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Employment implications of child-care access in New England, pre- and post-COVID-19

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Key Findings	2
Background	2
Methodology	3
Analysis	4
Discussion	12
About the author	14
Acknowledgements	14
Appendix	15
References	18

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Community Development Issue Briefs

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Our regional and community outreach publications address emerging and critical economic issues facing low- and moderate-income individuals, families, and communities. We strive to provide objective, data-backed information that is useful to those involved in community economic development, including governments, nonprofits, financial institutions, businesses, and communities themselves. Our work also seeks to demonstrate how residents from all walks of life are faring in the economy, in order to help inform our monetary policy deliberations.

Abstract

Access to child care is critical for the labor force participation of parents of young children. Many parents across the country face challenges accessing high-quality child care, due to both the limited availability and high prices of licensed child care. These challenges lead some parents to forego licensed care, use suboptimal care arrangements, or leave the labor market altogether. To explore the last point, this brief uses data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's Parent Demand Survey. The survey was open to both mothers and fathers, but the vast majority of respondents were mothers, so this brief relies exclusively on their responses in its discussion and conclusions. This sample includes nearly 2,100 New England mothers with at least one child under the age of 6 between February 2022 and April 2022. Specifically, I look at employment patterns at three points in time—before the COVID-19 pandemic, at the time of the survey in early 2022, and three months later (by asking about expectations). I then look at whether and how these patterns vary by access challenges. The data reveal that child-care users had higher employment levels and worked more hours than those who needed care but did not use it. This finding also held when comparing child-care users who used the amount of care they needed to those who used less care than needed because they had trouble accessing it. These findings help us understand the employment implications of child-care gaps, defined as not having access to needed care or not having the amount of care needed.

Key findings

- The employment rates of mothers who reported using child care from someone other than a parent averaged 23.6 percentage points higher than for mothers who forewent needed care.¹
- Mothers who used care but reported using less care than needed at the time of the survey were 10.1 percentage points less likely to be employed than mothers who used the amount of care needed.
- At the time of the survey, mothers who forewent needed care worked an average of 4.1 fewer hours per week than mothers who used care. At all three reference points, on average, they were 18.1 percentage points less likely to work full-time than mothers who used care.
- Mothers who used care but used less care than needed at the time of the survey worked an average of just 0.3 fewer hours per week than mothers who used the amount needed, but this varied by marital status. Mothers who were never married or living apart from a spouse worked 3.7 fewer hours per week—the largest difference across demographics.
- Mothers who used less care than needed due to “location” were the least likely to report working full-time and most likely to report working part-time.

Background

Mothers with school-aged children work at consistently higher rates than mothers of children who are not yet school age (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). The latter do not have guaranteed access to a place for their children while they work, unlike mothers of school-aged children who can count on public school for a portion of the day. Care options for parents of young children vary based on what parents can find, afford, accept, and/or arrange (Weber, 2011). There are no guarantees that parents can access care that they would find acceptable for their children or any care at all (Savage & Robeson, 2025). This affects their ability to work.

Multiple studies have demonstrated that mothers' labor force participation is sensitive to the costs of child care and access to subsidies (Morrissey, 2016). In Quebec, eight years after introducing universal care for preschool-aged children, there were an estimated 70,000 additional mothers in the labor force (Fortin et al., 2012). One study revealed an increased share (by 5.2 percentage points) of mothers entering the labor force when their child became eligible for free full-time care and an increased share (by 2.4 percentage points) in mothers looking for work (Brewer et al., 2016).

Access to child-care in the United States was disrupted in a dramatic and unprecedented fashion during the COVID-19 pandemic. Widespread closures of child-care establishments and reduced capacity at the height of the pandemic were often followed by slow re-openings and constrained returns to business as usual in later stages. These constraints were accompanied by mass unemployment, most highly concentrated in the leisure and hospitality industries (Falk et al., 2021). We also saw a shift toward remote work, most notably in sectors of information, financial activities, and professional and business services (Dalton & Groen, 2022). This has transformed how many organizations continue to work. The exogenous shock to the child-care landscape and workforce make the COVID-19 period an ideal time to

¹ This brief reports bivariate statistics, but it is important to note that educational differences exist in relation to employment rates, with holders of Bachelor's degrees being much less likely to be employed if they forego needed care than if they use care than mothers with less than Bachelor's degrees.

understand how supply-side constraints manifest into access challenges and the implications of those challenges for parental work. It should be noted that the challenges that the child-care sector faced during the pandemic existed well before the crisis but were exacerbated by it.

