2023-07-17

Did COVID Change Everything or Nothing at All? Canadian Family Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Carlee Guenther Dynes
Brigham Young University

Did COVID Change Everything or Nothing at All? Canadian Family Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Carlee Guenther Dynes

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Mikaela Dufur, Chair
Jane Lily López
Melissa Alcaraz

Department of Sociology

Brigham Young University

ABSTRACT

Did COVID Change Everything or Nothing at All? Canadian Family Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Carlee Guenther Dynes
Department of Sociology, Brigham Young University
Master of Science

In March of 2020, Canada, along with the rest of the world, declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national emergency and responded with society-wide lockdowns, granting exceptions only for essential workers. Canadians across all demographic categories were significantly impacted, and many parents of children under 18 faced the difficult task of caring for their children while simultaneously meeting their work obligations. Using novel in-depth interview data from 30 Canadian parents (in 15 couples) collected between April 2022 and May 2023, I explore three main changes to family life resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic: expanded family-friendly work practices, increased time with nuclear family members, and fathers' increased contributions to childcare. My work builds on previous research in two important ways. First, it utilizes qualitative data to deepen our understanding of these early shifts; and second, it provides evidence for the durability (or lack thereof) of family changes beyond the initial lockdown stage of the pandemic and into the 'new normal'. With this approach, I find that family life changed dramatically during the pandemic and some of these changes were durable while others were not.

Keywords: COVID-19, Canada, family, childcare, family-friendly work practices

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Primarily I would like to acknowledge both Dr. Mikaela Dufur and Dr. Kevin Shafer for their roles as my academic advisor and chair of my thesis committee. Their support, including financial support for my data collection, allowed me to successfully complete my thesis research. Dr. Dufur was incredibly helpful in guiding me through the many necessary pivots in my project and encouraging me past the finish line. Additionally, I relied heavily on the knowledge, expertise, and support of my two other committee members, Dr. Jane Lily López and Dr. Melissa Alcaraz, throughout my thesis work and feel immense gratitude for their mentoring and friendship. I owe much to my committee members least of all for their enthusiasm for my project. Other faculty mentors helped me develop tools to become a better scholar and I feel grateful for their investment in my learning. Additionally, it was my privilege to study with a bright and kind cohort of other students as well as sharing the process with other similarly positioned women in other departments.

The support of my partner, Adam Dynes, was also crucial in helping me carve out space in our collective lives to complete the coursework and thesis for this master's degree. Without his willingness to renegotiate our own division of household labor and childcare tasks by increasing his share of the driving, cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, homework monitoring, and piano practice nagging, graduate school would have remained an unfulfilled dream. There are considerable barriers for entering and being successful in graduate school for a middle-aged stay-at-home mother, and I was blessed to have the best cheering section in Adam and our five children, Jack, Paul, Miriam, Jane, and Simon Dynes, as I worked through these challenges. I thank you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

INTRODUCTION

A year after the birth of their third child, Matt Parker (CEO) was wrapping up his three-month portion of a yearlong parental leave shared with his wife Jen (physician). Matt and Jen's youngest child joined her three-year-old brother at a local daycare center while their older sister attended kindergarten at a nearby public school. Matt, who recently left his corporate job to start his own company, was eager to return his attention once again to building his company. Four days after starting daycare, the Parker's youngest child, along with her siblings, was sent home as the COVID-19 government-mandated lockdowns began. Jen, a physician splitting her time between seeing patients in her clinic and rotating through service at the hospital, worked more hours than ever at the hospital while also moving most of her patients to virtual appointments when all non-emergency in-person interactions were outlawed. Matt shifted to remote work while simultaneously caring for their three children during Jen's many work hours. Reflecting on this time, he states, "I have no idea how I did it. I don't. It is a daze to me" (Matt Parker, CEO). Family life changed dramatically for the Parkers overnight at the beginning of the pandemic. Matt and Jen Parker's experiences, while unique in the particulars, were shared by many Canadians parents during the pandemic.

The global COVID-19 pandemic is the defining event of recent history. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO), declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and, in the week that followed, most countries, including Canada, elected to fully shut down non-essential places of business, schools, child-care centers, and public spaces attempting to curb the spread of the disease (Urrutia et al. 2021). The results for many families included significant work disruptions, either through loss of employment, remote work, or increasingly stressful in person work situations, as well as significant disruptions to childcare arrangements and schooling.

Although individual Provincial governments were responsible for setting many pandemic response policies, in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of the global pandemic, most Canadians experienced similar restrictions (Fuller and Qian 2021; Schieman et al. 2021). Canadians across all demographic categories were substantially impacted, and many parents of children under 18 faced the uniquely difficult task of caring for their children while simultaneously meeting their work obligations.

With the wide-ranging restrictions on public and private life regulated by both the Canadian federal and provincial governments, I ask: *how did Canadian family life change during the COVID-19 pandemic? And how durable are those changes?* Using novel data from in-depth interviews with 30 Canadian parents (15 couples), I interrogate the changes in several main areas. First, I examine how family-friendly workplace practices shifted during the pandemic and what has happened to these work practices now that the pandemic stage of COVID-19 has passed.

I focus on understanding how the pandemic has shifted childcare for families, specifically looking at if and how family-friendly work practices changed, if those changes outlasted the earliest phase of the pandemic, and how these changes have impacted families. Second, I ask how childcare changed, and if these shifts last beyond the earliest phase of the pandemic when remote work, virtual schools, and shuttered daycare centers were the norm. I explore if fathers increase their childcare contributions in response to increased childcare demands during the pandemic, and if those changes are durable. Third, and finally, I look at how family time changed during the pandemic, and if those changes have continued. While the body of research on effects of COVID-19 on families is large and growing every day (Carroll et al. 2020; Fuller and Qian 2021; Gadermann et al. 2021; Schieman et al. 2021; Shafer, Scheibling, and Milkie

2020), little research examines the durability of these changes in Canada beyond the initial and most acute phase of the pandemic. With each of these three areas of change, I seek to better understand which changes, if any, have outlived the pandemic, as well as which changes families wish they were able to keep. I find that family life changed significantly in all three areas with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that some of these changes are more durable than others.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

The COVID-19 pandemic is a unique shock that disrupted the lives of nearly all Canadians and global citizens more generally. In Canada, the response in the early stages of the pandemic was dramatic; schools were moved to online only, many daycare and childcare centers were temporarily shuttered, workplaces were closed, and workers shifted to remote work (where possible except for essential workers). Some workers lost their employment due to these closures in order to meet the demands of childcare and remote schooling for their children or because of safety concerns related to the pandemic (Schieman et al. 2021). Public spaces were also closed, and the government introduced strict lockdown measures limiting the ability of families to spend time with individuals outside their household, including those who helped provide child and elder care (Schieman et al. 2021; Shafer et al. 2020). Although all Canadians experienced disruptions, the effects on parents, and in particular those living with children under age 18, differ in important ways (Schieman et al. 2021). Studying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families offers us a unique insight into what changes when most family members are home together all day while parents are working, and children need care and help with school. Of special importance are family-friendly work practices, childcare, and family time.

Family-Friendly Work Practices

Family *policies* are typically defined as government policies designed to address the needs of families, such as paid and unpaid parental leave (maternity and paternity), child tax credits or allowances, free/reduced cost childcare, part-time work options, sick leave (including to care for ill family members), remote work, and flexible work schedules (Collins 2020; Glass 2000). Many government family policies, like the Canada child benefit and subsidized childcare are designed to ease the financial burden of having children focus on low-income families and are not designed to benefit dual-earner households; however, other policies accessed through employers, like sick leave, are most available to higher-educated and higher-earner parents (Beaujot, Du, and Ravanera 2013; Government of Canada 2022a, 2023).

In contrast, family-friendly work *practices* represent a broader collection of government and company policies as well as behaviors performed by individuals to improve work-life balance for employees. For example, employers might have an official policy for sick leave but in practice, workers are unlikely to use all of these days. I use the term "practices" to capture this full range of strategies and to emphasize that many are not strictly regulated by policies, but rather that individuals have some autonomy in how they access and approach these work practices. Family-friendly work policies and practices have origins in the elusive quest for both higher worker productivity and better work-life balance; yet, research is mixed regarding how successful these practices are at improving the lives of individual workers and their families (Andersson, Garcia, and Glass 2021; Baadel, Kabene, and Majeed 2020; Bourhis and Mekkaoui 2010; Butts, Casper, and Yang 2013; Christensen and Staines 1990; Dilmaghani 2021; Duncan and Pettigrew 2012; Elbaz, Richards, and Provost Savard 2022; Fuller and Hirsh 2019; Glass, Simon, and Andersson 2016; Mullins, Charbonneau, and Riccucci 2020; Noonan and Glass

2012). Additionally, access to family-friendly work practices is unevenly distributed across the Canadian working population. The COVID-19 crisis has brought questions of work-life balance to the forefront of both scholarship (Rashmi and Kataria 2022; Schieman et al. 2021) and public discourse (Ballard 2022; Brace 2022; Parker, Horowitz, and Minkin 2022). Missing from the current discussion are qualitative data on how family-friendly work practice changed during the pandemic, and how durable these changes appear to be. I focus on three family-friendly work practices: remote work, flexible work schedules, and paid time off for illness.

Defined by Olson (1983) as "organizational work that is performed outside of the normal organizational confines of space and time" (p. 182), remote work has grown from a rare occurrence to a common practice (Richardson and Kelliher 2015). Prior to the pandemic, an estimated 41 percent of Canadian jobs could be performed fully remote (Gallacher and Hossain 2020). In 2016 about 1.3 million Canadians, or about 7 percent of workers, worked remotely (Statistics Canada 2022). Even more Canadian workers, approximately 70 percent in 2012, did so at least some of the time (Statistics Canada 2022). Remote work is concentrated among higher-paying and higher-skilled positions and varies greatly by location and industry (Gallacher and Hossain 2020). Like many other aspects of life, the COVID-19 pandemic altered workplaces. As of May 2021, the number of Canadians working exclusively from home increased to 4.2 million people, approximately 22 percent of the workforce (Statistics Canada 2022). Between 2016 and 2021, the increase in exclusive remote work was drastic, representing a 214% increase over that five-year period. Building on the technological advances of the internet and email in the 1990s, much of the new growth in remote work is assisted by recent technological advances that make remote work increasingly possible for a larger number of workers (Elbaz et al. 2022; Schweitzer and Duxbury 2009; Soga et al. 2022). Remote work is

often billed as a solution to work-life balance conflicts, yet the research on the benefits are mixed (Andersson et al. 2021; Mullins et al. 2020; Noonan and Glass 2012; Soga et al. 2022). While we know that remote work is more common post-pandemic than ever before (Farooq and Sultana 2022) and that some of this is driven by choice (Parker et al. 2022), the current research lacks qualitative narratives about how these changes have impacted families and if these shifts will outlast the pandemic.

Like remote work, flextime has become increasingly common in the last decade (Government of Canada 2021) but the literature on the impacts of COVID-19 on flexible work schedules is sparse. Flexible work schedules, often called flextime, refers to some level of employee discretion in when they do their work, with most employers continuing to control some aspect of their employees schedules (Dilmaghani 2021; Lyness et al. 2012). For most workers, hours are expected to fall within 'core hours' (e.g., between the hours of 7am and 5pm) with variation on start and end times as well as during lunch breaks. This flexibility allows employees to attend to family or personal matters during the work day without affecting their total number of work hours (The Government of Canada 2021). Other workers have increased levels of control over their schedule within the work week (Christensen and Staines 1990; Dilmaghani 2021). Work schedule flexibility, like remote work, is unevenly available, and varies substantially (Gerstel and Clawson 2014; Golden 2008). For example, public employees have the right to formally request flexible work arrangements, including remote work or flextime (Government of Canada 2016) but, outside of the public sector, employee access to both varies substantially (Employment and Social Development Canada 2016). First implemented in the 1970s, flextime was initially designed to provide workers with more work-life balance (Ezra and Deckman 1996), yet evidence on how well it increases their ability to meet both work and family

demands is inconsistent (Baadel et al. 2020; Christensen and Staines 1990; Dilmaghani 2021; Duncan and Pettigrew 2012; Fuller and Hirsh 2019; Lyness et al. 2012). Additionally, research on how employees feel about flextime suggests that the benefits of flextime are uneven across demographic characteristics (Butts et al. 2013).

All Canadians, with some restrictions, are eligible for up to 15 weeks of paid time off to recover from serious illness through federal employment insurance (EI) benefits; however, short-term sick leave varies considerably in time and payment (Béland, Fakorede, and Mikola 2020; Heymann et al. 2020; Rho, Fremstad, and Gaby-Biegel 2020; Thompson et al. 2021). Federal employees, again with some limitations, are eligible for four consecutive paid days for illness or other personal reasons (with up to ten per year); however, access for Canadians working in the private sector varies, and only about 40 percent of Canadian workers have access to any paid sick leave at all (Government of Canada 2022a; McDonald 2020; Rho et al. 2020).

To stop the spread of COVID-19, Canadian provinces enacted strict quarantine guidelines recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) at the beginning of the pandemic, requiring infected or exposed individuals to isolate for 14 days (World Health Organization 2020). As a result, instituting generous sick leave policies and requiring employees to stay home when exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms[1] became increasingly common. Many countries adjusted federal sick leave policies to encourage workers to stay home when exposed to or symptomatic of COVID-19 (Heymann et al. 2020). The Canadian federal government enacted new legislation, the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB), which provides income to those who are ill, needing to isolate from COVID-19 or who are more vulnerable to serious complication from

[1] The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, is characterized by a number of physical symptoms, including fever, coughing, difficulty breathing, fatigue, and sore throat (World Health Organization 2023).

COVID-19, for up to 6 weeks between September 27, 2020 and May 7, 2022 (Government of Canada 2022b). Additionally, the Canadian government recently permanently updated their sick leave policy for federal workers, citing COVID-19 as the catalyst[2] for more generous leave (Government of Canada 2022a).

