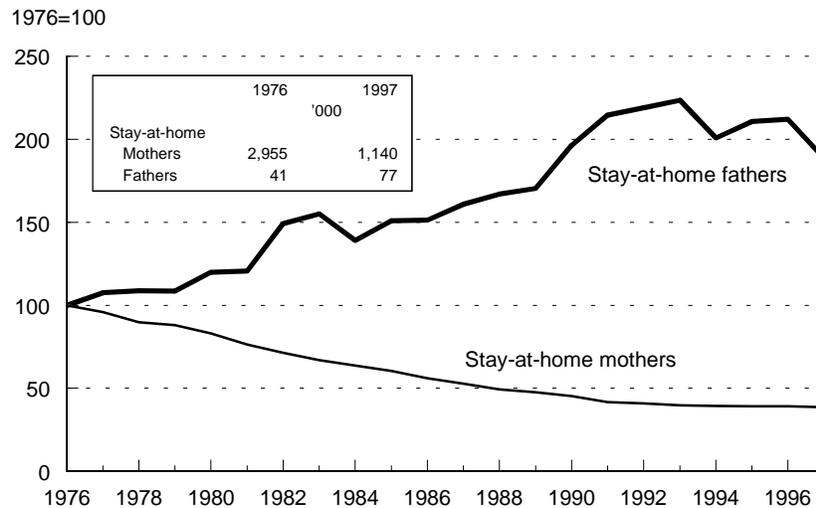
In 1989, Bill C-21 introduced amendments to the *UIA*, which included 10 weeks of parental leave with the birth or adoption of a child. This leave could be taken by one parent or shared (if both parents had accrued enough insurable weeks) any time up to 52 weeks after the child arrived home. As of October 1990, when Bill C-21 passed, fathers have been entitled to paid leave for the purpose of primary care giving. Since that time, roughly 31,000 parents each month, 1,000 of them fathers, have taken parental leave with benefits. Fathers' percentage of all parents on leave has fluctuated between 3% and 4% annually since 1991.

than those with single-earner fathers (Crompton and Geran, 1995; Table 2). On the other hand, these families may have little choice in the matter. Stay-at-home fathers in the Atlantic and rural regions are more likely than those elsewhere to be discouraged workers: 15% and 9%, respectively – well above the 6% national average. Relatively limited opportunities may have led some of these men to remain at home because they believed no work was available.

Stay-at-home dads

Stay-at-home fathers differ from their female counterparts, and from earning parents. Their average age is 42, compared with 35 for mothers and 38 for earning parents (Table 3). Four in ten stay-at-home fathers and mothers have a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree. In contrast, some 55% of earning fathers and 52% of

Chart B
More fathers are opting to stay home with their children.



Source: Labour Force Survey

earning mothers have graduated from a postsecondary institution. Similarly, only 18% of stay-at-home fathers and 25% of stay-at-home mothers who worked in the past year were employed in managerial or professional occupations, compared with 30% of earning fathers and 39% of earning mothers.

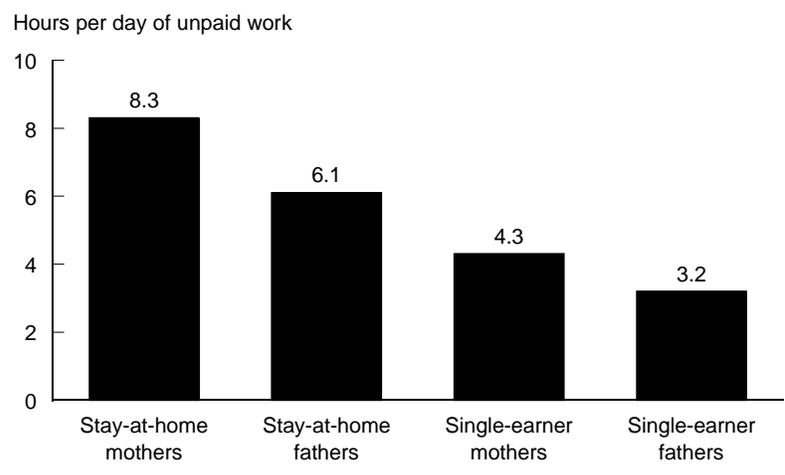
The lower occupational and educational attainment levels of some stay-at-home parents suggest that reduced employment options may have contributed to their decision to remain at home with the children. And the length of time out of the workforce varies by sex: 49% of fathers at home have been out for less than one year. The corresponding figure for mothers is only 19%. Roughly one in three stay-at-home fathers and mothers have been out of the workforce for one to five years, and a full 45% of mothers and 17% of fathers have been

Time use of stay-at-home parents

Stay-at-home mothers did an average 8.3 hours per day of unpaid work in 1992, including child care, housework (meal preparation, meal clean-up, indoor cleaning, laundry and other related work), shopping and volunteer work, while stay-at-home fathers did an average 6.1 hours.

In contrast, single-earner mothers and fathers put in a daily average of 4.3 and 3.2 hours, respectively, of unpaid work. These fathers did an average 7.1 hours of paid work per day, however, and mothers, some 6.0 hours (averaged over 7 days).

Stay-at-home mothers do the most unpaid work.



Source: General Social Survey, 1992

Table 3
Characteristics of stay-at-home and earning parents in single-earner husband-wife families

	Stay-at-home father	Stay-at-home mother	Earning father	Earning mother
Average age	42	35	38	38
			%	
Education	100	100	100	100
High school graduation or less*	58	58	46	48
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	27	29	35	35
University degree	16	13	20	17
Occupation**	100	100	100	100
Managerial/professional	18	25	30	39
Clerical, sales and service	15	62	18	49
Processing, machining and fabricating	14	6	22	7
Construction	25	--	11	--
Other	28	7	18	4
Duration out of labour force	100	100	...	...
Less than 12 months	49	19	...	...
12 to 59 months	34	36	...	...
60 months (5 years) or more	17	45	...	...
Reason left last job (if worked in past 12 months)	100	100	...	...
Lost job	67	43	...	...
Personal or family responsibilities	--	34	...	...
Other	30	23	...	...

Source: Labour Force Survey, 1997

* May include postsecondary education that was not completed.

** The occupation for stay-at-home parents refers to the last job they held, for those who worked in the past 12 months.

out for five years or longer. Among the stay-at-home parents who have worked in the past year, 67% of fathers and 43% of mothers said they had lost their last job. One in three mothers (34%) had stopped work because of family or personal responsibilities; 30% of fathers and 23% of mothers reported other reasons.

Summary

The number of husband-wife families opting to have one parent stay at home dropped from 3.0 million in 1976 to 1.2 million in 1997. This is a direct result of a reduction in families with a stay-at-home mother (1.8 million), and in spite of a 36,000 increase in the number of families with a stay-at-home father.

Although this article has focused on families with a stay-at-home father (77,000 in 1997), some 210,000 families have fathers at home for other reasons (unemployment, at school, unable to work). Even if some of these men have not chosen to stay at home, and despite whatever time some may spend searching for employment, they are assuming the role of a

stay-at-home parent – performing unpaid work and child care at home. Fathers at home, by choice or otherwise, are sensitizing themselves and their children to a role historically unfamiliar to most men. □

■ Notes

- 1 This includes common-law families.
- 2 R. LaRossa discusses the “negative consequences that have accompanied asynchronous change in the social institution of fatherhood.” He cites several sources that address this issue in detail.

■ References

Crompton, S. and L. Geran. “Women as main wage-earners.” *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-001-XPE) 7, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 26-29.

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