This brief is the second in a three-part series exploring child-care usage and access challenges among New England mothers of young children around the time of COVID-19. Some scholars maintain that access to early care and education means “... that parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an arrangement that supports the child’s development and meets the parents’ needs” (Fries et al., 2017). My definition is broader and based on reported usage and the amount of care used (see Appendix: Definitions). The first brief in the series examined whether and how child-care usage and access challenges vary by state of residence and demographics (Savage, forthcoming, a). This brief examines the employment implications of these usage and access challenges.

Methodology

The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston administered an online survey to parents with at least one child under the age of 6 at the time of the survey (February–April 2022). Respondents were asked to share recollections, experiences, and expectations about their care usage and employment status prior to COVID-19 (December 2019–February 2020), at the time of the survey, and in the following three months. As discussed above, the analysis is limited to nearly 2,100 mothers (see Appendix for more details on the methodology²).

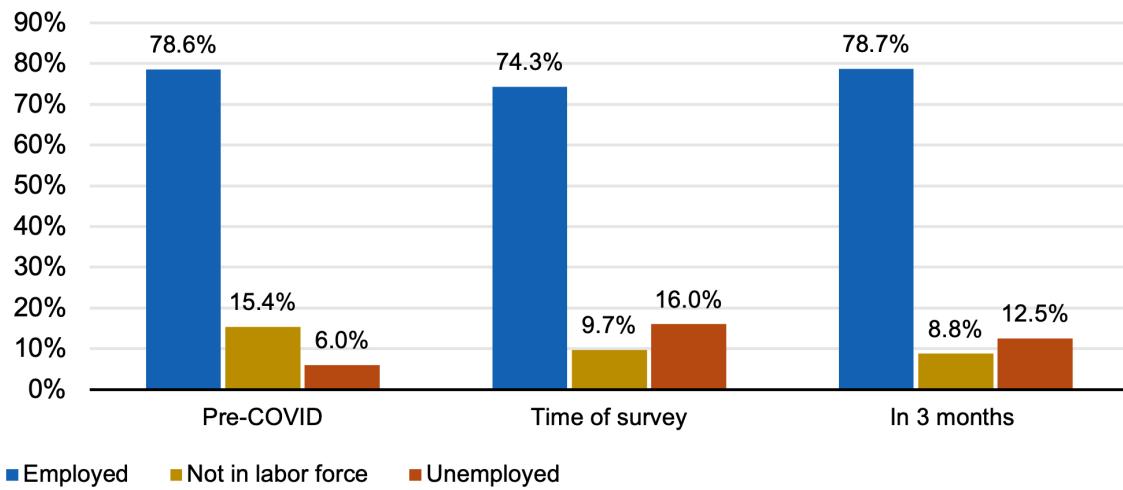
² For limitations, see Savage, S.A. (2025). Child-care usage and access challenges during COVID-19 and the economic recovery. *Federal Reserve Bank of Boston*. <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/community-development-issue-briefs/2025/childcare-usage-access-challenges-during-covid.aspx>

Analysis

Maternal employment: Declines and resiliency

As shown in Figure 1,³ based on respondents' recollections of the pre-COVID period, maternal employment declined by 4.3 percentage points⁴ and unemployment more than doubled by the time of the survey. Mothers expected employment to rebound in the next three months, but unemployment was still expected to be higher than pre-COVID levels. Figure 1 combines all mothers in the sample, regardless of marital status.

Figure 1 | Employment status of New England mothers of young children, by reference period



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.

Note: There is no significant difference between the "employed" groups "pre-COVID" and "in 3 months." Percentages are weighted.