Understanding sick leave policies is only one piece of the puzzle in the bigger picture of how Canadian families are impacted by taking sick leave, and examining the practice of taking sick leave offers us additional understanding. In 2019, Canadian workers averaged 8.5 days for illness or disability (Government of Canada 2022a); however, considerable variability exists (McDonald 2020). Taking time off for work even for illness violates idea worker norms, and even in workplaces where sick leave is available, workers who take sick leave when they are ill or to care for a sick family member violate this norm (Acker 1990; Kelly et al. 2010; Reid 2015). Norm violations are not always costless, and the consequence or perceived consequences for taking sick leave range in severity (Lovell 2004; Reid 2015). While evidence suggests sick leave policies have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Government of Canada 2022a), more work is needed to explore how the actual practices shifted during the pandemic and if those practices remain altered post-pandemic.

Childcare

In the context of my study, I define childcare as including all the tasks required to adequately care for children under age 18 in contemporary Canadian society. Childcare includes both formal and informal arrangements and can be provided by parents or other caregivers inside

[2]The Canadian government recognized that the pandemic has shifted ideas about illness: "One thing COVID-19 made crystal clear is that when you're sick, you should stay home. Ten days of paid sick leave means that more workers won't have to choose between getting well and getting paid. That's good for workers and their families, and it's good for business, too." – Minister of Labour, Seamus O'Regan Jr (Government of Canada 2022a).

the child's home; in the homes of friends, relatives or other paid childcare providers; or in childcare centers or schools. Despite many mothers working for pay outside their homes, women still provide the majority of childcare, a trend referred to as the stalled gender revolution (England 2010; Raley, Bianchi, and Wang 2012; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019). Research aimed at understanding why women's workforce participation, as well as fully egalitarian divisions of household labor and childcare, have stalled is ongoing.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges for families, and chief among them was the disruption to childcare arrangements (Department of Finance Canada 2021; Shapiro and Stanton 2022). Families with younger children (i.e., those not old enough to attend public school), particularly those without a stay-at-home parent[3], experienced disrupted childcare. Many childcare centers shuttered their doors in the first few months after the global pandemic was declared, and still others lost care provided by extended family or other home-based care providers (Friendly et al. 2021). Restrictions were unevenly applied to childcare providers, where daycare centers were forced to close and stay closed longer, while at-home care centers (day homes) were permitted to operate on a limited scale[4] (Friendly et al. 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021; Nair 2020; The Government of Alberta 2020b). Those relying on care from individuals were permitted to continue with certain conditions as long as both parties were comfortable with the level of risk. For families depending on the care of non-residential grandparents, the risk posed by the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted care in greater part than those outsourcing care to younger and less vulnerable individuals (Friendly et al. 2020). Additionally,

[3] In 2015, 18 percent of Canadian couples with children had a stay-at-home parent (Statistics Canada 2018).

[4] In British Columbia some daycare centers stayed open, and schools remained open for children of essential workers (Nair 2020). Schools and daycares fully reopened in June (Nair 2020). In both Alberta and Ontario, both daycares and schools closed in March 2020 shortly after the pandemic was declared (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021; Government of Alberta 2020a; Karstens-Smith 2020; Nielsen 2020). Daycares reopened in June, and children returned to schools the following fall (in August or September 2020).

childcare needs differ by age of children, and the effects of the pandemic have been most acute on parents with young children (Shafer et al. 2020).

Essential to the discussion of how childcare tasks are divided between mothers and fathers is understanding the current Canadian government policies regarding childcare. Although Canada's childcare policies may look generous to parents in the United States, Canada lacks national childcare programs implemented in many western countries. In the 2021 federal budget, Canada pledged to deliver $10/day quality childcare by 2026 (Department of Finance Canada 2021). In addition to subsidized childcare, Canada also offers child allowances of roughly $4,000 ($4,800 for the youngest child) for low-income families that can be used to supplement the costs of childcare (Collyer et al. 2020). Outside Quebec, Canadians prefer alternative childcare (e.g., with a nanny or in a smaller day home) to center-based care (Mitchell and DeBruyn 2019) although this may change with the implementation of new affordable childcare legislation. In addition to government family policies, private companies may also offer family-friendly policies like 'topping up' maternity or paternity wage replacement (i.e., by paying the difference between the government replacement rate and the employees regular salary) or providing onsite childcare facilities often at a reduced cost (Shafer et al. 2020; Smith 2022). Despite Canada's recent commitment to government sponsored affordable childcare, childcare costs and decisions about what type of care to employ are largely shouldered by individual families.

Families that rely on schools for childcare also experienced significant disruptions. Depending on the province, children enter public schools at age 4 or 5[5] (British Columbia Ministry of Education 2016; Government of Alberta 2023; Ontario Ministry of Education 2023).

[5] Children in British Columbia and Alberta enter publicly funded kindergarten the year they turn 5 years old ((British Columbia Ministry of Education 2016; Government of Alberta 2023) and children in Ontario may enter publicly funded junior kindergarten the year they turn 4 years old (Ontario Ministry of Education 2023).

Children typically remain in publicly funded school until the year they turn 18 years old or graduate from grade 12 (Government of Canada 2022c). At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all schools shifted to virtual learning, with a wide range of exceptions between provinces, school districts, schools, grade, individual teachers, and family's level of commitment (Rizk et al. 2022). Beginning in March 2020, schools remained closed for the remainder of the 2019/2020 school year and opened again with various precautions for the 2020/2021 school year in late August or early September 2020 (Rizk et al. 2022). Schools responded to current levels of community infection as well as to outbreaks within their school community by sending home infected and exposed individuals, groups of individuals, whole classes, or in some cases entire schools (Rizk et al. 2022). For many families, these disruptions were significant and lasted throughout the 2020/2021 school year, and for others, they were minor or even non-existent (Rizk et al. 2022). In many cases families were also given the option of virtual school during the 2020/2021 school year for either the first semester or the entire school year, providing safer options for families with vulnerable family members or other concerns about the safety of in-person school (Rizk et al. 2022).

Shifts in men's involvement with childcare in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that many men have responded to the higher childcare demands by increasing their share of tasks, despite the fact that women still perform the bulk of childcare (Shafer et al. 2020; Smith 2022). Although there is concern that the COVID-19 pandemic has further stalled progress toward more gender equality in childcare, evidence suggests that gains in fathers' increased involvement in childcare have outlasted the earliest phase of the pandemic in the United States, especially for fathers with egalitarian gender attitudes and increased work from home opportunities (Carlson and Petts 2022). Although my interviews do not offer a generalizable

sample from which to infer population level trends, my data provide additional information about the durability of increases in fathers' contributions to childcare. Further research is needed to make generalizations about how durable men's increased involvement will be in Canada.

Using the needs exposure hypothesis (Shafer et al. 2020), we might expect that fathers increased their share of childcare during the earliest stages of the pandemic, but the question of how long those changes last is largely unanswered in the literature. Research on the impacts of paternity leave offer us one window into the durability of changes after fathers are exposed to the everyday needs of their children (Petts and Knoester 2018; Wray 2020). Paternity leave research is limited in several ways for testing the durability of father's increased childcare contributions, in large part because paternity leave is still rare and opt-in, with many fathers choosing not to use it. Studying what happens during a global pandemic overcomes both these limitations by increasing the needs exposure of nearly every Canadian father regardless of their preferences.

Family Time

The final area of focus in my research is how COVID-19 affected family time. According to a pre-pandemic study using data from survey of 2,000 Canadian parents, families spent an average of 5.4 hours per day together during the week and 12.2 hours together during the weekends (Ronald McDonald House Charities Canada 2019). Here, time together specifically means any time spent interacting together as a family and was spent in a variety of ways, including everyday activities like eating meals and driving to and from activities and special events like vacations and participating in local events (Ronald McDonald House Charities 2019). Nearly all Canadian parents (91 percent) were satisfied with their family life (Ronald McDonald House Charities 2019). This evidence supports past findings from a nationally representative sample that most Canadians are satisfied with their family lives (Focus on the Family Canada

2002). Despite this satisfaction, many parents also report being too busy and wishing they could spend more time together as a family, citing work schedules, sports and other organized children activities, and social commitments as barriers (Ronald McDonald House Charities 2019). Other studies show that perceived lack of time with children is related to parents' negative well-being, both for physical and mental health (Milkie, Nomaguchi, and Schieman 2019). Parents clearly feel conflict between societal (and their own) expectations and their material realities, and this conflict is a source of stress. Scholar Sharon Hays (1996) coined the term "intensive mothering" to describe "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially-expensive" mothering practices related to the barriers listed above (Hays 1996:8). Over the last several decades, Canadian mothers across all demographic groups, like those in the United States, increasingly participate in intensive mothering (Butler 2010; Forbes, Lamar, and Bornstein 2021; Guppy, Sakumoto, and Wilkes 2019; Hays 1996).

While intensive *mothering* still occurs, recent trends in Canada suggest that intensive *parenting* is the new norm, with fathers becoming increasingly involved with childcare (Guppy et al. 2019). Both mothers and fathers face pressure to meet competing ideal worker and intensive parenting norms (Christopher 2012; Collins 2020; Hays 1996; Milkie et al. 2010), and family time suffers as a result. COVID-19 dramatically increased the amount of time available for families to spend together (Snan 2020). Investigations of how this increased family time impacted families in the short term as well as whether these increases remain in post-pandemic life are missing from the literature.

CURRENT STUDY

To date, very few studies examining parents' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic utilize qualitative data (Smith 2022), and in this study I seek to fill this gap.

Additionally, I address the question of durability regarding changes experienced by Canadian parents as well providing additional insight into how families view \these changes. My findings center around three main themes: first, changes to family-friendly work practices; second, changes to childcare; and third, changes to family time. I find that family-friendly work practices (i.e., remote work, flextime, and sick leave) changed dramatically at the beginning of the pandemic, and many of those changes remain in some capacity. In contrast, changes to childcare provision were less durable. Though childcare changed dramatically at the start of the pandemic in terms of the inability to outsourcing childcare to care centers and schools as well as increases in fathers' contributions, outsourcing returned after the lockdowns were over, and fathers' increased contributions remained in only some situations (e.g., when fathers engaged in family-family-friendly work practices). Time spent together as a family also changed significantly at the beginning of the pandemic, and those changes, though viewed by most as positive changes to their family life, did not generally outlast the pandemic.

METHODS

Between April 2022 and May 2023, I interviewed 30 Canadian parents, totaling 15 couples, about their pandemic parenting experiences. Previous research on the implications of the pandemic on families offer insight into the types of adjustments that couples made to their work and home responsibilities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shafer et al. 2020); my work builds on their findings by examining these dynamics in depth. Conducting qualitative interviews offers the unique advantage of flexible questions designed to examine the motivations and perceptions of these important adjustments. The semi-structured interviews explore how couples made their decision surrounding their family adjustments. Additionally, the interview

data provides needed information about the durability of adjustments made early in the pandemic as society collectively moves away from heightened restrictions and concern.

The population of interest for my study is all Canadian parents over 18 years of age in a domestic heterosexual partnership where both partners work for pay and have minor biological children living in their home. Couples were interviewed together over Zoom both for time-saving reasons and to explore the couple's dynamics in answering the interview questions in the analysis. For further research convenience, I limited my study to those living in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, and to those who are fluent in English. Of the fifteen couples, eleven reside in Alberta, two couples live in British Columbia, and the remaining two couples reside in Ontario. The sample generally consists of college educated individuals with middle to high household incomes. Study participants were all married and self-identified, except one, as white, and all, except one, self-identified as cisgender. Only one of the couples I interviewed experienced involuntary job loss because of the COVID-19 pandemic (both Travis and Rachel Nelson were unemployed for several months because of work restrictions), and, additionally, several women reduced their paid work hours to care for their children (Stephanie Fisher, Samantha Taylor, and Courtney Russell). See Table 1 for additional details on sample characteristics and Table 2 for couple profiles. Generating data from a sample of highly privileged Canadians offers both substantial limitations and advantages that I expand upon in the discussion section. I have much in common with the study participants; specifically, I am a white cisgender woman with a college education, partnered with an advanced-degree-holding white cisgender man. Together we have 5 children, who ranged in age from 3 to 12 at the beginning of the pandemic. Like several of the participants, I also shifted careers during the pandemic. Unlike the study participants, I live in the western United States with my husband and children. Because

I also parented during the pandemic, my questions were shaped by my own experiences and challenges with family-friendly work practices, childcare, and family time. I believe my position as a fellow parent allowed study participants to honestly discuss the challenges and boons of the pandemic relating to family life in part because the interview felt much like a conversation with a peer. Because of this I made concerted efforts to allow participants to speak for themselves.

Research participants were recruited through my personal and professional networks, mainly through Facebook, email, and text messages. Participants were encouraged to share the recruitment flyer with other parents that may qualify, and participants were not informed if their friends or family members decided to participate in the study. None of the participants referred other couples for participation in the study. Once eligibility was determined, couples were invited to individually complete a quantitative survey followed by an in-depth interview conducted over Zoom with their partner. Survey questions were based on the survey used by Shafer et al. (2020) in their study on the household division of labor between Canadian couples at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the omission of several questions asking about religiosity and mental health and the addition of several more questions addressing their current experiences with work, childcare, and other household tasks during the pandemic. Interviews, all of which I conducted, took place over Zoom at a convenient time for the participating couple, with an attempt made to schedule interviews after their children's bedtime to minimize the risk of children overhearing the interview. During two interviews, a baby was present for part of the interview. In all cases but two, interviews were held in the evening, and interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and 45 minutes. Couples were asked to give verbal consent and then asked questions from an interview guide (see Appendix a). Interviews followed a semi-structured format and questions differed slightly between interviews to reflect the participants'

responses and emerging research findings. Interview questions were designed to probe the ways that couples make decisions about their childcare, household work, and paid work arrangements, as well as to explore the connection to gender attitudes, paternity leave (if applicable), and family support networks and other support structures. The interviews were not recorded using the record option in Zoom to prevent a video recording from being captured, and instead an audio file from the interview was recorded on a separate digital recording device. Information about the participants will remain confidential throughout the study. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

After couples completed the interview, each participant was mailed a $15 USD Visa gift card as compensation for participation in the study, with a total of $30 USD per couple. Audio recordings were transcribed using Rev and were checked for accuracy and de-identified in Rev before exporting to Dedoose for initial coding.

FINDINGS

In the following section I highlight three main findings from the interviews with Canadian parents: changes to family-friendly work practices, changes to childcare, and changes to family time. Due to space constraints, I am not able to include quotes from each couple under each of the three themes. However, I select quotes that are representative of the overall findings from the interview data.

