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Work around the clock A snapshot of non-standard hours child care in Canada

Executive summary

This report is intended to be a useful tool for policy makers striving to strengthen child care policy and programs, researchers studying child care, family and workplace policy issues, advocates working for accessible high quality child care for all Canadian families and employers of non-standard hours workers. Its main purpose is to provide an up-to-date report on the state of child care for families working non-standard hours in Canada.

The report includes:

- Data and information about non-standard work and non-standard workers in Canada;
- A review of pertinent literature on non-standard hours child care;
- A review of selected literature on the effects of non-standard work on work-family balance generally;
- Information collected from a scan of provincial/territorial policies and initiatives related to non-standard hours child care (including initiatives that have and have not been sustained);
- Several case studies of non-standard hours child care programs;
- International examples of non-standard hours child care provision, research and analysis.

Challenges, opportunities and issues for child care are identified and analyzed in the larger context of Canadian child care. In that context, the report includes practical

information about what seems to “work” and what does not seem to work for families and services. The paper’s last section uses the information to make a number of recommendations to governments, employers, unions, human rights specialists and parents.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the CUPW Child Care Fund and non-standard hours child care

This report on non-standard hours child care was funded by the Child Care Fund of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). Provided under the terms of the CUPW’s collective agreement with Canada Post, the Fund supported the project as part of the union’s commitment to help its members meet their child care needs. The Fund is financed by Canada Post and administered by CUPW to provide support and resources to CUPW members as well as to finance research that can help inform CUPW in serving their members and the broader community better.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers has a particular interest in non-standard hours child care because many of its members, particularly inside plant workers, are predominantly engaged in early morning, extended evening and overnight shifts. When overtime is taken into account, other groups of postal workers such as letter carriers now often work into the evening hours as well. CUPW is the sole union that represents workers working non-standard hours in communities across every region of Canada and Quebec, so its members who are struggling with child care in many ways very much reflect the child care struggles of non-CUPW-parents across Canada.

Context

For families in all parts of Canada, high quality regulated child care is hard to find and—outside Quebec—hard to afford. For the many families who work non-standard schedules, an affordable regulated child care space that meets their needs is even harder to access than child care during “normal” working hours—essentially impossible for most families. Most child care service providers who consider providing child care to meet non-standard schedules either reject the idea because it is not financially viable or cease to offer these services after a time. The additional costs associated with providing non-standard hours services are unsustainable for most child care services providers without a stable external source of additional funding.

Non-standard work hours include a wide variety of schedule possibilities that are now common— from slightly extended hours (beginning as early as 6:00 AM or until 7:30 or 8:00 PM), to later shifts (until 11:30 PM or later), full overnights, to weekends. While there is no official definition of “standard work hours”, they are often considered to cover the working hours of 9:00 to 5:00 or 8:00 to 6:00; Canada Post defines work hours not considered to be shift work as falling between 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM.

Parents in communities across Canada find that standard child care operating times do not meet the needs of workers who work early morning, evenings or overnight shifts, rotating and split shifts, casual/on-call jobs, or other non-standard or irregular shifts. Canadian experience and research show that current child care funding and other policy usually makes it difficult or impossible for most child care services to meet non-standard schedules. While some provincial/ territorial governments have experimented at different times with pilot projects or provided special funding to facilitate non-standard hours child care, these have been few and far between and have usually not been sustained. Thus, it is not surprising that there are few options offering regulated child care to meet parents' non-standard schedules.

It is clear that the lack of a comprehensive child care system with sustained funding and flexible options for families hinders development and maintenance of non-standard hours child care services. In Canada's market-based child care, public funding for child care is uneven and limited, with most child care services primarily supported by parent fees. Parent fees are already out of reach for many families and cannot be raised to cover the full cost of non-standard hours child care programs (which tend to be even more expensive than regular programs) without making them financially inaccessible to the majority of families.

What we know about non-standard hours workers in Canada

Based on a 2008 analysis of data from the 2005 *General Social Survey*, some of the characteristics of non-standard hours work and workers are relevant to child care.

- 28 percent of employed Canadians worked something other than a regular day shift.
- 82 percent of shift workers worked full-time.
- Rotating/irregular schedules were the most common types of shift work.
- 37 percent of all full-time shift workers and 70 percent of part-time shift workers were women.
- 6 of 10 shift workers (7 of 10 day workers) were married.
- The percent of couples w/children <15 years was almost the same for those who worked standard hours (27.5 percent) and non-standard hours (29.6 percent).
- 22 percent of families with a parent working regular evenings had children compared to 30 percent of day workers.

In the Canadian population, it is not currently known what percent of non-standard hours workers are low income. However, 2001 data found that 40 percent of low income workers worked non-standard hours compared to 25 percent of other workers.

What we know about non-standard hours child care

Across Canada, there is very little regulated child care that is available in the evening, on weekends, overnight or on a rotating or on-call basis to meet the schedules of non-standard hours workers who need care for their children. There is, at the present time, no inventory of such services although three provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia) are set up to allow parents to search on-line for regulated services operating at non-standard hours.