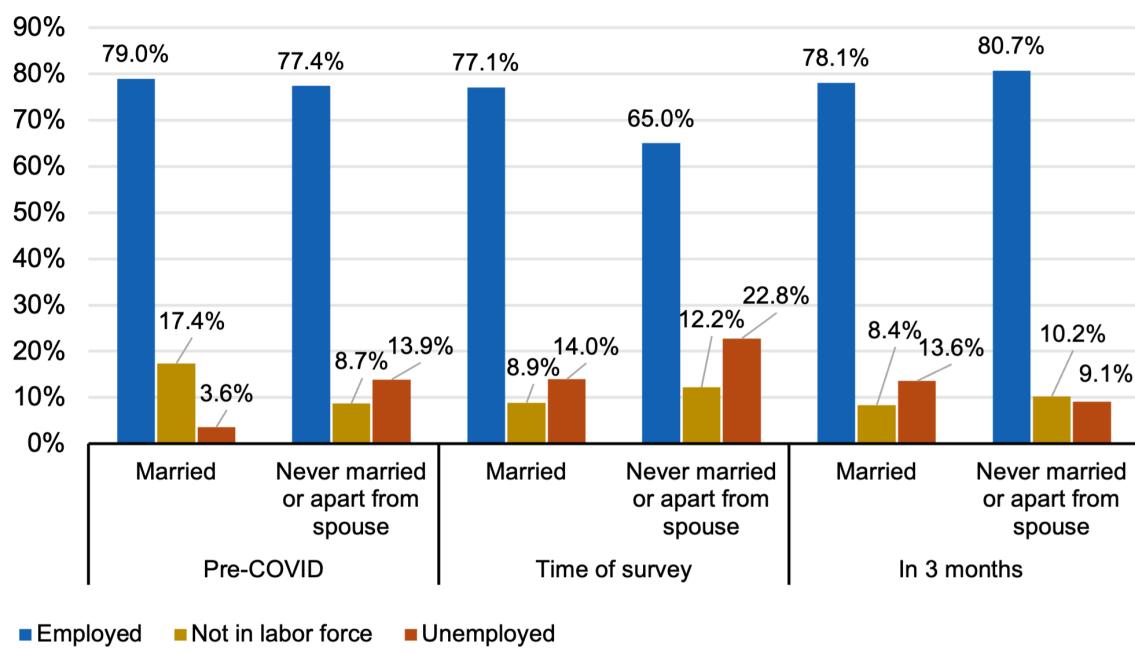
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³ Weighted percentages are shown. See Appendix for more details on the weighting techniques used in the analysis.

⁴ Differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level unless otherwise noted.

When taking marital status into consideration, as shown in Figure 2, at the time of the survey, married mothers were less likely to experience declines in employment relative to unmarried mothers (defined as never married or separated, divorced, or widowed). Married mothers, however, were almost twice as likely to report being outside the labor force at the pre-COVID period than unmarried mothers. The largest dip in employment occurred at the time of the survey among unmarried mothers. These mothers were 12.4 percentage points less likely to be employed at the time of the survey than at the pre-COVID period and 12.1 percentage points less likely to be employed than married mothers at the time of the survey, although this was expected to rebound to pre-COVID levels in three months.