Changes to Family-Friendly Work Practices

Pandemic changes to family-friendly work practices

For many Canadian Families, particularly those in middle- and upper-income brackets, employment changed dramatically at the start of the pandemic. Formal policy shifts took place both on the government and individual company levels, and importantly, employees themselves

adjusted how they interacted with these policies in more informal ways. Additionally, shifts occurred that fall outside of the scope of policy and encapsulated by the more holistic term family-friendly work practices. When the global pandemic was declared in March 2020, all but essential workers[6] were sent home to continue their work remotely. The experiences of the families in my study mirrored these national trends. Technological advancements like Zoom enabled many workers to continue their jobs remotely. While virtual meeting technologies like Zoom are not new, for many, the pandemic was the first time they regularly used these types of virtual meeting platforms. Patrick Russell (financial planner) moved his office out of the city and shifted his client meetings to Zoom. Despite trying to promote Zoom meetings with his clients over the previous three years with little success, the pandemic shifted this dramatically for Patrick and others like him. Zoom and other virtual meeting platforms like Microsoft Teams were an integral part of most individuals' remote work experiences, and most of the frustration with using them was centered around remote learning for school aged children.

For most workers, job schedule flexibility also increased at the beginning of the pandemic. Remote work was often discussed in tandem with flextime. While it is possible to work remotely with little to no job schedule flexibility, and to have job schedule flexibility while working in an office environment like Mike Miller (engineer) and Rob Adams (insurance broker), in most cases, remote work and flextime appeared together. Those working remotely also had a high level of flextime.

In addition to remote work and more flextime, individuals noted that the early months of the pandemic provided more generous sick leave for themselves and to care for ill family

[6] Canadians working in one of the 10 infrastructure sectors who's work was deemed "essential to preserving life, health and basic societal functioning" were permitted to continue working in their normal workplaces with additional safety measures (Public Safety Canada 2021).

members. This was particularly noticeable for the several members of my study that are health care workers. Jen Parker (physician), recalled being sick several years before the onset of COVID-19:

> I was so sick. I actually came home one day. I had been sick throughout the week, and I got progressively sicker as the week went along. Nobody was masking at that time. But then I had a couple of patients who started to get sick as well, and I realized, I was like, 'I'm passing whatever I have onto patients, even though I was trying really hard to be...' So, then I started wearing a mask that week because I didn't want more people to get sick. And then by the Saturday, I was on call... So, it's supposed to be one of those days where you work eight to two, or three, in the morning. And I spiked a fever. And the nursing staff was giving me anti fever medications to try and bring it down. Just at one point I called my chief and was like, 'I don't think I can do this. Is there a backup?' And they're like, 'Nope, you got to figure it out. Maybe you don't need to come in to review the admissions with the fever, but only if you've got a good one. But no, there's nothing we can do.' And so, then the next morning I walked around with a mask on and pumped myself full of medication. And then I was sick for a week after that. Not quite as sick as when I had Delta, but sick. And then when I got Delta, I was supposed to be working as well. And it was easy. You just had to say, 'I've got COVID.' And that's it. Off the schedule, somebody else covers. That has been better. (Jen Parker, physician)

Before the pandemic physicians and other healthcare workers like Jen were often expected to care for their patients while they themselves were ill. Protocols put into place to slow the spread of COVID-19, dramatically changed at the start of the pandemic to allow and require sick workers to stay home.

Other workers in other sectors also noted changes to the way that employers treated illness, requiring sick workers with COVID symptoms to stay home, but also allowing time off for other types of illness.

> Megan: If we were sick, we were at work. If our kids were sick, we were at home, because we would stay home with our kids. And then when we got sick, not want to take more time off work.
>
> John: And also, the culture to a certain extent was like, 'Look how sick I am. I'm still at work. I really need to be here. I'm a good worker.'
>
> Megan: You're like this champion warrior worker. Because you're there sick.
> (Megan Graham, university administrator; John Graham, data analyst)

Prior to the pandemic, ideal worker norms encouraged employees to come to work when sick even when they had access to generous sick leave policies. The *practice* of taking sick leave

differed substantially from access to formal sick leave *policies*. Employers, faced with the threat of spreading COVID-19 in workplaces, encouraged sick workers to stay home, changing the way that their workers practice taking sick leave.

Durability of family-friendly work practice changes.

While remote and flexible work and sick leave changed dramatically at the start of the pandemic, my data suggest that some of these shifts have been rather durable. After Canada eased up the most severe lockdowns, some workers returned to their pre-pandemic work situations, but many in my sample were able to retain at least some of the work changes. For example, Jacob Taylor (accountant) worked full-time in his downtown office prior to the pandemic, moved to fully remote for two years, and is now working from home two days a week and commuting to the office for the remaining three days.

> I actually really liked working from home. And certainly, before the pandemic they [my employers] were not very flexible. Like maybe if you absolutely needed to work from home, you could, but now they're like, 'Oh yeah, yeah, whatever you want. Whatever you need.' Kind of thing… If I could stay at home all the time, I probably would, but just with my role, and that I need to spend probably three days a week in the office, so that was a decision in terms of career path and what needs to be done for the work, but not just my personal preference. (Jacob Taylor, accountant)

The pandemic altered his work culture dramatically and he now enjoys being able to work from home part-time with the possibility of staying home on additional days as needed.

Like Jacob, Megan (university administrator) and John Graham (data analyst), for example, plan never to return to their offices full-time.

> Life is just busy, and we found each other working and then parenting and then after bedtime we would just be exhausted and kind of do our own thing. Whereas during the pandemic, once we had childcare figured out, we would go for walks at lunchtime and hold hands and it just became this really dreamy, he was my most favorite coworker of my whole life. We loved it. So, we wished we spent more time working from home with each other. That was the best part of the pandemic. (Megan Graham, university administrator)

While the Grahams plan to continue working remotely because of the opportunity it affords them to work together during the day (despite having different employers), others framed their retention of remote working hours as a realization that in-person work was not as important as we previously believed. In-person work has become less essential because of technological advancements and society's general comfort with utilizing them, and as Matt Parker (CEO) describes, businesses have permanently changed:

> What the pandemic did is in business and private enterprise, it flipped the need. A lot of people now are rushing back to conferences and stuff, to that in person stuff. So, people are rushing back to that. But they've been disenthralled from the need to meet face-to-face because Zoom meeting works. And it's more effective and more efficient. And I had one CEO sitting there saying... We're talking on Zoom. And he's like, 'This used to have to be, one of us would have to drive an hour, 45 minutes, whatever.' And he goes, 'We can have this quality time can be 45 minutes carved out and we don't have to spend an hour and a half traveling to do this kind of stuff.' He's disenthralled himself from that thinking. Although he still has all his people in the office and he doesn't have a [remote] work policy yet, but at least with vendors and customers, he's thinking differently. So, it's interesting. So that that's been a big shift in the way you can do business. (Matt Parker, CEO)

Similarly, Patrick Russell (financial planner) found that once his clients were accustomed to using Zoom for meetings, in many cases they preferred it to meeting in person.

> Yeah. I offered Zoom meetings for three years prior to COVID and I put a 10% uptake from clients and now it's 100% because everyone... the familiarization with Zoom, because they wanted to see their grandkids and go to their book club and do Pilates was... Now everyone's comfortable on it. So yeah, it's transformative. (Patrick Russell, financial planner)

Although he maintains an office in the city, Patrick (financial planner) and Courtney (bookkeeper) have decided to stay in the country rather than returning to their life and home in the big city. This shift, which they feel represents a significant improvement in their quality of life, is only possible because of the pandemic related work changes.

> Now because of COVID he can do a lot of Zoom meetings with his clients. So, he could do Zoom meetings from the office here, service his clients here, and then go to the big city when needed. So, didn't really need to be in the city as much as before. It's a great city… but we've just decided to stay [in the country] because it's a better quality of life for our family. (Courtney Russell, bookkeeper)

Similarly, high school teacher, guidance counselor, and city counselor Brian Bennet found that technology was both enthusiastically used by both his students and fellow teachers:

> I don't do near the number of meetings after school that I used to. A lot of those meetings have become virtual meetings or Teams, or simply an email. I'll have kids that will contact me on Instagram, or Snapchat or Facebook or some other form. It's not like it used to be, where everyone knocked on my door and I had office hours that kids would come to. So that's changed. It's much more efficient. (Brian Bennett, teacher, guidance counselor and city councilor)

While for many, technology has replaced the need for some in-person meetings, for others, their post-pandemic experience suggests that in-person meetings are preferred now more than ever. Brian's work in the school has embraced technology, however, his work as a city councilor has done the opposite.

> People were so sick to death of any virtual, of any Zoom, online, whatever the case is, that we've pretty much eliminated all of those modes of meeting together entirely. So now everything is a face-to-face meeting. Where we used to have meetings where we would receive agenda packages beforehand, now the agenda packages are smaller and we're spending more time in meetings dealing with the pieces face-to-face. (Brian Bennett, teacher, guidance counselor and city councilor)

Brian's city council's response of eliminating virtual meetings and limiting digital communication is an outlier in my data; however, others, like Sven Hansen (architect and university professor) and Patrick Russell (financial planner), talked about the pendulum swing back to more in person meetings post-COVID.

> Yeah, we do have a lot of, well, we had obviously lots of meetings online, but we also switched back to meetings in person because I think they realized it's not great to just have every meeting online. Some meetings are totally fine online, or you go to a meeting in person, it's like, 'Well, that was worth a phone call.' So, it depends. And of course, now using Zoom or whatever, it's much more common. It's totally normal to all of us now. (Sven Hansen, architect and university professor)

Workplaces and individuals are renegotiating which meetings must be conducted in person and which are possible to hold virtually. Perhaps workplaces that are rejecting technology in response to virtual meeting fatigue will continue to renegotiate their digital vs. in person mix and future studies should closely examine how this continues to change over time.

The quality of life that employees gained by working remotely during the pandemic was often mentioned by the couples in my study. For Eva Hansen (school program director), more remote work and job flexibility is related to an improvement in work life balance:

> I think that there's maybe a little bit more balance just talking to friends that are in private industry or my friend, she's an executive at Google in Dublin, and it's like they went from five days of work at now they have to be in the office three days a week and then the other two they can stay. So, there's more of a balance. Or our friend who, he's a prosecutor here, they were running cases at home, they dressed in the robes in front of Zoom or whatever. And so, those types of jobs, as soon as they could get back in the courtroom, they were back in. But he's still able to work at home a little bit more. So, you see the more necessary things it's like, 'Yeah, you really need to be in court.' That's definitely moved back, but for the paperwork side, maybe you can spend a little bit more time at home. And I think that's what I'm seeing anyways. A little more balance. (Eva Hansen, school program director)

Remote and flexible work allow working parents greater balance, and most plan to continue working remotely at least some of the time.

> I was at work full-time two years ago. My life has changed in two years, and full-time office doesn't fit my life anymore. Sometimes it's just... I'm not just going to back it all out, go back to the office full-time, just because you want me to… Things have moved and changed while I've been away. I can't... It doesn't fit to just go straight back into the office. (Mark Fisher, programmer)

In addition, several people discussed the importance of family-friendly work practices by framing it as a top priority in future job searches. Patrick Russell, who employs 5-6 others in his financial planning office, notes this change.

> I think there's certain employers that are demanding more and more time in the office, which is you're trying to swing the pendulum back. But I think you're getting a lot of pushback from ... Certain companies have just said, 'No, if you want to work it's five days a week in the office.' But they'll lose some good people because some people will say, 'Well, I've now tasted the work-life balance. I don't care about that job as much.' (Patrick Russell, financial planner)

Employees, particularly highly educated and skilled white-collar workers like those in my study, have come to expect remote and flexible work and, in the current economic climate, are able to leverage their skills and experience to continue utilizing these types of family-friendly work practices.

Additionally, participants frequently mentioned the shift in sick leave as a significant difference of post-pandemic life. According to Sara, (teacher's aide). "When you take time off now for sickness or family, it just seems like it's more chill than it used to be." Workplaces, now accustomed to employees taking time off for illness or quarantining after COVID exposures, have adapted to increased sick leave. In the hospital setting, this was especially true. Jen Parker (physician), noted, "I guess the one policy that we have that is better is that we're allowed to be sick now, and you get to stay home. If you're sick, we have a backup schedule now. Whereas we didn't before."

While workplaces have increased their understanding of illness and willingness to allow workers to stay home to recover, workers themselves are simultaneously more willing to take time off when needed. Brian (teacher, guidance counselor, and city councilor) reported that, "People are willing to stay home a little more than they used to be. Even myself, prior to the pandemic I would not take a day off." Megan Graham (university administrator) and her partner John Graham (data analyst) noted this change as well. Prior to the pandemic, they identified coming to work while sick as demonstrating your commitment to your job and ideal worker norms, the culture around working while sick has changed. In Megan's words, "the culture [since the pandemic] has improved in that area" (Megan Graham, university administrator).

Employees like Justin Davies, an accountant, are unwilling to work in an environment where the needs for families are not prioritized. Part way through the pandemic Justin started a new position with a family-centered employer. Being able to take sick leave when sick was a motivating factor in this switch:

> I think before, you would even feel guilty for taking sick time, and even a little bit during COVID. It's like, I know I have time off and I know I need to isolate if I was exposed to positive cases, but you feel uneasy about it. To be at a place now that's like, 'No, take sick time. You have personal days.' I think I get four just personal days for whatever in the year. Take those if you need them. I think that's been a different change from COVID. (Justin Davies, accountant)

Others like Sarah Adams (teacher's aide), Mike Miller (engineer), and Tara Bennett (teacher's aide/nurse), shared Justin's desire to find an employer that prioritized family-friendly work practices when they changed jobs during the pandemic.

Both official government and company policies around sick leave, as well as the informal practices surrounding sick leave, shifted as a result of the pandemic and these changes appear to have survived with some degree of durability. Similarly, workplaces were also more understanding and accepting of time off for mental health or bereavement. For Sarah Adams (teacher's aide), post-pandemic society is "just so much more aware of our need for mental self-care. And so, if we're able to say, 'do you know what? I just need a mental date' [and our employers] aren't allowed to say anything, they have to just let that happen."