Several studies and analyses note that a number of different kinds of non-standard hours child care (slightly extended child care hours, care that extends into the late evening or into the night, overnight care and weekend care) can be identified.

As well, there are some kinds of flexible work arrangements, accommodation or policy that may address some non-standard hours child care issues; the U.K. and Australia provide several good examples of such policies. The main Canadian example of this approach is exemplified by the ruling in the Fiona Johnstone case that led to a legal interpretation of Canadian human rights legislation defining protection from discrimination as including child care responsibilities as part of “family status”. Several other legal cases have reinforced this interpretation of accommodation based on family status.

What we know from research on non-standard hours child care

The report summarizes Canadian research and other documentation about non-standard hours child care as well as research on the effects of non-standard work on family life, work-life balance and child well-being. A literature review conducted for this report found that there is very little new Canadian research or documentation about non-standard hours child care. One exception is Albanese’s 2007 study of mothers’ work and family responsibilities in rural Quebec. The respondents in her study reported that the \$7¹/day child care program allowed them to maintain part-time or lower-paid employment or to focus on finding a new job or enrolling in retraining. Despite the popularity of the child care program, however, centre schedules did not cover non-standard hours and were a matter of concern for most interviewees. This study confirmed the findings of a 2000 study by Preston et al. in Quebec, Newfoundland and Alberta that notes that the “onus of adjustments to shifts fell mostly on women”. As well, an evaluation of the Quebec government’s 10 non-standard hours pilot projects in the early 2000s provided considerable detail about the different types of non-standard hours services and how parents experienced them. The evaluation confirmed that use of these services was quite variable but important for the parents who relied on them. The study

¹ Quebec child care fees were increased slightly by the Quebec government in 2015 and now follow a more geared-to-income model.

found that the stability of the care and that it was one arrangement, not several, were especially important.

A 2011 Ontario study by Pagnan, Lero and MacDermid Wadsworth found that “off-shifting” was the primary way participants arranged care for their young children. Finally, although Canadian data are not available, US researchers have found (confirmed most recently in a 2015 Urban Institute analysis), that low-wage workers are more likely to work non-standard, unpredictable shifts and for these workers, child care choices are deeply constrained by work schedules.

While there are a number of fairly recent Canadian studies looking at work/family issues and non-standard work, none have included child care. In a 2004 study, Strazdins et al. compared children aged 2-11 in families working regular and no-standard hours using the NLSCY data. The researchers concluded that more data on non-parental child care use was needed and that “some of the links to family life and child well-being may result from lack of affordable or accessible child care”.

Provincial/territorial policy and initiatives on non-standard hours child care

A provincial/territorial scan included an online search of all provincial/territorial ministry/ department websites. Telephone interviews with officials from most provinces/territories responsible for child care were also conducted.

None of the provinces/territories has a comprehensive policy or program to ensure access to non-standard hours child care. In most cases, little was known about the demand, prevalence and issues for non-standard hours child care. Several officials indicated that they thought there was little to no demand for non-standard hours child care. Three Atlantic provinces have had specific regulations setting barriers to operation of non-standard hours child care, although these are changing.

Manitoba and Saskatchewan both provide some additional funding for non-standard hours child care programs. In Manitoba, operating funding and fee subsidies for non-standard hours programs are one and a half times the regular amount. Manitoba officials said that they were reviewing funding policies to better define extended hours. In Saskatchewan, centres operating 80 – 120 hours per week receive a higher (+25 percent) early childhood services grant per space while those operating 120+ hours/week receive an additional 50 percent of the grant per space. These two were among the three provinces (British Columbia is the third) in which non-standard hours child care programs can be identified using online searches of government websites.

Alberta provides an Extended Hours Subsidy (an additional \$100/month) directly to parents who are working/attending school during extended hours and are eligible for a fee subsidy. This can be used for any form of regulated or unregulated child care.

In 2000, Quebec launched a pilot project and set up 10 non-standard hours child care centres that were funded in addition to the regular base funding formula and were, in certain situations, allowed to operate outside the regulations. A detailed evaluation was conducted in 2002 but additional funding ceased a year later. Although most of these programs are still operating, it appears that only one offers non-standard hours (extended into the early evening). Although non-standard hours child care in Quebec does not receive additional funding, funded CPEs and garderies (non-profit and for-profit centres) are eligible to be publicly funded to offer non-standard hours care through Quebec's usual formula-based public funding as per the Regulations.

No jurisdiction indicated any current research or projects focused on addressing non-standard hours child care. Ontario, based on a 2012 survey, indicated that 10 percent of regulated child care centres operated earlier than 7 AM and later than 6 PM (the survey did not capture regulated family child care, which Ontario assumed to be more flexible than centres in offering non-standard hours child care).

What we know about non-standard hours child care from case studies

The project included five case studies of non-standard hours child care programs. Four of the five programs studied were solely centres: one was a stand-alone program, while three were part of organizations that had multiple centres with one organization including family child care. All were in urban areas and varied from 24 hour provision to just slightly extended hours of one hour in the morning and one and a half hours in the evening. The centres all reported that their non-standard hours programs were somewhat different from their standard daytime programs.