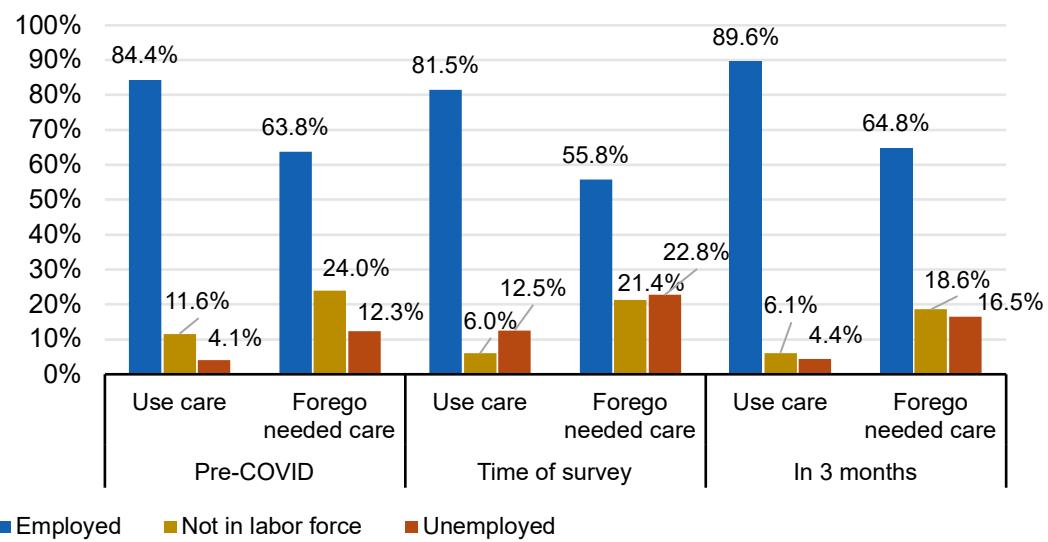
Figure 2 | Employment status of New England mothers of young children by marital status, by reference period



Access challenges and employment

Figure 3 shows the employment status of mothers by whether mothers used care or forewent needed care⁵ based on recollections, experiences, and expectations. Across the reference points, mothers who reported using care from someone other than their child's parent averaged employment rates that were 23.6 percentage points higher than those of mothers who reported foregoing needed care. Both mothers who used care and forewent needed care reported dips in employment at the time of the survey relative to the pre-COVID period, but the decline for mothers who forewent care was greater. Both groups expected employment to rebound in three months, exceeding their pre-COVID reports of employment. However, the percentage of mothers not working who expected to forego needed care in three months remained persistently higher than mothers using care, as was the case at prior reference points.

Figure 3 | Employment status of New England mothers of young children by care usage, by reference period



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.

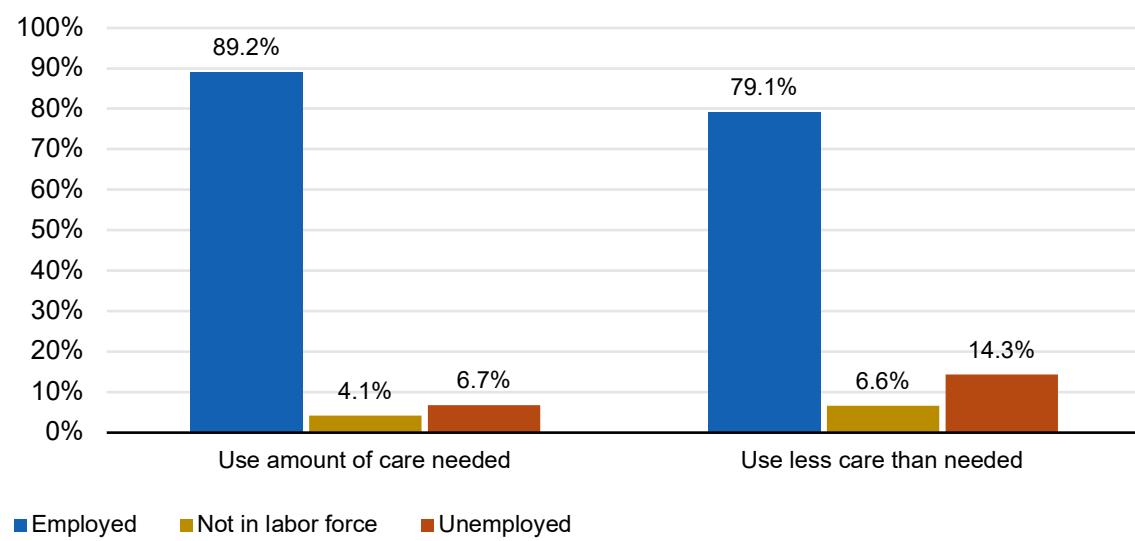
Note: Percentages are weighted.