Taken together, trends toward more remote work and flextime, and generous paid time off for illnesses suggest an important shift in workplaces towards more family-friendly work practices. George King (student and data analyst), father of three preschool-aged children, summed up these changes, saying that workplaces are "more family oriented… more family focused" and life is "more balanced now than it was before."

Changes to Childcare

With daycares and schools closed, most children spent the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic at home. Families, like those in my study, were tasked with caring for and supervising their children for more hours of the day than previously. Several important questions arise from this situation. First, who shouldered the increased childcare load? And second, how durable were these changes as lockdown restrictions were eased up and children returned to daycare and school? In answer to the first question of how childcare changed at the beginning of the pandemic, my data suggest three findings: first, most families were unable to outsource

childcare during the lockdown; second, although the increased childcare load often fell on mothers, many fathers also took on a greater share of the childcare and for some this increase was dramatic; and third, other fathers experienced little to no change in the amount of time they spent caring for their children during the lockdown stage of the pandemic.

Pandemic changes to childcare

Nearly all families in my study experienced significant disruption in their daytime childcare arrangements. For most, daycares and schools were closed, and parents were left to figure out how to care for their children while simultaneously doing their jobs. During this initial phase of the pandemic, there was very little outsourcing of childcare, with exceptions only for Liz (nurse) and Justin Davies (accountant) who relied on Liz's elderly parents to care for their children when Liz, a nurse, was at the hospital. Caring for children, both young and school aged, was difficult for families, and nearly all listed this as one of the most significant challenges of the pandemic. Parents used a variety of strategies to meet these care demands. Families like Claire (teacher) and Tom Wilson (contractor) tried to keep going with both their work and caring for their children. In Claire's words:

> It was really difficult, because I had my kids at home with me, so that was really hard. And my one daughter was preschool, and my other daughter was in grade one, but she's in French immersion. So, it was extra difficult, because I was having to get her online with her class while trying to teach my class online and also take care of the preschooler. So that was tough. (Claire, teacher)

Claire's partner, Tom (contractor), was unable to adjust his work schedule to care for their children while Claire taught, and in fact his business was busier than ever before with the pandemic remodeling boom.

Similarly, the Graham family discussed the stress of finding a new childcare arrangement for their children at the start of the pandemic.

> Well, it was tough, because literally the day we shifted to work from home was the day that schools closed. Daycare closed. So, all of a sudden you have a 16-month-old and a three-year-old and us at home, trying to figure out what in the world you're going to do. (Megan Graham, university administrator)

While the Grahams ultimately secured fulltime care for their two young children after only a week, they identify the childcare crisis as one of the most significant challenges of the pandemic.

Several families in my study had children straddling both age groups, dealing with young children and school-aged children while also working. For example, Matt (CEO) and Jen Parker (physician) had two children in daycare and their oldest daughter was in kindergarten when the pandemic was declared.

> Amelia was supposed to be in daycare. Jude was still in daycare, and Freida was in kindergarten when the pandemic started. And so basically for the rest of the school year, school was... There was no school. And the daycare reopened for kids…in the middle of June. So for three months, all three kids were at home full-time plus we were trying to do virtual kindergarten… Virtual kindergarten was the worst. (Jen Parker, physician)

The care needs of the Parker's three children, aged 1, 3, and 5, may have been difficult to manage at the same time under the best circumstances and were very challenging given Matt's work as a CEO to a new company, and Jen's as a physician.

For families with only older school aged children, the school closures were no less impactful. Children in kindergarten through high school were expected to complete varying amounts of schoolwork, using a mix of physical and digital materials, involving both independent and teacher led work. This was extremely challenging for families, particularly those with both parents maintaining their full pre-pandemic work schedules like the Hansens, Parkers, and the Millers. Amber Miller (x-ray technician) and Mike Miller (engineer) both continued to work full-time hours at the beginning of the pandemic, and when both were working, their children, ranging in age from 17 to 7 years old, were left home to care for each other and complete their schoolwork. Mike's office was within two minutes of their home, and

he would “pop in every now and then” (Mike Miller, engineer) to check in on their children’s work after he and Amber reminded them "Okay, you guys need to get your stuff done." (Amber Miller, X-ray technician).

Instead of trying to care for children while working, other families adjusted the work schedule of one parent significantly to meet their daytime childcare needs. For example, Stephanie Fisher, a teacher, “dialed it back a bit” on her online teaching hours to manage the schoolwork for their four children (Mark Fisher, software engineer). Stephanie and Mark Fisher, like several others in my study, decided to prioritize Mark’s work while Stephanie would support their children by working fewer hours for while she was compensated hourly. The Fishers labeled the prospect of working two full-time jobs while also caring for their children during the pandemic as “impossible”.

> Mark: Yeah. Stephanie wasn't working full time and I can't imagine trying to do what we did if we were both trying to maintain a full-time job.
>
> Stephanie: It would've been really-
>
> Mark: Pretty much impossible. I don't think I could have supported their learning very well. (Mark Fisher, programmer; Stephanie Fisher, teacher)

The Fisher’s experience was shared by several other families in my study. Samantha Taylor (trainer and coach) reduced her hours to supervise their children while Jacob (accountant) maintained his work hours. Rachel Nelson (receptionist) and Courtney Russell (bookkeeper), both employed by their husband’s professional offices, reacted similarly by reducing their paid work hours. While there were exceptions, most of the individuals who stepped back from their work to care for their children during the pandemic were women, consistent with other studies (Schieman et al. 2021).

In addition to reducing the paid hours of one parent to care for children recently sent home from school, some families adapted by working less at salaried jobs. Chris Young, a

university professor, simplified his classes to focus his attention on caring for his and Laura's children until their daycare and summer camps reopened several months into the pandemic. Similarly, the Camerons prioritized Wendy's job as a nurse practitioner at a jail, while Kevin, a teacher, supervised their children's schoolwork. While Kevin was still working full-time during this period, his workload was reduced, and he focused most of his attention on his children.

> Yeah, I wasn't really concerned about my job, to be honest. I was posting work, but every day the kids would get up and we'd try to maintain some routine. We'd start with O Canada, then they would have some work to do. We would have recess and then lunch. It was basically the mornings that I would focus on them. And then in the afternoons I would focus on my own classes. I would have sometimes a Teams meeting or just post some work or, again, there was nothing really structured, so I did the best I could… It was just, like I said, it was a mishmash of everything. And I was lucky to be able to be home with them and focus on their work and then not really have to worry about mine. (Kevin Cameron, teacher/librarian)

Kevin felt secure in his position as a teacher and was comfortable placing his job lower on the list. Despite being well equipped to handle virtual school both in terms of time and training, school closures were difficult for the Camerons. When asked about the most difficult aspect of the pandemic, Wendy Cameron, a nurse practitioner, emphatically responded "it was homeschooling… I mean, it was really hard, especially at the beginning." This sentiment was shared by Brian (teacher, guidance counselor and city councilor) and Tara (then a teacher's aide) Bennett as well. According to Brian:

> It was horrible… It was always a bit of a bit of a cluster. It was always a bit of a mess. So we were always trying to manage, trying to make it happen. Oh, it was a horrible experience that we'll talk about 30 years from now. (Brian Bennett, teacher, guidance counselor and city councilor)

Although families like the Bennetts or Camerons, both with teacher fathers, struggled with virtual school, and those who were not teachers felt this even more acutely. When asked if virtual school was the most challenging aspect of COVID parenting, Rob Adams, an insurance broker, responded "100%... 100%. Because she [Sarah] kept saying, I'm not a trained teacher. I'm

not a teacher. Like trying to remember trigonometry and all this social [studies] stuff. Yeah. It was so hard." Sarah added:

> I wasn't working at the time, thankfully. So I was at home that whole time. Unfortunately, the semester that Jackson was at home, he had math and science. And so honestly, every day I would want to cry just because it was so frustrating trying to get him to do the work. He couldn't fully understand. He has a little bit of a learning disability. And so, the whole format, how the teacher tried to set it up was just not productive for him at all. So, we ended up calling family members that are teachers that were able to help explain it to him a lot. So thankfully that... (Sara Adams, teacher's aide)

With only a few exceptions, the families in my study did not outsource their childcare during the initial lockdown stage of the pandemic. For most, this was a matter of necessity. Daycares and schools were simply not open, and faced with no other option, parents cared for their children while also, in many cases, doing their jobs. While this was true for the vast majority of families in my study, several couples faced minimal or no disruption to their childcare arrangements. Liz Davies' mother cared for her and Justin's children before the pandemic and were able to continue this arrangement as both families limited their exposure to other households and used masks as a precaution. Although Megan and John Graham faced the loss of daycare for their two young children in March, they convinced one of their son's daycare workers to open a day home and to care for their children along with a second set of brothers from another family. Their childcare disruption was short lived, and their new arrangement granted them many of the benefits of their previous daycare along with the added benefit of operating within the strict COVID rules.

For most families, disrupted childcare was the norm and families responded to these disruptions in two main ways, first by fathers increasing their childcare contributions, and second, by mothers decreasing their work responsibilities to care for their children while fathers experienced little change in their childcare contributions. Fathers like Matt Parker (CEO), who

ran his company remotely while caring for his three preschool aged children during the hours his physician wife was at the hospital, found themselves providing more care than ever before. Because Jen's schedule was rigid and intense and their daycare was closed for the lockdown, the Parkers were left with few options for caring for their children despite Matt's own very demanding work responsibilities.

In contrast, fathers partnered with wives who had access to high flexibility the number of hours as well as the times of the day that they worked experienced little change in the amount of childcare they provided even during the initial lockdown stage of the pandemic. Although Patrick, like Matt, owned his own company and was able to work remotely during the lockdowns, his wife, Courtney, worked fewer hours and decided to scale back her work even further to take on the full-time care and schooling for their two children in March of 2020. While Courtney experienced a dramatic increase in her share of childcare, Patrick, and other fathers like him, still reported spending more time caring for his children during the early stage of the COVID pandemic than before. The experience of Patrick and Courtney Russell was shared by several other families in my study who all elected to scale back on formal work for mothers, rather than maintaining the mothers' pre-pandemic workloads in order to meet the increased childcare demands.

My data suggest that the amount of childcare provided by fathers during the early lockdown stage of the pandemic varied considerably in response to their own work demands and, more importantly, those of their partners. For several families, the pandemic did not result in any change in their division of childcare. Work is not the only piece of the puzzle in understanding if and when fathers increased their childcare contributions early on, and other confounding factors like major illness (Chris and Laura Young, Rachel and Travis Nelson), disability (Rob and Sarah

Adams), job and career changes, and age of children played an important role in how families responded to the increased childcare demands. Chris and Laura Young (both university professors) were one such couple, where their division of childcare of their two children (aged 5 and 3 at the start of the pandemic) was heavily dictated by Laura's cancer treatments, and the increased childcare load fell squarely on Chris. Laura and Chris, who were both employed as university professors, met the increased childcare demands with sharp increases for Chris and smaller increases for Laura who was undergoing chemo treatments during the beginning of the pandemic.

For still other couples, the pandemic did little to impact their division of childcare, both in cases where childcare was divided roughly equally between mothers and fathers and in cases where the division was skewed toward higher amounts of mothers' contributions. For example, Travis Nelson found himself unable to work as a chiropractor during lockdowns, and rather than fully devoting his time to helping his school aged children with their schoolwork, he allowed his wife Rachel to take the lead with their children.

> It'd been so uncertain all the time. So no, we kept them home and struggled through school with them at home… There was no necessary routine to it… And we struggled a little bit with Travis being home and not knowing where he fit into the routine, trying to figure out our routine. (Rachel Nelson, receptionist)

Travis, like other men who experience job loss in other contexts (Rao 2020), was unclear about how he could best navigate his own feelings of uncertainty about their financial future and his career and felt hesitant to spend his newfound time focusing on the educational and everyday needs of their children.

Durability of changes to childcare.

The data suggest that some childcare changes were more durable than others. Childcare was outsourced as soon as possible, with a return to pre-pandemic daytime childcare

arrangement. Involvement by fathers was more nuanced, with some fathers maintaining their increased levels of childcare post pandemic while other fathers did not.

Regarding the pandemic loss of outsourced childcare, most families returned to outsourcing their childcare as soon as it was available, and they felt safe sending their children. When possible, children returned to daycares and schools as soon as they reopened. Mark (programmer) and Stephanie Fisher (teacher) were the exception and decided to keep their children enrolled in virtual school beyond the initial lockdowns. By February of 2021, Mark and Stephanie had re-enrolled their youngest two children in their local public school, and by the following school year, all four of their children were back to attending in-person school.

Increased care by fathers in the immediate aftermath of Canada's lockdowns is supported by previous quantitative work (Shafer et al. 2020); however, I find the increases in childcare contributed by fathers is short lived for many fathers. Outside of the acute crisis of COVID-19 lockdowns, which for most families was during the summer of 2020, or certainly by fall of 2020, the divisions of childcare between mothers and fathers returned to mostly pre-pandemic levels. For most fathers, the increases in childcare did not last beyond the first two months of the pandemic. Kevin Cameron and Brian Bennett, both teachers, exemplified this trend. Kevin Cameron, partnered with Wendy (nurse practitioner), performed the bulk of childcare during the early stages of the pandemic, both because he was home while school was closed during the same hours as his children, and because Wendy left during the day to provide medical care in their community. During this time Kevin recalls:

> I think we were pretty lucky because whenever the kids were home, I was home. So, it was mandated by the government… Wendy was irrelevant in a lot of ways because I was always available. Not that she's irrelevant, but she ... But honestly, for childcare, I mean, she had to still go into work. (Kevin, teacher/librarian).

In fall of 2020, both Kevin and their children returned to in-person school, and Kevin's childcare contributions dropped back to pre-pandemic levels. Brian Bennet, like Kevin Cameron, was also working from home as a teacher while schools were closed for his two teenage children. Unlike Kevin, Brian's partner, Tara (teacher's aide), also worked in the schools, and they equally shared childcare duties during the beginning of the pandemic. After schools reopened, Brian's childcare contributions also returned to pre-pandemic levels of care.

