

Expensive childcare and short school days = lower maternal employment and more time in childcare? Evidence from the American time use survey ^[1]

Author: Ruppanner, L., Moller, S., Sayer, L.

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Excerpted from abstract

This study investigates the relationship between maternal employment and state-to-state differences in childcare cost and mean school day length. Pairing state-level measures with an individual-level sample of prime working-age mothers from the American Time Use Survey (2005–2014; $n = 37,993$), we assess the multilevel and time-varying effects of childcare costs and school day length on maternal full-time and part-time employment and childcare time. We find mothers' odds of full-time employment are lower and part-time employment higher in states with expensive childcare and shorter school days. Mothers spend more time caring for children in states where childcare is more expensive and as childcare costs increase. Our results suggest that expensive childcare and short school days are important barriers to maternal employment and, for childcare costs, result in greater investments in childcare time. Politicians engaged in national debates about federal childcare policies should look to existing state childcare structures for policy guidance.

For many mothers, the care of children remains a major barrier to employment. The excessive cost of preschool care pushes mothers out of the labor market (Blau and Robins 1989; Han and Waldfogel 2001; Hofferth and Collins 2000). Mothers expect to return to work when children are school aged, but the birth of second children and short school day lengths often derail mothers' reentries into the labor market. Persistent gaps in maternal employment are surprising given women's gains in higher education, access to higher-level positions, and the cultural shift toward public-sphere gender egalitarianism. Yet the gender-essentialist cultural frame emphasizing mothers' domestic duties has impeded private-sphere equality (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011; Goldin 2006; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015; Spitzer 1988). Hence, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate domestic share and, as a consequence, are more likely to reduce employment to care for family (Sayer 2005; Stone 2008). To reduce institutional barriers to maternal employment, many countries have instituted family policies to ease parenthood transitions (i.e., parental leaves) and to provide childcare (i.e., universal childcare). Yet childcare policies, well-paid leaves of one year or less, and affordable, accessible childcare are shown to be positively associated with maternal earnings and employment (Boeckmann, Misra, and Budig 2015; Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann 2012; Misra, Budig, and Boeckmann 2011). Yet the United States stands alone as the only Western industrial nation with no paid parental leave and minimal childcare support for preschool-aged children (Gornick and Heron 2006; Gornick and Meyer 2003; Gornick et al. 1996). Rather, the U.S. federal government emphasizes market (private-sector) solutions (i.e., employer-sponsored programs or domestic outsourcing) to meet family demands with federal provisions reserved for those below established poverty thresholds (Esping-Andersen 1990).

In response to the void in federal policy, many states have legislated family policies (i.e., Massachusetts's 2015 parental leave policy, California's Prop 10—taxpayer funded 0–5 childcare) to support working families. States are also central to legislating school schedules, offering childcare tax subsidies, and regulating the distribution of the federally subsidized Child Care Development Fund (Amenta and Halfmann 2000; Blau 2003; Blau and Tekin 2007). As a consequence, preschool and school-aged care environments vary dramatically across the 50 states and the District of Columbia. In the absence of a federal childcare policy, state legislators are increasingly important, yet understudied, policy actors. Further, as political discussions at the national level are increasingly focused on legislating federal childcare provisions (see, e.g., Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign platform and President Trump's 2019 budget for examples of federal childcare policies), policy makers should look to successes in existing states to inform their childcare platforms.

Cross-national evidence shows affordable, high-quality, and widely available childcare reduces mothers' domestic time and increases their employment odds (Boeckmann et al. 2015; Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann 2012; Jaumotte 2003; Misra et al. 2011; Pettit and Hook 2005). School day length also structures maternal employment, with many women reducing existing employment when children are young and reentering employment once children reach school age (Bianchi 2000). Cross-national differences in school structure (i.e., Germany's short school days, Italy's preference for children to go home for lunch, and France's four-day school week) structure maternal employment (Gornick and Meyers 1997). This same conceptual framework may extend to states—those with expensive childcare and short school days may limit mothers' employment. The inclusion of school day length extends existing research and addresses the call to more holistically

measure barriers to maternal employment (Han and Waldfogel 2001).

Existing research shows mothers are more likely to reduce employment when faced with expensive childcare at the national (Blau and Robins 1989; Han and Waldfogel 2001; Ribar 1992) and county levels (Hofferth and Collins 2000). Yet no study to date has investigated the role of states in structuring maternal employment. Childcare costs vary at the state level, a consequence of states' unique economic conditions, immigration patterns, and costs of living. While a thorough investigation of childcare costs at multiple levels—the state, the county, and the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)—is warranted, the requisite data are not publicly available. Thus, we use state-level differences in preschool care costs and school day lengths as broader proxies for state-level childcare generosity. The role of school day length is understudied across these literatures. This omission is conspicuous given that the U.S. Constitution grounds responsibility for K–12 education in the state (Department of Education 2005), with 83 cents of every dollar coming from the state and local levels compared to only 8.3 cents from federal agencies (Department of Education 2005). This means state legislatures have important power to determine the structure and content of school education, with school days often reduced to redress state budgetary deficits (Dillon 2011). These decisions may have the unintended consequence of restricting maternal employment.

The existing literature is clear—the absence of universal subsidized childcare remains a key institutional barrier to gender equality in maternal employment and childcare nationally and globally (Cha and Weeden 2014; Gornick and Meyer 2003; Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2011; Offer and Schneider 2011). Further, short school days may limit maternal employment. Yet no study to date has extended these models to weigh whether state-to-state variation in preschool and school-aged care resources structure mothers' employment and childcare time. Given that greater income inequality at the state level widens class-based gaps in investment in children (Schneider, Hastings, and LaBriola 2018), state context matters in explaining how parents invest their time. It follows that childcare time investments also may be conditioned by institutionalized barriers to maternal employment—expensive childcare costs and short school days. Further, no study to our knowledge has investigated how changes in childcare costs over a 10-year span affect maternal employment and childcare patterns. To address these gaps, this study assesses two central questions: (1) Are mothers less likely to be employed and likely to spend more time in childcare in states where childcare is inexpensive and school days are long? and (2) Are increases in childcare costs over time associated with mothers' lower odds of employment?

To test these questions, we pair individual-level data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) for prime working-aged mothers (2005–2014 aged 18 to 59, $n = 37,993$) with two strategically selected state-level measures—childcare (preschool) cost (adjusted for median married couples' incomes) and school day length. First, we test whether some states are better at supporting working mothers than others by offering inexpensive childcare and long school days. Then, we test whether mothers living in states with more generous child and school-aged resources are more likely to work full- or part-time and also to spend less time in childcare. By utilizing data that span a decade, we also test whether changes in childcare costs structure mothers' employment status and childcare time. This allows us to determine not only whether mothers' employment is sensitive to childcare costs but also whether increases in childcare cost, relative to median incomes, are detrimental to maternal employment outcomes and associated with more time in childcare. Our results highlight the importance of expansive child and school-care provisions on mothers' employment and domestic time, from which we draw concrete policy recommendations that should inform current policy debates about universal childcare.

Region: United States ^[4]

Tags: female labour force participation ^[5]

child care costs ^[6]

school age child care ^[7]

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