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⁵ I identified two types of access challenges: 1) foregoing needed care, which is limited to those who did not use care at a reference point, and 2) using less care than needed, limited to users of care at the time of the survey. See Appendix for more detailed definitions of access challenges.

A similar pattern emerges when restricting the sample to mothers who used less care than needed.⁶ As shown in Figure 4, mothers using the care they needed at the time of the survey were 10.1 percentage points more likely to be employed than mothers using less care than they needed. Mothers using less care than needed were more than twice as likely to be unemployed than mothers using the amount of care needed. The direction of causality is uncertain, but this could signal a strain on finding employment when one has less care than needed.

Figure 4 | Employment status of New England mothers who used care at the time of the survey, by sufficiency of care



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.
Note: Percentages are weighted.

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Access challenges and work hours

Table 1 looks beyond *whether* mothers worked to *how* they worked by showing the average number of hours typically worked by care usage and access challenges at the time of the survey. The table shows the average hours worked overall per week, then shows average hours worked by key demographics and family characteristics. Mothers who used care worked an average of 4.1 more hours per week than mothers who forewent needed care. The largest difference is in the middle-income category, where mothers who used care worked an average of seven hours a week more than mothers who forewent

⁶ Access challenges defined as “using less care than needed” were coded according to whether mothers who used care at the time of the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they used less care than needed due to factors related to affordability, availability, or quality.

care. The second largest difference was among mothers with three or more children. Those in that category who used care worked 6.6 more hours per week than those who forewent care. The smallest difference in hours worked is in the low-income category, and it goes in an unexpected direction: low-income mothers who forewent care worked an average of almost 30 minutes more per week than those who used care. A small difference also exists for mothers who were never married or apart from a spouse. These mothers who forewent care worked under one hour less per week on average than mothers who used care. The largest difference between mothers who used care but who reported using less care than needed was for mothers who were never married or apart from a spouse, for whom the average difference was 3.7 fewer hours.

Table 1 | Average typical hours worked per week by care status and demographic characteristics at the time of the survey⁷

Usual hours worked per week ⁸						
	Overall	Used care		No care		Forewent needed care
		Used less than needed	Used amount needed	38.5	38.8	
Overall	37.7	38.5	38.5	38.8	34.4	
Less than a bachelor's	37.1	38.4	38.2	39.4	35.0	
Bachelor's or higher	38.1	38.6	38.7	38.6	33.0	
One child under age 13	38.4	38.9	39.2	37.9	37.8	
Two children under age 13	37.8	38.6	38.3	39.3	32.5	
Three or more children under age 13	36.7	38.1	38.1	38.5	31.5	

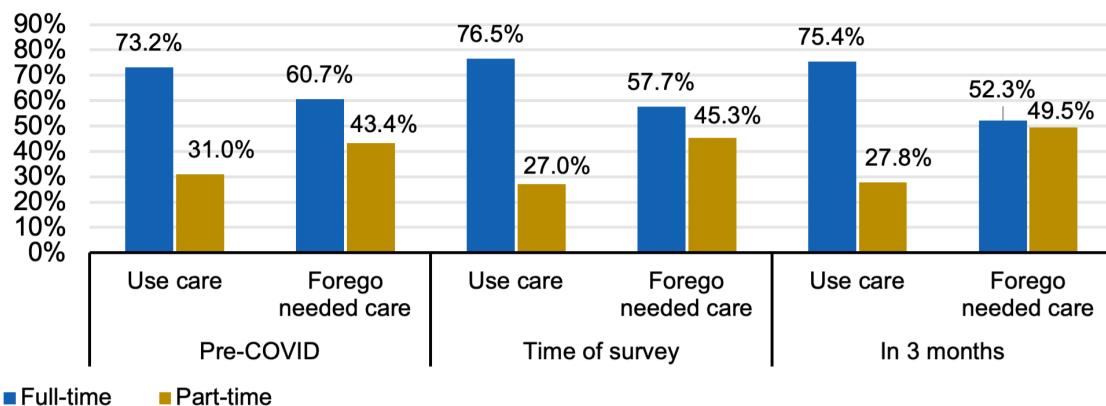
⁷ Note: Differences between care usage and foregoing needed care are significant overall and for each demographic at the p<.05 level. Differences between “used less care than needed” and “used amount of care needed” are NSD for the following demographics: bachelor's or higher and \$100K or greater. All differences within subgroups are significant at the p<.05 level.