To the extent that fathers continued providing an increased amount of childcare, they did so because their work situations allowed them to engage in family-friendly work practices. For both Jacob Taylor (accountant) and Mark Fisher (programmer), remote work continued after the initial lock down periods ended. As a result, both families made the decision to ramp up work for Samantha Taylor (trailer and coach) and Stephanie Fisher (teacher) knowing that their partners were at home with flexibility in their schedules should their school aged children need them during the day.

> Although the only thing is now is I've got flexibility, if she's got appointments and needs to be gone, I can just say, 'Hey, I'm going to work from home this day.' And I can be home to help out now. (Jacob Taylor, accountant)

While these fathers did not intend to provide full time care for their children while working remotely, they found that remote and flexible work allowed them to be on call when their daytime childcare, in this case public school, was not available.

In addition to official government and work policies that allow workers more flexibility and allow for remote work, workers themselves shifted how they viewed their own work flexibility and felt more comfortable using this flexibility to care for their families. For example, although employers may have granted more flexibility to workers, pre-COVID workers were hesitant to ask for flexibility to care for their families. The pandemic has shifted this and allowed some men to shoulder a larger share of the childcare demands. In the words of Matt Parker

(CEO), “I've come to understand that … people are really understanding... I've got a lot more flexibility than I choose to believe, and I've only really come to understand that after about two years of having to constantly impose on people.” For Matt Parker, who has intentionally crafted a family-friendly work environment in his new company, the pandemic has furthered his willingness to take time out of his day to care for his family.

Other fathers, like Rob Adams, were able to maintain increased levels of care despite not shifting to remote work during the pandemic. Rob’s flexibility and work autonomy made him the main point of contact during the day for his school-aged children because his wife' Sarah’s work as a teacher’s aide (EA) did not have either flexibility or autonomy. For Justin Davies (accountant), a father of 3 preschool aged children, his remote work similarly allowed him to be the primary contact for preschool or for their younger children who were cared for at home by his partner’s elderly parents when his wife, Liz (nurse), was working. On Liz’s days off, Justin’s remote work allowed her to leave a napping baby at home while she ran errands, or when she needed an extra hand with their three children during the day. While all these fathers continued to work full time, having remote and flexible work allowed them to combine their paid work with some less involved forms of childcare. George said:

> At least from my perspective, for your family, it’s best-case scenario to be able to work from home and do both things. Obviously, when you're working, you're working, but in those situations where you're like, ‘I need to do this because you need stitches,’ or something, that you can. There's some flexibility a little bit. (George King, data analyst and student)

Not all fathers retained the family-friendly workplace practices beyond the first year or so of the pandemic.

> I would say though pre-pandemic, with him [Jacob] traveling so much, even though he's close with all the kids, he didn't necessarily understand the day-to-day schedule and all the things that the kids were involved in and doing. He was a little bit removed from that. And then once he started working at home, he would see them come and go and come in and say hi when they'd come home from school. And so I would say he was more connected to their daily life when he

> worked from home, than when he was traveling before. And now back to traveling, he's probably just a little bit less involved in their lives. (Samantha Taylor, trainer and coach)

Losing remote and flexible work meant that dads who were able to spend more time with their children during the pandemic are unable to maintain their increased levels of childcare.

Changes to Family Time

Pandemic changes to family time.

For many families, the silver lining of many of the pandemic-related hardships was a dramatic increase in the time they were able to spend together as a family unit. Socializing outside of households was limited by the provincial governments (CBC News 2023; Government of Alberta 2020b; Nielsen 2020), and I find families with a range of political beliefs largely adhered to these rules because of their commitment to being good citizens and modeling rule following to their children (Hier 2021). For example, Stephine Fisher, who identifies as somewhat liberal, and her husband Mark, who identifies as conservative, agreed that following Provincial rules and regulations about COVID-19 was a priority for their family.

> 'Should our kids get together or should they not? They're going to be outside. Is that going to be safe? Are we following the rules?' We want to make sure that we're teaching our kids that we follow the rules that are given to us, even if they're hard and we don't understand them. We kind of decided that that was the most important thing for us. And so, we tried to stick with that to teach that. (Stephanie Fisher, teacher)

Many other families shared similar thoughts about prioritizing rule-following across the political spectrum. What this meant for families was that all the many after-school and weekend playdates, enrichment activities, and recreation were no longer possible, and very few places were open, other than the grocery or home improvement stores (George and Dayna King). Families replaced the void with time together. This entailed daily walks (Stephanie and Mark Fisher) and playing board games (Rob and Sarah Adams, Wendy and Kevin Cameron, and Brian and Tara Bennett), more sibling play time than ever before (Eva and Sven Hansen), starting

traditions of family camping trips (Laura and Chris Young and Matt and Jen Parker), watching movies (Kevin and Wendy Cameron), investing in home recreation like trampolines (Eva and Sven Hansen) or hot tubs (Sarah and Rob Adams), and generally just being together more than ever before (Amber and Mike Miller).

While at the onset of each interview many couples expressed how difficult life was for them during the pandemic, at some point in the interview, couples softened and shared how much they liked the time to be together.

> Because the nature of what we were doing, because we were all together all the time, what we discovered almost immediately is we really enjoyed being with each other. And so, it kind of became a real growth opportunity for us as a family. And we started doing things like eating in the house more, 'cause of course we weren't going out. So, eating meals together more, games together more. (Brian Bennett, teacher, guidance counselor and city councilor).

Later in their interview, the Bennetts were almost reluctant to confess how much they enjoyed many aspects of the pandemic:

> Brian: This is going to sound insane. I think we actually liked it more.
>
> Tara: I'm a bit of an introvert. I love being home. And so, for me it was kind of a dream. Yeah. I mean, I could still read books. I could do all the things that I like to do in my spare time. Plus, I was studying now, right?
>
> Brian: And for me, because I'm so busy in my life, between coaching football and coaching basketball and council and a full-time job, without thinking too hard, I probably do 80 hours outside the home a week. Being forced to stay in the house? I freaking loved it. It was wonderful. It was, "Let's just sit and do things together." I think our board game inventory through Amazon tripled. So, we had really a lot of fun together, and I think that was a good thing. And then we are a family that, we enjoy each other. So, when we have an opportunity to do things together, we take advantage of the opportunity, as best we can. (Brian Bennett, teacher, guidance counselor, and city councilor; Tara Bennet, teacher's aide/nurse)

So much of the discussion around pandemic parenting has focused on the most difficult parts, and for families in my study, the loss of childcare and school closures were the primary sources of difficulty but exploring the idea that the pandemic was good in some ways for many families has been examined to a lesser degree by scholars. Like the Bennetts, who expressed reluctance to

confess their true feelings about the pandemic's impact on their family life by calling it "insane" (Brian Bennett, teacher, guidance counselor and city councilor), many families expressed some apprehension with sharing how their family benefitted during a time that was so hard for many. The Bennetts acknowledge that their position as financially stable parents was privileged, and many others in my study framed their praise of pandemic family time with similar acknowledgement of their own privileged positions. Jen Parker hedged her praise of the pandemic with a recognition that other families in different situations may have faced additional challenges:

> I think parenting through the pandemic, there was some blessings in it obviously, because we had our nuclear family… So, in some ways that was great. And despite all the craziness, there was some great memories that we made because we did things that we probably wouldn't have done otherwise with our kids and as a family. (Jen Parker, physician)

Jen compared her situation with others in her acquaintance who are single parents and felt that her family's pandemic experiences were positive in large part because of their privileged family form.

Couples often spoke about the slower pace of life during the pandemic, and how much they enjoyed this change from pre-pandemic life. Amber Miller (x-ray technician) recounted that she "personally loved it. Because the kids were at home, everything kind of slowed down." A slower pace of life was not mentioned only by parents with school-aged children but was shared across all my study participants. For example, the Grahams, parents of two preschool aged boys praised the slower pace of life during the pandemic, saying:

> Life is just busy and we found each other working and then parenting and then after bedtime we would just be exhausted and kind of do our own thing. Whereas during the pandemic, once we had childcare figured out, we would go for walks at lunchtime and hold hands and it just became this really dreamy, he was my most favorite coworker of my whole life. We loved it. So, we wished we spent more time working from home with each other. That was the best part of the pandemic. I think we will look back on the pandemic, minus the gong show of trying to figure out childcare, we really loved it. We loved it. We weren't also running place to place. Even the kids'

> activities shut down. And so, we just had more time to just chill. And yeah, we weren't rushing before work, after work, commute, all those types of things. Yes, we were dropping the boys off to childcare, but it was just like there's no one even on the road. There wasn't even traffic during that time, so it was dreamy. We earned time in our lives to be a family. (Megan Graham, university administrator)

Megan and John felt the pandemic gave them more time to be together and with their children by stripping away all the extra activities and social gatherings that were part of their pre-pandemic life.

Every couple believed that life during the pandemic was challenging for families; however, most of the families in my sample, situated solidly in the middle- or upper-income brackets with two stable incomes, also found the pandemic had good parts too. Despite this, not every aspect of the increased family togetherness was positive, especially for self-identified introverts like Sarah Adams and her son.

> Me and my son are introverts and we struggled because we couldn't find space to be by ourselves. So, it was like we both were struggling, but in completely opposite ways. My kids were here all the time, and I would occasion, I really got into gardening that summer because they weren't going to follow me out in the yard because then I put them to work and stuff. And so that was the little bit of time that I was able to have by myself. And my son managed, he had his video games and that was how he isolated. But Rob and the girls really struggled not having friends to socialize with. (Sarah Adams, teacher's aide)

Introverts struggled with not having alone time, but extroverts like Rob Adams and his daughters had a difficult time adjusting to the loss of social activities. This was a common theme among the couples in my study, both for themselves and for their children (Tara and Brian Bennet's kids, Eva and Sven's kids, and Patrick and Courtney Russell along with their children). Despite the challenges that too much family time caused, nearly every family remembered this family time as special.

Durability of changes in family time.

While severe lockdowns were eased up for most Canadians by summer of 2020 when schools and daycares were reopened, many of the social restrictions remained for months longer.

In some ways, life did not return to 'normal' until summer 2022, over 2 years after the global pandemic was declared. Eventually, as restrictions were lifted and families themselves regained comfort participating in activities, many filled their schedules to pre-pandemic levels. Many families noted their increased family time did not survive the pandemic times and "it went back to the way it was" (Rachel Nelson, receptionist). While life for many is just as busy as before, some, but not all, held on to some aspect of their family time. Even the Russell family, who said "we're busier than pre-COVID, for sure" (Patrick Russell, financial planner), found that they still spent more time as a family after the pandemic than before.

> It was a really good thing for our family to slow down and be more together. And we did a lot of family things together and we still try to do a lot more family because of ... Well, not because of COVID, but what we have done in during COVID. Yeah, and we try to hang out more. And I think because we've moved up here, the country also slow us down a little bit just because we are in the ... not middle of nowhere but kind of, and then we spend more time, the kids can't just run out and play with friends all the time and stuff. So, it slowed us down and that's a good thing. It's made us relax a little bit more. (Courtney Russell, bookkeeper)

Like the Russells, life for the Adams has become busier than ever, but despite this they feel like they have kept some elements of their increased family time.

> And we spent so much family time, we really got to know the kids during that time when we spent so much time together. We bought a basketball hoop; we bought a lot of stuff that we could do here. So, I appreciate that time that we were able to spend… The only reason we haven't been able to retain it is just because they work and they're starting to be more involved in things. But now Sunday afternoons, it's now just a routine to play a family game. And we didn't have that set up before as much doing our scripture study, we were able to get so much more in depth during the pandemic and we were able to keep that a little bit more. (Sarah Adams, teacher's aide)

The Millers reported a similar experience with their family, saying "we play more games together, like board games or card games, because we did that a lot [during the pandemic]. And so that's one thing I'd say, that's stayed or kept." (Amber Miller, X-ray tech)

For the Parkers, the amount of time they spend together as a family is not necessarily different now than pre-pandemic, but rather the quality of that time has changed.

> I think it's subtle. The pandemic forced the family unit to be more intense. And so, what I've heard from other parents and stuff that a lot of parents were really, really social before. They're

> always having play dates and stuff like that. And I always thought in the back of my head that it's a bit of a crutch to keep the kids entertained because they didn't want to have to be one-on-one with their family sometimes, which I understand of course. But I think the individual time in that family unit, hopefully will remain as a result. (Matt Parker, CEO)

Having more intense and intentional family time was a boon to the Parkers, both busy high achieving professionals, and the experience of the pandemic was an opportunity to restructure their family in a way to keep this level of family interactions.

For those who felt like they jumped right back into the frenzied pace of pre-pandemic parenting without retaining the quality or amount of family time, many felt nostalgic about the family togetherness they enjoyed during COVID. These families wished they were able to keep that aspect in their current lives. This was true for the Fishers. When asked to describe what life looked like for their family at the start of the COVID lockdowns, Stephanie Fisher responded:

> It was kind of awesome…We didn't have to do anything. It was sort of nice. I was talking about it with a friend at the pool today, actually. We were like, 'Remember when we didn't have to do anything in the evening? There was nothing scheduled.' That part was awesome. And it was really a nice family time, kind of just hunkered down and the kids had each other and just did puzzles. (Stephanie Fisher, teacher)

While Stephanie Fisher, like all the parents in the study, found many aspects of family life during the pandemic difficult, she missed the simplicity of fewer pulls on their time and more dedicated family time.

> Yeah, I think, like you said, not taking things for granted works on that level, too, that we also shouldn't take for granted the things that were really nice during COVID, too. Or forget the lessons that we learned from being together and the parts that we really liked about that, and make those still continue to happen even though we're busy again in different ways. Yeah, there were some good parts, so I don't want to forget those lessons, either, and how much we did actually like walking together. So, we can't forget to still do that sometimes. (Stephanie Fisher, teacher)

Ultimately, maintaining pandemic levels of family togetherness was not possible for most families. Travis Nelson (chiropractor) recognized that "there were good things, like having more time to be forced to take a break and to spend more time with the kids. But it wasn't sustainable because eventually you need to earn money."

Increased time allowed families to re-evaluate.

Families had more time to spend together, but they also had more time to reassess the trajectories of their lives. For several families in my study, the pandemic was an opportunity to strip away all the business and find space to evaluate their jobs and their career paths. For many, these changes were something they had been thinking about for years, but COVID offered them a chance to reset. Tara Bennett began the pandemic working as a teacher's aide (EA) and slowing down the pace of their family's lives gave her the time and space to go back to school to recertify as a nurse.