A number of factors led to the reported success of these non-standard hours child care programs. First, being associated with a larger organization made a difference: all the respondents identified this factor as a significant contributor to success. This was associated with the larger organization's ability to absorb some of the non-standard hours program's extra costs. Another factor was the administrative capacity of the larger organizations, as scheduling parents and staff requires significantly more administration than regular day programs. As well, having access to a larger cohort of staff was a crucial asset provided by the larger organization, including the potential for job mobility within the organization as recruitment tool for staff.

A second significant contributor to success was reported to be extra funding in addition to parent fees and regular government funding. Four of the five programs received extra funding, which they reported as critical to success in sustaining the non-standard hours service. The two potential sources of this extra funding were government funding (in the Manitoba and Saskatchewan case studies) and employer/ union funding. In one case of union funding, the extra funds were provided by CUPW and UPCE, while in the other, a large multi-service agency, a consortium model involving employers, organizations and unions requires them to pay a fee to gain access for their employees/members. This latter program was originally funded by the Ontario government but was defunded when the government changed in the 1990s.

Among the challenges the case studies identified were: inconsistent need and usage, affordability, preference for making other arrangements for care at non-standard hours such as off-shifting with their partner. The issue of irregular or rotating shifts, creating a need for part-time or on-call care was also identified as a difficulty, partly because it is quite administration-heavy; one respondent noted that non-standard hours child care required 50 percent more administration than the regular day program to schedule children and staff. Finally, it was noted that inconsistent use patterns make it very difficult to sustain these programs without additional funding. The centre-based program in Ontario that does not receive extra funding also identified the implementation of full-day kindergarten as putting considerable financial pressure on the program.

In summary, the case studies highlighted the role that infrastructure and funding play as key pieces for creating and sustaining non-standard hours programs. At the same time, it is evident that the people who envision and lead these programs play a crucial role.

Conclusions

The research conducted for this report reinforces the view that creating and sustaining non-standard hours child care requires a publicly-funded, publicly-managed universal system of high quality early childhood education and child care that funds programs to meet the needs of all families and children. Moreover, based on the available literature, interviews and discussion with government officials and the case studies, it appears that the challenges for parents and service providers appear to be relatively consistent across Canada. Overall, a systemic approach to the creation and maintenance of programs, as well as reliable, adequate and sustained public funding paid directly to services to support them would have a profound impact on the accessibility and affordability of child care for all Canadians including those engaged in non-standard hours work.

Recommendations based on the study

To the federal government

1. Provide strong federal leadership to put in place a comprehensive early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy framework and system while respecting provincial, territorial and Indigenous jurisdiction over social programs.
2. Develop a full ECEC policy framework based on universal access (including parents working non-standard hours) and moving away from the market-based system that makes it so difficult to develop and sustain non-standard hours child care. Part of the policy framework would be a plan for long-term sustained federal ECEC transfer funding to provinces/territories.
3. Work with provinces/territories to establish a research, data and evaluation agenda that includes the issue of child care for non-standard hours workers care as well as consideration of other family supportive policies to address the needs of non-standard hours workers.
4. Convene a national working group including provincial/territorial representatives, employers and unions to examine the situation of families in which parents work non-standard hours and to make recommendations for a variety of options for better support.

To provincial/territorial governments

5. Review and analyze each jurisdiction's approach to non-standard hours child care and identify demand for non-standard hours services.
6. Develop a policy approach that would facilitate and support affordable non-standard hours child care services where there is local demand.
7. Develop an approach to providing public funding to recognize the actual cost of operating to non-standard hours services.
8. Provide informative materials online and in print for parents about regulated child care services offering non-standard hours child care.

To employers

9. Consider the needs of workers who are parents when implementing workplace arrangements and policies such as schedules, shifts and accommodation.
10. Develop workplace policies specifically designed to address the issues that families face with regard to non-standard hours. This work should be in collaboration with relevant unions and other workplace groups and personnel and should recognize that there are instances in which there is a need for non-standard hours work.

To human rights specialists

11. Explore, contribute to and develop rights-based legal and other remedies to the current child care situation that fails to support parents needing non-standard hours child care. This work should be based on human rights conceptions of child care, family responsibilities and women's rights (such as Fiona Johnstone and other Canadian human rights decisions based on accommodation, the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

To unions

12. Work with unions and community partners to convene a working group on the issue of non-standard hours child care.
13. Advocate with governments on the issue of access to child care generally and non-standard hours child care in particular.
14. Develop and provide resources for members (such as the Finding Quality Child Care website, research and educationals) to help them address the issue of non-standard hours child care.
15. Continue providing support for pilot and other special initiatives in this area both to meet the needs of members and to provide illustrations of successful non-standard hours child care.
16. Consider and analyze innovative union policy approaches to families that could support the child care needs of members working non-standard hours.

To parents working non-standard hours

17. Join with others to advocate for a universal national child care program that would meet the needs of all families including those working non-standard hours.
18. Be as well informed about your child care options as you can be, although they are limited, so as to maximize the possibility of securing suitable, affordable, quality child care.