⁸ See Appendix for standard deviations.

White	37.2	37.8	37.7	38.3	33.5
Non-white	38.6	39.9	39.9	40.2	35.5
Married	38.0	38.8	38.9	38.5	33.6
Never married or apart from spouse	36.6	37.3	36.2	39.9	36.6
Less than \$50K	34.9	35.3	35.3	35.6	35.7
\$50K to \$99K	39.4	40.8	40.4	42.2	33.8
\$100K or greater	38.1	38.7	38.7	38.7	33.4

Another way to understand how mothers work is to examine how many of those working full- or part-time schedules are using the care they need (Figure 5). Mothers who used care were more likely to work full-time than mothers who forewent needed care. The biggest gap was in the “in three months” period, when 75.4% of mothers who used needed care were working full-time, compared to 52.3% of mothers who forewent needed care (a 23.1 percentage point difference). As Figure 5 shows, the percentage of mothers working full-time who forewent needed care declined steadily through the time periods surveyed, from 60.7% pre-COVID, to 57.7% at the time of the survey, to 52.3% three months from the survey. At the same time, reports of part-time work increased steadily among those who forewent needed care over the same period.

Figure 5 | Child care usage of New England mothers of young children by work schedule and reference period

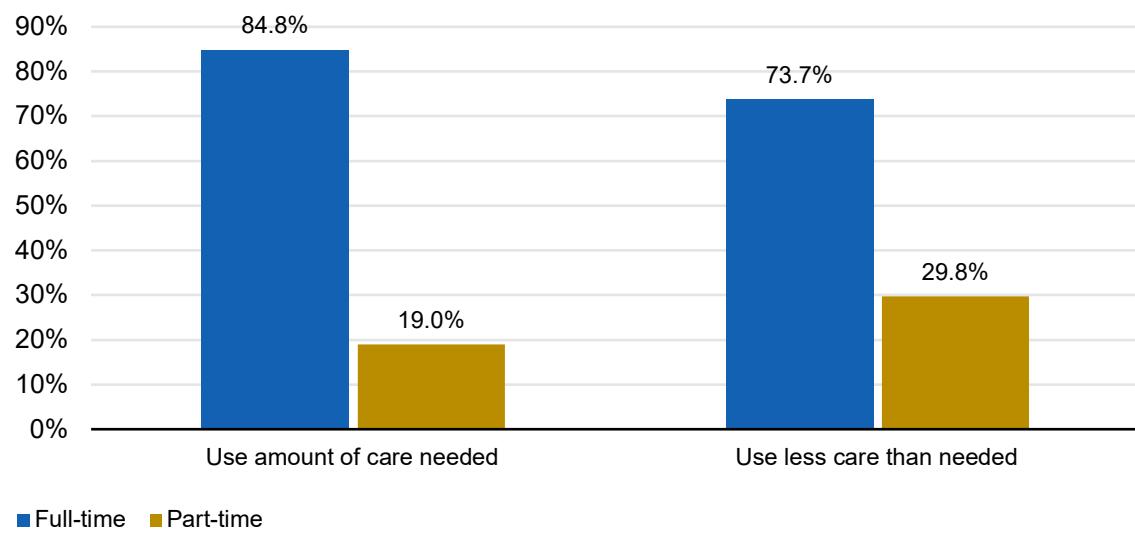


Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.
Note: Percentages are weighted.

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In Figure 6, when looking at work schedules of just mothers who *used* care, a pattern similar to Figure 5 emerges. Mothers who used the care they needed were 11.1 percentage points more likely to work full-time⁹ than mothers who used less care than needed. In contrast, mothers who used less care than needed were 10.8 percentage points more likely to work part-time than mothers who used the amount of care needed.