> Brian: And with the time, and as Tara alluded to a bit earlier, she was able to get rested and she was able to focus on something different. So, she made the decision very early in the pandemic to go back to nursing. So, we enrolled her in university again to do the nursing refresher program so that she could go back to nursing. And now in retrospect we look back at what we've done over the course of the last three years and realize COVID was an amazing boon for us. It was an opportunity.
>
> Tara: It served us very well.
>
> Brian: It did. It was an opportunity for us to just get our lives moving again in a direction we wanted. So...
>
> Tara: And then I also got really rested in COVID. And so right in the middle of COVID I decided to go back to my nursing. I had left nursing 16 years previous, and I thought, 'Wait a minute, if I'm not valued or paid at this position like I should be, I'm going to go back to where I can make a little more money and do what I feel is more fulfilling.' So, I started the schooling to get back to my nursing career, which is where I am now. (Brian Bennett, teacher, guidance counselor, and city councilor; Tara Bennet, teacher's aide/nurse)

Without the major changes to family life from the pandemic, Tara may not have had the mental, emotional, and physical energy for several more years to return to a career that she loved.

Like Tara Bennett, the Russell family also credits the pandemic for creating an opportunity for their family to move out to the big city and into the country. Patrick Russell spent his childhood weekends and holidays in the country and hoped someday to do the same with his wife Courtney and their two young children. They even dreamed of living in the country full-time but did not believe it would be possible until they reached retirement age. Once their

financial planning office and their children's school were closed for the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russells were able to test out their dream of living in the country, buying, and remodeling a house with a large outdoor space. The pandemic forced them to slow down, and with the newfound ability to work almost fully remotely, the Russells made the decision to relocate permanently to the country. Courtney Russell (bookkeeper) explained, "We've just decided to stay because it's a better quality of life for our family." This move allowed them to adjust their big city lifestyle and incorporate more outdoor recreational activities like skiing and hiking.

The Parker family, while not relocating to the country like the Russells, also pursued their goal to spend more time in nature with their three young children during the pandemic. Matt reflected, "I always wanted to really get our family into camping. And then we bought an RV trailer. And that's something coming out of the pandemic that really was a great thing" (Matt Parker, CEO). This experience was shared by Laura and Chris Young (both university professors) and their two children. While the pandemic limited many of the activities they enjoyed doing as a family and made travelling to see their family across the US border impossible for over a year, it did allow them to spend more time outside camping or exploring the many national and provincial parks in western Canada.

Other couples found that the pandemic forced them to focus on their family and pull back from many of the extras that were pulling them away from time together. Like many of the high achieving couples in my study, Matt and Jen Parker were involved in many community and professional boards. The pandemic offered time away from these activities and the opportunity to reassess their commitments when meetings and other duties resumed. According to Jen and Matt Parker:

> Matt: That's one change. I resigned or got myself off all the boards I was on.

> Jen: I think it was that realization for him that you needed to focus a little bit more on your family. You were overextending yourself.
>
> Matt: Yes.
>
> Jen: And you realized you didn't need to overextend yourself quite so much just because you wrote it down on a piece of paper that your goals were to do this, this, and this. So, it was a reframing, a reprioritization.
>
> Matt: Yeah. That's another big thing. It's been reprioritization.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. And you feel like you're going to keep that? It's better?
>
> Matt: Yeah, for sure. I get asked to be on boards all the time, and I just keep saying no.
>
> (Matt Parker, CEO; Jen Parker, physician)

Both Jen and Matt spoke of reducing their professional and volunteer commitments before the pandemic, with a move to a .8 (part-time) position at the hospital for Jen (physician) and resigning from his high-ranking corporate position by starting his own company for Matt (CEO), but the pandemic further solidified their commitment to scaling back their own careers to spend more time with each other and their three young children.

Another way that families used the increased family time of the pandemic was directed towards improving their homes. With access to public spaces severely limited, homes, for those privileged to own them like many of the families in my study, became a priority. Five of the families I spoke with, Sarah and Rob Adams, Patrick and Courtney Russell, Matt and Jen Parker, and Eva and Sven Hansen, and Claire and Tom Wilson all spent time one home renovations to improve the function and beauty of their homes where so much of their time was now spent.

In each of these examples, families used the pause caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as an opportunity to reprioritize and redirect some aspect of their family's lives. In each of these cases, these changes appear to remain beyond the pandemic. Houses are permanently altered, jobs and careers have shifted, and families have established new traditions for family vacations, as a result of the extra time the COVID-19 pandemic gave families.

DISCUSSION

Implications

These findings have implications for several related literatures. The first relates to gender and family-friendly work practices. Since the earliest stages of the pandemic, concerns have been raised about the gendered implication of COVID-19 (Lewis 2020), and more research is required to understand the short- and long-term effects of the pandemic on gender equality in the workforce. Women in my sample who worked in salaried positions compared with those working part-time for hourly wages were less likely to reduce their work hours to care for their children. This is consistent with other research that finds women's careers were more likely to suffer as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and conflicts with their caregiving roles (Schieman et al. 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic is not unique in this regard. Previous work demonstrates that women have been disproportionately impacted in past pandemics, such as the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2016 in west Africa (Wenham, Smith, and Morgan 2020). Policies encouraging women to seek salaried employment rather than hourly wages may assist women to stay in the job market during future shocks, such as major recessions or pandemics. By encouraging policy makers within both the public and private sectors to continue restructuring workplaces to allow parents of both genders more opportunities to meet both their work and home responsibilities, we may also open some traditionally male occupations to more women, who self-select out of these professions because they have been structurally unfriendly towards working mothers.

My data suggest that shifts in family-friendly work practices play an important role in how likely increases in father's childcare contributions are to continue beyond the pandemic. The good news for proponents of more equitable division of labor is that workplaces appear more supportive of family-friendly work practices. Further, workers themselves are more likely to seek

out and embrace family-friendly work practices in the post-pandemic world. Shifts toward remote work, greater flextime, and more generous sick leave particularly allow fathers to play a more active role in caring for their children. This supports previous work on the 'needs based theory' of fathers' involvement (Shafer et al. 2020). I find evidence that when fathers spend more time at home with their children, they are more likely to perform more childcare. What I do not find evidence of is that these effects remain when fathers return to their previous schedules. For example, fathers who returned to in-person work were no longer exposed to the daily needs of the family, and my data suggest these fathers return to pre-pandemic levels of childcare. Private companies and government entities interested in greater gender equity in the home would do well to encourage fathers to engage in family-friendly work practices and structure work environments that allow them to freely do so.

While not shifting the balance towards more gender equality in childcare, women as well as men benefit from workplaces that encourage family-friendly work practices. From previous work (Fuller and Hirsh 2019; Glass and Camarigg 1992) and what is mirrored in my data, we find evidence that women, especially educated women, may select careers and jobs positions that explicitly allow them greater freedom to engage in family-friendly work practices. Wendy Cameron (nurse practitioner) explained this well: "What moms need is flexibility where you can do those things if you need to." When asked if fathers also need flexibility as a follow-up to this statement, both Wendy and her husband Kevin (teacher/librarian) answered quickly with "yeah." Both mothers and fathers, and indirectly entire families, benefit when they are able to engage in family-friendly work practices.

Like the families I interviewed, I am also a parent and experienced many of the same challenges they shared with me. Unlike the couples in my study, I experienced the pandemic

living in the United States, while they all live in one of three Canadian provinces, Alberta, British Columbia, or Ontario. As a sociologist, I am interested in the ways that institutions impact family life, and studying Canadians offers the American scholar an opportunity to see how families fare given slightly more institutional support. While a comparative sample of Americans would be necessary to fully understand how these institutional and cultural differences influenced the pandemic experience and how those experiences continue to impact family life, my findings contrasted with my own experience and those of others with whom I regularly interact and speak, suggesting that some of the ways that families were impacted were similar, and in other important ways they differed. Further work should further explore this topic, which should be of interest not just to Canadians living in the United States like me, but also to those interested in how the American experience might be different in the future in the presence of possible legislative and cultural shifts towards more family-friendly work life balance.

Similarly, family changes originating from the COVID-19 pandemic and related shifts offer us an opportunity to reflect on the challenges that families faced during a global pandemic and the support systems that are required for families during future pandemics. Many of the pandemic-related relief policies focused on economic and housing insecurity, and rightly so. However, families with steady incomes and stable housing still faced incredible difficulties during the pandemic, and in many cases, their financial privilege did not shield them from these challenges. Planning for childcare during the hours parents typically work, including for both younger and school aged children, should be a priority in any future pandemic plans. Global leaders and health experts warn that another pandemic is possible in our lifetime and we would be wise to consider carefully how we can best prepare to mitigate some of the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ghebreyesus 2023).

In addition to the many difficulties faced by families stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, families, like those in my study, also benefitted from the pandemic in important ways. As outlined in the findings, families spent considerably more time together during the early stage of the pandemic. Some of this time was enjoyable and treasured by the couples in this study. My findings suggest that intensive parenting norms shifted during the beginning of the pandemic because many of the activities and social obligations parents normally engaged in as part of their adherence to intensive parenting norms were no longer possible. The increased time spent together was enjoyable when it allowed them to relax and have fun together as a family. While many families before the pandemic desired more family time (Milkie et al. 2010), COVID-19 clearly demonstrated that more family time does not fully satisfy this desire. Many of the families in my study found that during the pandemic they had too much time for family togetherness, and certainly too much time for family togetherness within the walls of their own home. The couples I spoke with did not relish the extra time they spent engaging in certain types of childcare tasks for their children, particularly supervising virtual learning, noting that this was the most challenging aspect of the pandemic for their family. These activities, in addition to being physically demanding and time intensive, highlight the stress parents feel when facing conflicting ideal worker and intensive parenting norms. While the pandemic may have shifted some of the intensive parenting norms (i.e., those around extracurricular activities) parents still felt enormous pressure to keep their children on track academically. In other words, families want more time together, and they want that time together for enjoyable family activities enabling them to relax from the demands of conforming to both intensive parenting and ideal worker norms.

Limitations

Generating data from a sample of highly privileged Canadians offers both substantial limitations and advantage. First, by mainly interviewing white, cisgender, partnered, financially advantaged couples I am unable to capture the experiences of the many families and individuals outside of those parameters. While other scholars have looked at some groups of marginalized parents (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022), my work leaves untouched how different families were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and how durable those changes may be. Future researchers should build upon my research to explore how each of these identities and the intersections between them add complex layers to the experiences of Canadian parents and families. Much is missing from our current understanding of what types of changes lower-income families, families of color, single or Queer parents, families facing unstable housing, or other marginalizing identities experienced during COVID-19, and how durable those changes have proven to be.

While the limitations are notable, there are several advantages to limiting my sample to a privileged subset of the Canadian population, compensating for the disadvantages. First, by limiting the scope of my project, I was able to collect and analyze novel data from in-depth interviews in a short time frame. The fifteen couples in my sample reported a wide range of experiences, and varied greatly in their employment, ages of children, and types of childcare typically utilized. A sample including individuals from a wide range of demographic characteristics would have been much larger and would have required the addition of considerably more time and resources to collect. Further, despite their privileged status, many of the challenges resulting from COVID-19 impacting these families, impacted all Canadians, regardless of their demographic characteristics. Before the pandemic, as well as after the

immediate lockdown phase, Canadians with financial privilege were able to buy their way out of some of their problems by outsourcing additional care work. During the earliest stages of the pandemic, this was severely curtailed. Wealthy Canadians were not shielded from many of the impacts of the pandemic and were forced to face the difficulty of balancing paid work with care work with little opportunity to outsource childcare similar to their less privileged peers. My work, like all qualitative work, is not intended to provide generalizable findings, instead offering a deeper understanding into the experiences of some Canadians families in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. My hope is that this work will precipitate further questions and research into how families were impacted both in the short and long terms because of the global shock.

Additionally, while the 30 study participants were interviewed as couples, and represent the perspectives of only 15 couples, I found that there was important variation in the experiences between individuals within the same couple. Throughout the interviews, couples used phrases like "I have a different take on that" (Jen Parker, physician) to differentiate their own individual experience from their partner's experiences. While couples spoke of collective challenges, each study participant offered a slightly different perspective, shaped by their gender, relationship, personality, and work.

CONCLUSION

Previous work on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families has mainly been quantitative and focused on some of the immediate changes from the early lockdown stage. My work adds to the body of research in two important ways; first, by providing qualitative work that can examine the questions of how the pandemic impacted families more deeply; and second, by addressing the question of how durable these changes are beyond the initial lockdowns. Family-friendly work practices, like remote and flexible work and taking time off for illness,

were altered by the pandemic, and although many workers have returned to offices, some remain at home and most continue to enjoy increased flexibility and time off for illnesses. The changes to family-friendly work policies - at least within my sample of educated, mostly white professionals - appear the most durable of all the changes I examine. Additionally, I find that family life was significantly impacted in the earliest stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and some of those changes persist. Family time increased both in terms of the amount of time spent together as well as the ways that this time was spent. While family time has decreased dramatically with the return to 'normal' life 3 years post-pandemic, some elements of family life remain altered, and many families express regret over this loss of family time. Childcare was the third area with important changes, and in many ways the most dramatic shift in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when daycares and schools were shuttered for months. In this phase, childcare was rarely outsourced beyond the nuclear family, and the burden of care fell on both mothers and fathers, to some degree based on each individual's ability to engage in family-friendly work practices compared with their partner's ability to do so.

REFERENCES

Acker, Joan. 1990. “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations.” *Gender & Society* 4(2):139–58. doi: 10.1177/089124390004002002.

Andersson, Matthew A., Michael A. Garcia, and Jennifer Glass. 2021. “Across Rich Nations, Disadvantaged Children Do Better When Work-Family Balance Is a Policy Priority.” doi: 10.26153/TSW/10942.

Baadel, Said, Stefane Kabene, and Asim Majeed. 2020. “Work-Life Conflict Costs: A Canadian Perspective.” *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management* 20(2):178. doi: 10.1504/IJHRDM.2020.106257.

Ballard, Janette. 2022. “From Pandemic to Endemic: The Future of Work-Life Balance.” *University of Denver*. Retrieved June 16, 2023 (https://www.du.edu/news/pandemic-endemic-future-work-life-balance).

Beaujot, Roderic, Ching Jiangqin Du, and Zenaida Ravanera. 2013. “Family Policies in Quebec and the Rest of Canada: Implications for Fertility, Child-Care, Women’s Paid Work, and Child Development Indicators.” *Canadian Public Policy* 39(2):221–40. doi: 10.3138/CPP.39.2.221.

Béland, Louis-Philippe, Oluwatobi Fakorede, and Derek Mikola. 2020. “Short-Term Effect of COVID-19 on Self-Employed Workers in Canada.” *Canadian Public Policy* 46(S1):S66–81. doi: 10.3138/cpp.2020-076.

Bourhis, Anne, and Redouane Mekkaoui. 2010. “Beyond Work-Family Balance: Are Family-Friendly Organizations More Attractive?” *Industrial Relations* 65(1):98–117.

Brace, Robert. 2022. “Work-Life Balance in a Post-Pandemic World.” *Forbes*. Retrieved June 16, 2023 (https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/08/02/work-life-balance-in-a-post-pandemic-world/?sh=333ebb7d5d12).

British Columbia Ministry of Education. 2016. “British Columbia’s Education Program - February 2016.” Retrieved May 31, 2023 (chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/diverse-student-needs/educationwelcomeletter_jan2016_english_final.pdf).

Butler, Kate. 2010. “Intensive Mothering in British Columbia: Understanding the Impact of an ‘Investing-in-Children’ Framework on Mothering Ideology.” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* (42):243. doi: 10.7202/1002180ar.

Butts, Marcus M., Wendy J. Casper, and Tae Seok Yang. 2013. “How Important Are Work–Family Support Policies? A Meta-Analytic Investigation of Their Effects on Employee Outcomes.” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 98(1):1–25. doi: 10.1037/a0030389.

Carlson, Daniel L., and Richard J. Petts. 2022. “US Parents’ Domestic Labor During the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Population Research and Policy Review* 41(6):2393–2418. doi: 10.1007/s11113-022-09735-1.

Carroll, Nicholas, Adam Sadowski, Amar Laila, Valerie Hruska, Madeline Nixon, David Ma, Jess Haines, and on behalf of the Guelph Family Health Study. 2020. “The Impact of COVID-19 on Health Behavior, Stress, Financial and Food Security among Middle to High Income Canadian Families with Young Children.” *Nutrients* 12(8):2352. doi: 10.3390/nu12082352.

CBC News. 2023. “What You Need to Know about COVID-19 in B.C. on March 24, 2020.” *CBC News*. Retrieved June 20, 2023 (https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/coronavirus-update-bc-what-you-need-to-know-march-24-1.5507672).

Christensen, Kathleen E., and Graham L. Staines. 1990. “Flextime: A Viable Solution for Work/Family Conflict?” *Journal of Family Issues* 11(4):455–56.

Christopher, Karen. 2012. “Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers’ Constructions of the Good Mother.” *Gender & Society* 26(1):73–96. doi: 10.1177/0891243211427700.

Collins, Caitlyn. 2020. *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving*. First paperback edition, with discussion questions. Princeton, New Jersey Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Collyer, Sophie, Megan A. Curran, Irwin Garfinkel, David Harris, Mark Stabile, Jane Waldfogel, and Christopher Wimer. 2020. “What a Child Allowance Like Canada’s Would Do for Child Poverty in America.” *The Centry Foundation*. Retrieved September 20, 2021 (https://tcf.org/content/report/what-a-child-allowance-like-canadas-would-do-for-child-poverty-in-america/).

Department of Finance Canada. 2021. “Budget 2021: A Canada-Wide Learning and Child Care Plan.” *Government of Canada*. Retrieved June 15, 2023 (https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2021/04/budget-2021-a-canada-wide-early-learning-and-child-care-plan.html).

Dilmaghani, Maryam. 2021. “There Is a Time and a Place for Work: Comparative Evaluation of Flexible Work Arrangements in Canada.” *International Journal of Manpower* 42(1):167–92. doi: 10.1108/IJM-12-2019-0555.

Duncan, Karen A., and Rachael N. Pettigrew. 2012. “The Effect of Work Arrangements on Perception of Work-Family Balance.” *Community, Work & Family* 15(4):403–23. doi: 10.1080/13668803.2012.724832.

Elbaz, Sasha, Justine Blaise Richards, and Yanick Provost Savard. 2022. “Teleworking and Work–Life Balance during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Scoping Review.” *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne*. doi: 10.1037/cap0000330.

Employment and Social Development Canada. 2016. “Flexible Work Arrangements: What Was Heard.” *Government of Canada*. Retrieved June 21, 2023 (https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/portfolio/labour/programs/labour-standards/reports/what-we-heard-flexible-work-arrangements.html).

England, Paula. 2010. “The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled.” *Gender & Society* 24(2):149–66. doi: 10.1177/0891243210361475.

Ezra, Marni, and Melissa Deckman. 1996. “Balancing Work and Family Responsibilities: Flextime and Child Care in the Federal Government.” *Public Administration Review* 56(2):174. doi: 10.2307/977205.

Farooq, Rayees, and Almaas Sultana. 2022. “The Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Work from Home and Employee Productivity.” *Measuring Business Excellence* 26(3):308–25. doi: 10.1108/MBE-12-2020-0173.

Focus on the Family Canada. 2002. “Canadian Attitudes on the Family: The Complete Report.” Retrieved June 20, 2023 (chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/Canadian%20Attitudes%20on%20the%20Family.pdf).

Forbes, Lisa K., Margaret R. Lamar, and Rachel S. Bornstein. 2021. “Working Mothers’ Experiences in an Intensive Mothering Culture: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study.” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 33(3):270–94. doi: 10.1080/08952833.2020.1798200.

Friendly, Martha, Barry Forer, Rachel Vickerson, and Sophia Mohamed. 2020. “Canadian Child Care: Preliminary Results from a National Survey During the COVID19 Pandemic.” Retrieved June 21, 2023 (chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Canadian-Child-Care-COVID19-Survey-Data-Report.pdf).

Friendly, Martha, Barry Forer, Rachel Vickerson, and Sophia S. Mohamed. 2021. “COVID-19 and Childcare in Canada: A Tale of Ten Provinces and Three Territories.” *Journal of Childhood Studies* 42–52. doi: 10.18357/jcs463202120030.

Fuller, Sylvia, and C. Elizabeth Hirsh. 2019. “‘Family-Friendly’ Jobs and Motherhood Pay Penalties: The Impact of Flexible Work Arrangements Across the Educational Spectrum.” *Work and Occupations* 46(1):3–44. doi: 10.1177/0730888418771116.

Fuller, Sylvia, and Yue Qian. 2021. “Covid-19 and The Gender Gap in Employment Among Parents of Young Children in Canada.” *Gender & Society* 35(2):206–17. doi: 10.1177/08912432211001287.

Gadermann, Anne C., Kimberly C. Thomson, Chris G. Richardson, Monique Gagné, Corey McAuliffe, Saima Hirani, and Emily Jenkins. 2021. “Examining the Impacts of the

COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Mental Health in Canada: Findings from a National Cross-Sectional Study." *BMJ Open* 11(1):e042871. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-042871.

Gallacher, Guillermo, and Iqbal Hossain. 2020. "Remote Work and Employment Dynamics under COVID-19: Evidence from Canada." *Canadian Public Policy* 46(S1):S44–54. doi: 10.3138/cpp.2020-026.

Gallagher-Mackay, Kelly, Prachi Srivastava, Kathryn Underwood, Elizabeth Dhuey, Lance McCready, Karen B. Born, Antonina Maltsev, Anna Perkhun, Robert Steiner, Kali Barrett, and Beate Sander. 2021. *COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario: Emerging Evidence on Impacts*. Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. doi: 10.47326/ocsat.2021.02.34.1.0.

Gerstel, Naomi, and Dan Clawson. 2014. "Class Advantage and the Gender Divide: Flexibility on the Job and at Home." *American Journal of Sociology* 120(2):395–431. doi: 10.1086/678270.

Ghebreyesus, Tedros Adhanom. 2023. "World Must Be Ready to Respond to the next Pandemic: WHO Chief." *UN News: Global Perspective Human Stories*. Retrieved June 14, 2023 (https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136912).

Glass, Jennifer. 2000. "Envisioning the Integration of Family and Work: Toward a Kinder, Gentler Workplace." *Contemporary Sociology* 29(1):129. doi: 10.2307/2654938.

Glass, Jennifer, and Valerie Camarigg. 1992. "Gender, Parenthood, and Job-Family Compatibility." *American Journal of Sociology* 98(1):131–51. doi: 10.1086/229971.

Glass, Jennifer, Robin W. Simon, and Matthew A. Andersson. 2016. "Parenthood and Happiness: Effects of Work-Family Reconciliation Policies in 22 OECD Countries." *American Journal of Sociology* 122(3):886–929. doi: 10.1086/688892.

Golden, Lonnie. 2008. "Limited Access: Disparities in Flexible Work Schedules and Work-at-Home." *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 29:86–109. doi: 10.1007/s10834-007-9090-7.

Government of Alberta. 2020a. "Update 2: COVID-19 Pandemic in Alberta (March 15 at 4:30 p.m.)." *Alberta Government News*. Retrieved June 15, 2023 (https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=69818C355F188-C2A3-F5C6-875A2A33929D5C05).

Government of Alberta. 2020b. "Update 14: COVID-19 Pandemic in Alberta (March 27 at 8:30 p.m.)." *Government of Alberta*. Retrieved June 20, 2023 (https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=69941354D5ED5-0305-6492-CF5F6B8FD9BD41FB).

Government of Alberta. 2023. "Early Childhood Education." *Government of Alberta*. Retrieved March 31, 2023 (https://www.alberta.ca/early-childhood-

education.aspx#:~:text=registering%20your%20child.-,Kindergarten,year%20they%20have%20started%20Kindergarten.).

Government of Canada. 2016. “Flexible Work Arrangements: A Discussion Paper.” *Employment and Social Development Canada*. Retrieved June 16, 2023 (https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/portfolio/labour/programs/labour-standards/consultation-flexible-work-arrangements/discussion-paper.html).

Government of Canada. 2021. “Flexible Work Arrangements.” *Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety*. Retrieved June 15, 2023 (https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/flexible.html#:~:text=Flex%20time%20is%20an%20arrangement,%22core%22%20working%20day%20exists.).

Government of Canada. 2022a. “10 Days of Paid Sick Leave Now in Force for Nearly 1 Million Federally Regulated Workers across Canada.” *Employment and Social Development Canada*. Retrieved June 16, 2023 (https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2022/12/10-days-of-paid-sick-leave-now-in-force-for-nearly-1million-federally-regulated-workers-across-canada.html).

Government of Canada. 2022b. “Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB).” *Government of Canada*. Retrieved June 16, 2023 (https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/benefits/recovery-sickness-benefit.html).

Government of Canada. 2022c. “Education in Canada: Types of Schooling.” *Government of Canada*. Retrieved June 13, 2023 (https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/new-immigrants/new-life-canada/education/types-school.html).

Government of Canada. 2023. “Canada Child Benefit.” *Government of Canada*. Retrieved (https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/child-family-benefits/canada-child-benefit-overview.html).

Guppy, Neil, Larissa Sakumoto, and Rima Wilkes. 2019. “Social Change and the Gendered Division of Household Labor in Canada.” *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie* 56(2):178–203. doi: 10.1111/cars.12242.

Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press.

Heymann, Jody, Amy Raub, Willetta Waisath, Michael McCormack, Ross Weistroffer, Gonzalo Moreno, Elizabeth Wong, and Alison Earle. 2020. “Protecting Health during COVID-19 and beyond: A Global Examination of Paid Sick Leave Design in 193 Countries*.” *Global Public Health* 15(7):925–34. doi: 10.1080/17441692.2020.1764076.

Hier, Sean P. 2021. “Narrating the Crisis: Moral Regulation, Overlapping Responsibilities and COVID-19 in Canada.” *Current Sociology* 0(0). doi: 10.1177/00113921211055860.

Karstens-Smith, Breanna. 2020. “A Timeline of COVID-19 in Alberta.” *Global News*. Retrieved June 15, 2023 (https://globalnews.ca/news/7538547/covid-19-alberta-health-timeline/).

Kelly, Erin L., Samantha K. Ammons, Kelly Chermack, and Phyllis Moen. 2010. “Gendered Challenge, Gendered Response: Confronting the Ideal Worker Norm in a White-Collar Organization.” *Gender & Society* 24(3):281–303. doi: 10.1177/0891243210372073.

Lewis, Helen. 2020. “Pandemics Affect Men and Women Differently.” *The Atlantic*, March 19.

Lovell, Vicky. 2004. *No Time to Be Sick: Why Everyone Suffers When Workers Don’t Have Paid Sick Leave*. B242p. Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

Luhr, Sigrid, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett. 2022. “Parenting Without Predictability: Precarious Schedules, Parental Strain, and Work-Life Conflict.” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(5):24–44. doi: 10.7758/RSF.2022.8.5.02.

Lyness, Karen S., Janet C. Gornick, Pamela Stone, and Angela R. Grotto. 2012. “It’s All about Control: Worker Control over Schedule and Hours in Cross-National Context.” *American Sociological Review* 77(6):1023–49. doi: 10.1177/0003122412465331.

McDonald, David. 2020. *COVID-19 and the Canadian Workforce: Reforming EI to Protect More Workers*. Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives.

Milkie, Melissa A., Sarah M. Kendig, Kei M. Nomaguchi, and Kathleen E. Denny. 2010. “Time With Children, Children’s Well-Being, and Work-Family Balance Among Employed Parents.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72(5):1329–43. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00768.x.

Milkie, Melissa A., Kei Nomaguchi, and Scott Schieman. 2019. “Time Deficits with Children: The Link to Parents’ Mental and Physical Health.” *Society and Mental Health* 9(3):277–95. doi: 10.1177/2156869318767488.

Mitchell, Peter Jon, and Rachel DeBruyn. 2019. “The Pros and Cons of Canada’s Child Benefit.” *Institute for Family Studies*. Retrieved June 15, 2023 (https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-pros-and-cons-of-canadas-child-benefit).