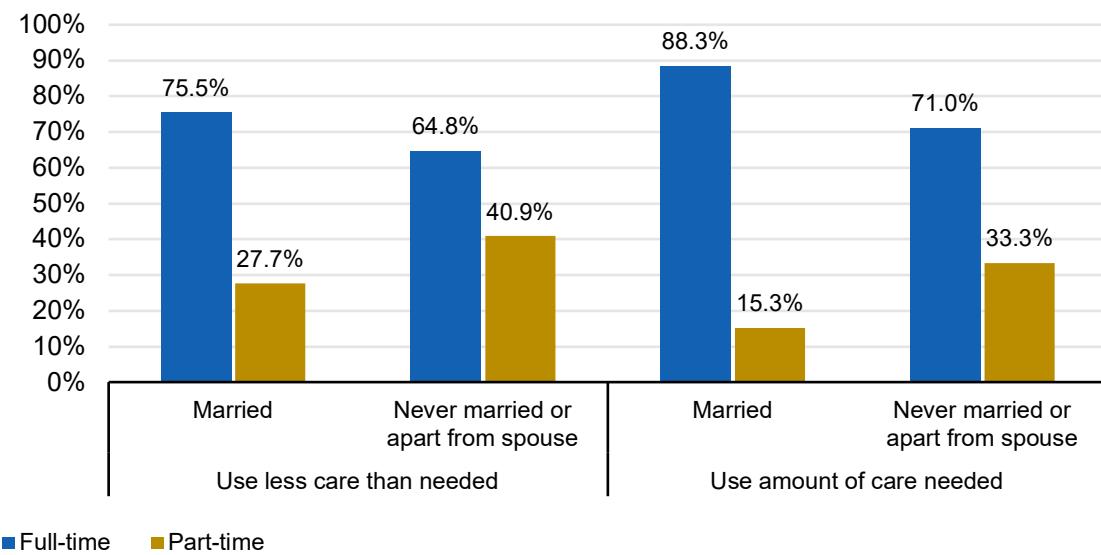
Figure 6 | Use of child care among New England mothers of young children by work schedule at time of survey



⁹ Mothers are coded as working “full-time” if they described their work as full-time “all of the time.” Mothers are coded as working “part-time” if they described their work as part-time either “sometimes” or “all of the time.”

Marital status may affect the sensitivity of mothers' work hours to child-care access, as shown in Table 1. To examine this another way, Figure 7 shows care usage by a mother's marital status and whether she works a full- or part-time schedule. Here, we see that 88.3% of married mothers who use the amount of care needed were working full-time, while 75.5% of married mothers who use less care than needed were working full-time (a 12.8 percentage point gap). This is greater than the 6.2 percentage point gap between never married mothers or those apart from their spouse in the same care situations: among that group, 71% of those who use the amount of care needed worked full-time, while 64.8% of those who use less care than needed worked full-time. The same patterns hold true for mothers who worked part-time, whether they are married or not.

Figure 7 | Use of child care among New England mothers of young children by marital status and work schedule at time of survey