Mullins, Lauren Brock, Étienne Charbonneau, and Norma Riccucci. 2020. “The Effects of Family Responsibilities Discrimination on Public Employees’ Satisfaction and Turnover Intentions: Can Flexible Work Arrangements Help?” *Review of Public Personnel Administration* 41(2):384–410. doi: 10.1177/0734371X19894035.

Nair, Roshini. 2020. “How B.C.’s Schools Adapted to a Pandemic.” *CBC News*. Retrieved (https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/school-timeline-british-columbia-1.5699655#:~:text=March%2017%20%7C%20B.C.%20K%2D12,new%20methods%20for%20online%20learning.).

Nielsen, Kevin. 2020. “A Timeline of COVID-19 in Ontario.” Retrieved June 20, 2023 (https://globalnews.ca/news/6859636/ontario-coronavirus-timeline/).

Noonan, Mary C., and Jennifer Glass. 2012. “The Hard Truth about Telecommuting.” *Monthly Lab Review* 153:38–45.

Olson, Margrethe H. 1983. “Remote Office Work: Changing Work Patterns in Space and Time.” *Communications of the ACM* 26(3):182–87. doi: 10.1145/358061.358068.

Ontario Ministry of Education. 2023. “Kindergarten.” *Ontario*. Retrieved (https://www.ontario.ca/page/kindergarten).

Parker, Kim, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Rachel Minkin. 2022. “COVID-19 Pandemic Continues to Reshape Work in America.” *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved June 16, 2023 (https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/02/16/covid-19-pandemic-continues-to-reshape-work-in-america/).

Petts, Richard J., and Chris Knoester. 2018. “Paternity Leave-Taking and Father Engagement.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 80(5):1144–62. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12494.

Public Safety Canada. 2021. “Archived - Guidance on Essential Services and Functions in Canada During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Public Safety Canada*. Retrieved June 8, 2023 (https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrt/crtcl-nfrstrctr/esf-sfe-en.aspx).

Raley, Sara, Suzanne M. Bianchi, and Wendy Wang. 2012. “When Do Fathers Care? Mothers’ Economic Contribution and Fathers’ Involvement in Child Care.” *American Journal of Sociology* 117(5):1422–59. doi: 10.1086/663354.

Rao, Aliya Hamid. 2020. *Crunch Time: How Married Couples Confront Unemployment*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Rashmi, Kumari, and Aakanksha Kataria. 2022. “Work-Life Balance: A Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis.” *Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 42(11/12):1028–65.

Reid, Erin. 2015. “Embracing, Passing, Revealing, and the Ideal Worker Image: How People Navigate Expected and Experienced Professional Identities.” *Organization Science* 26(4):997–1017. doi: 10.1287/orsc.2015.0975.

Rho, Hye Jin, Shawn Fremstad, and Jared Gaby-Biegel. 2020. *Contagion Nation 2020: United States Still the Only Wealthy Nation without Paid Sick Leave*. Center for Economic and Policy Research.

Richardson, Julia, and Clare Kelliher. 2015. “Managing Visibility for Career Sustainability: A Study of Remote Workers.” Pp. 116–30 in *Handbook of Research on Sustainable Careers*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Rizk, Jessica, Robert Gorbet, Janice Aurini, Allyson Stokes, and John McLevey. 2022. “Canadian K-12 Schooling During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons and Reflections.” *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 201:90–100.

Ronald McDonald House Charities. 2019. “2nd Family Togetherness Survey Highlights.” Retrieved June 16, 2023 (chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.rmhccanada.ca/sites/default/files/Ronald%20McDonald%20House%20Charities%20Key%20Learnings.pdf).

Scarborough, William J., Ray Sin, and Barbara Risman. 2019. “Attitudes and the Stalled Gender Revolution: Egalitarianism, Traditionalism, and Ambivalence from 1977 through 2016.” *Gender & Society* 33(2):173–200. doi: 10.1177/0891243218809604.

Schieman, Scott, Philip J. Badawy, Melissa A. Milkie, and Alex Bierman. 2021. “Work-Life Conflict During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 7:237802312098285. doi: 10.1177/2378023120982856.

Schweitzer, Linda, and Linda Duxbury. 2009. “Benchmarking the Use of Telework Arrangements in Canada.” *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences / Revue Canadienne Des Sciences de l’Administration* 23(2):105–17. doi: 10.1111/j.1936-4490.2006.tb00684.x.

Shafer, Kevin, Casey Scheibling, and Melissa A. Milkie. 2020. “The Division of Domestic Labor before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada: Stagnation versus Shifts in Fathers’ Contributions.” *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie* 57(4):523–49. doi: 10.1111/cars.12315.

Shapiro, Stanley J., and Julie Stanton. 2022. “Canada After COVID-19: A Flourishing Community for Everyone?” Pp. 103–18 in *Community, Economy and COVID-19*, *Community Quality-of-Life and Well-Being*, edited by C. J. Shultz, Ii, D. R. Rahtz, and M. J. Sirgy. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Smith, Julia. 2022. “From ‘Nobody’s Clapping for Us’ to ‘Bad Moms’: COVID-19 and the Circle of Childcare in Canada.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 29(1):353–67. doi: 10.1111/gwao.12758.

Snan, Nebal. 2020. “Canadians Spent More Quality Time with Family, Pursued Hobbies during COVID-19 Pandemic, Survey Finds.” *Saltwire*, July 28.

Soga, Lebene Richmond, Yemisi Bolade-Ogunfodun, Marcello Mariani, Rita Nasr, and Benjamin Laker. 2022. “Unmasking the Other Face of Flexible Working Practices: A Systematic Literature Review.” *Journal of Business Research* 142:648–62. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.01.024.

Statistics Canada. 2018. “Changing Profile of Stay-at-Home Parents.” *Statistics Canada*. Retrieved June 22, 2023 (https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016007-eng.htm).

Statistics Canada. 2022. “Jobs in Canada: Navigating Changing Local Labour Markets.” *Statistics Canada*. Retrieved June 14, 2023 (https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221130/dq221130b-eng.htm).

Thompson, Alison, Nathan M. Stall, Karen B. Born, Jennifer L. Gibson, Upton Allen, Jessica Hopkins, Audrey Laporte, Antonina Maltsev, Roisin McElroy, Sharmistha Mishra, Laveena Munshi, Ayodele Odutayo, Menaka Pai, Andrea Proctor, Fahad Razak, Robert J. Reid, Arjumand Siddiqi, Janet Smylie, Peter Juni, and Brian Schwartz. 2021. *Benefits of Paid Sick Leave During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. doi: 10.47326/ocsat.2021.02.25.1.0.

Urrutia, Deborah, Elisa Manetti, Megan Williamson, and Emeline Lequy. 2021. "Overview of Canada's Answer to the COVID-19 Pandemic's First Wave (January–April 2020)." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18(13):7131. doi: 10.3390/ijerph18137131.

Wenham, Clare, Julia Smith, and Rosemary Morgan. 2020. "COVID-19: The Gendered Impacts of the Outbreak." *The Lancet* 395(10227):846–48. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30526-2.

World Health Organization. 2020. *Considerations for Quarantine of Individuals in the Context of Containment for Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19): Interim Guidance, 19 March 2020*. WHO/2019-nCoV/IHR_Quarantine/2020.2. World Health Organization.

World Health Organization. 2023. "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)." *World Health Organization*. Retrieved June 15, 2023 (https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1).

Wray, Dana. 2020. "Paternity Leave and Fathers' Responsibility: Evidence From a Natural Experiment in Canada." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 82(2):534–49. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12661.

TABLES

Table 1. Summary of interviewee demographic information.

Demographic category		n	%
Gender			
	Male	14	47
	Female	15	50
	Gender queer	1	3
Level of education			
	High school graduate	1	3
	Some college/trade school	4	13
	Bachelor's degree	18	60
	Above a bachelor's degree	7	23
Age			
	30-34	3	10
	35-39	9	30
	40-44	10	33
	45-49	4	13
	50-54	2	7
Monthly household income (pretax)			
	$5,000 - $6,999	4	13
	$7,000 to $8,999	2	7
	$9,000 or more	24	80
Religion			
	Atheist/None	7	23
	Agnostic	3	10
	Christian	20	67
Number of Children			
	Two	6	20
	Three	16	53
	Four	6	20
	Five	2	7
Preschool aged children at start of Pandemic		16	53
Province of Residence			
	Alberta	22	73
	British Columbia	4	13
	Ontario	4	13
Remote Work *(part-time remote work)*			
	Before	3 *(4)*	10 *(13)*
	March 2020	20 *(1)*	67 *(3)*
	Now	6 *(8)*	20 *(27)*
Job Change		12	40
Essential Worker		6	20

Table 2. Couple Profiles

Name (*occupation*)	Remote Before	Remote Mar 2020	Remote Now	Job Change	Ages of Children	Childcare Before	Childcare mar 2020	Childcare Now
Adams								
Sarah (*daycare worker/ teacher's aide*)	No	No	No	Yes	10, 13, 15	school	mother	school
Rob (*insurance broker*)	No	No	No	No				
Bennett								
Tara (*teacher's aide/nurse*)	No	Yes	No	Yes	14, 17, 21	school	both parents	school
Brian (*teacher, guidance counselor, city councilor*)	No	Yes	No	No				
Cameron								
Wendy (*nurse practitioner*)	No	No	PT	Yes	3, 5, 7, 9, 11	school	father	school
Kevin (*teacher/librarian*)	No	Yes	No	Yes				
Davies								
Liz (*nurse*)	No	No	No	Yes	1, 3 baby in 2020	grandma	grandma	school, grandma
Justin (*accountant*)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes				
Fisher								
Stephanie (*teacher*)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	5, 7, 10, 11	school	mother	school
Mark (*programmer*)	No	Yes	Yes	No				
Graham								
Megan (*university administrator*)	No	Yes	PT	No	1, 3	daycare	day home	daycare
John (*data analyst*)	No	Yes	PT	Yes				
Hansen								
Eva (*school program director*)	PT	Yes	PT	No	>1, 5, 12	school	both parents	daycare, school
Sven (*insurance broker/ compliance/professor*)	No	Yes	PT	Yes				
King								
Dayna (*teacher*)	No	Yes	No	No	1, 2, baby in 2021	mother	mother	father
George (*data analyst, student*)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes				
Miller								
Amber (*x-ray tech*)	No	No	No	No	5, 8, 12, 14	school	older siblings	school
Mike (*engineer*)	No	No	No	Yes				
Nelson								
Rachel (*receptionist*)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	9, 11, baby in 2020	school	mother	mother, school
Travis (*chiropractor*)	No	No	No	No				
Parker								
Jen (*physician*)	No	PT	No	No	1, 3, 5	daycare, school	father	daycare, school
Matt (*CEO*)	No	Yes	No	No				
Russell								
Courtney (*bookkeeper*)	PT	Yes	Yes	No	4, 6	school	mother	school
Patrick (*financial planner*)	No	Yes	Yes	No				
Taylor								
Samantha (*trainer/coach*)	No	No	No	Yes	3, 6, 12, 14	school, mother	mother	school
Jacob (*accountant*)	No	Yes	PT	No				
Wilson								
Claire (*teacher*)	No	Yes	No	No	3, 6, baby in 2020	daycare, school	mother	day home, school
Tom (*contractor*)	No	No	No	No				
Young								
Laura (*professor*)	PT	Yes	PT	No	3, 6	daycare, school	father	school
Chris (*professor*)	PT	Yes	PT	No				

/ denotes a career change

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. I'd like to know about your work. Remembering back to before the pandemic started in 2020, what was your work schedule like? What kind of flexibility do you have? Can you tell me about how that changed at the beginning of the pandemic when so many places closed down? How is it different now?
2. Shifting gears a little, I'd like to know a little bit about your family. Tell me about your children – how many, their ages?
3. When your children were first born, were either of you able to take parental leave to care for them?
    a. Tell me about those experiences.
    b. How did you make decisions about parental leave?
    c. What factors were most important for you?

In this interview we will be talking a lot about your experiences with childcare. I know that term can mean a lot of different things, so I want to give you a few examples of what I mean. When I ask about childcare, I want you to think about who takes care of your younger children (if applicable) during the day when one or both of you are typically at work, and I also want you to think about childcare activities outside of that. Things like arranging activities and appointments, communicating with the school, reading, talking, and playing with your child, and helping your child with physical tasks. It's really a pretty broad topic.

4. Now I will ask a few questions about your experiences with childcare. Remembering back to pre-pandemic times, tell me about your childcare arrangements for a typical day.
    a. What would happen if it was a snow day, or if one of your kids was sick?

5. How did this change in the early days of the pandemic?
6. What do your childcare arrangements look like now at this later stage of the pandemic?

I'd like to know about how you made decisions about which partner is in charge of which childcare tasks.

7. Can you walk me through how you made these decisions?
    a. What is the most important factor in deciding who does what?
    b. What other factors matter?

We've touched on this a little bit when we were talking about childcare, but I'd like to hear more about how you divide up some of the other household talks. This includes things like cooking, cleaning, running errands, taking care of the yard, doing car maintenance, and other similar tasks.

8. Thinking back to before the pandemic, can you tell me about who does what household tasks?
    a. How has this changed over the course of the pandemic?
    b. Can you walk me through how you made these decisions about who should do what?
9. Thinking of other couples you know; do you feel like the way you divide childcare is similar to or different their arrangements?
    a. What about with other household tasks?
10. What types of changes do you hope to make to the ways that you have divided up childcare and housework after the pandemic is over?

a. Are there any changes that you've made during the pandemic that you hope to continue with?

One last topic I want to touch on is support. By support, I mean both formal and informal support from family, friends, community or religious organizations, or government agencies. Support could look like a lot of different things (help with childcare, household tasks like cooking or cleaning, emotional support, or monetary support).

11. Tell me about the support your family received before the pandemic?
    a. In the early weeks and months of the pandemic did this support change?
    b. What about now?
12. What kind of policies do you think would help families like yours both during COVID and 'normal' times?
13. Now that we are almost finished with our interview, what did we miss talking about that you think would be helpful for me to understand about how couples make decisions about childcare, work, and parental leave decisions?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences about these questions.

Sample follow up questions:

Can you think of an example?

What was going on in your life right then?

Could you walk me through that experience?