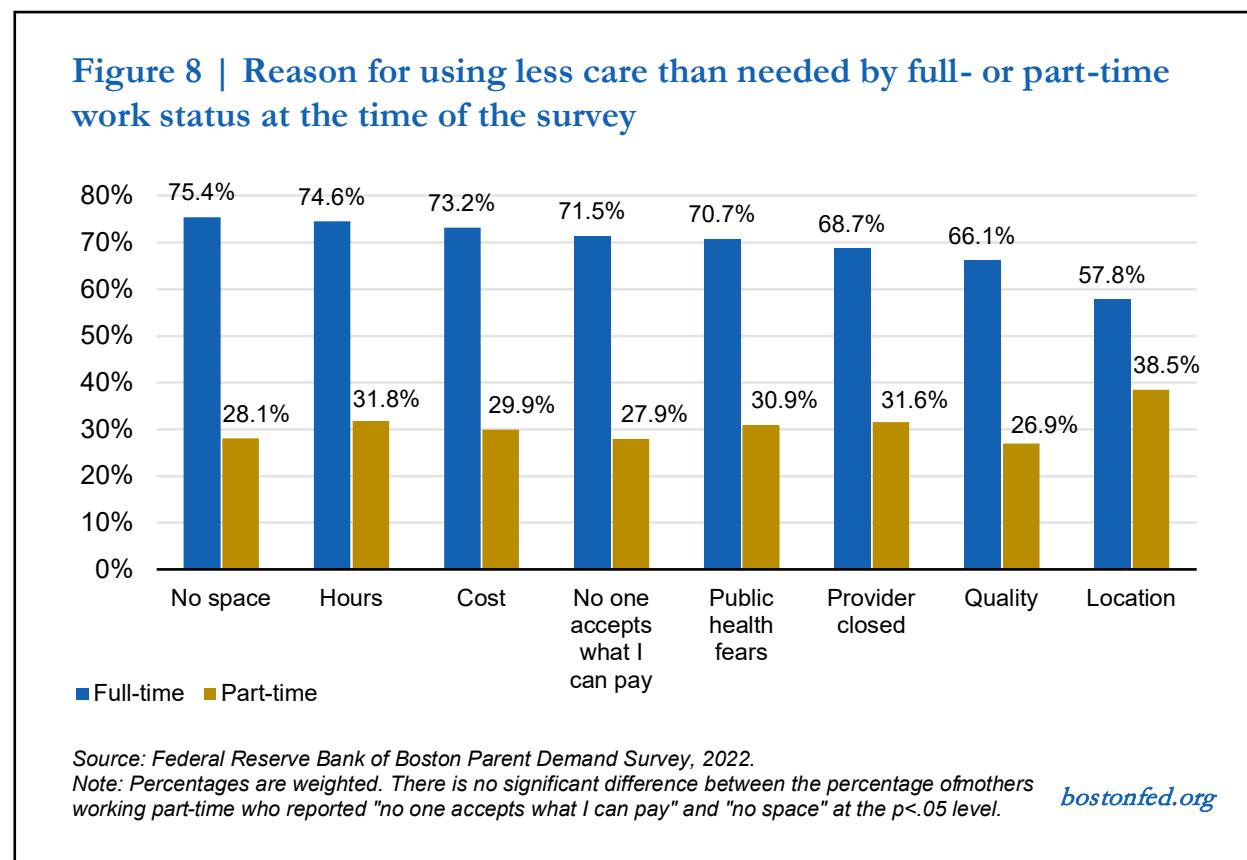


Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.

Note: Percentages are weighted.

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Figure 8 explores the reasons why mothers used less care than needed. Mothers who cited “location” as a reason they were using less care than needed were least likely to be working full-time and most likely to be working part-time. This was followed by those citing “hours” and “provider closed,” respectively. Mothers who said “no space” for their child were most likely to be working full-time.



Discussion

This brief aims to illuminate the intersection of child-care access and labor force patterns of mothers in New England. The analysis is centered around the COVID-19 pandemic, when child care was less accessible. This enabled a more nuanced examination of employment. The self-reported recollections, experiences, and expectations of mothers before, during, and in the later recovery of the pandemic gave us a window into how care and employment interacted. This approach also offers insight into how a period marked by constraints on the economy and in the child-care supply affected the nexus of care and work.

My analysis reveals that, on average, foregoing needed care or using less care than needed was associated with lower levels of employment and fewer hours. Mothers who forewent needed care seemed

to have lower levels of employment and work fewer hours than those who used less care than needed. Mothers who forewent needed care also had shorter work schedules across nearly all demographic subgroups, but the impact was greatest among middle-income mothers and mothers with two or more children under the age of 13. Among mothers who used less care than needed, the most negatively impacted subgroup was mothers who were unmarried or apart from a spouse. These mothers worked 3.7 fewer hours on average than mothers in the same subgroup who used the amount of care needed. This is perhaps unsurprising, as married mothers may be able to substitute spousal care for paid child care. However, married mothers may be more sensitive than never married mothers or those apart from spouses when it comes to their ability to work full- or part-time when they can't use needed care. It should also be noted that mothers who were never married or were apart from spouses were more likely to work multiple jobs than married mothers. It's more difficult to adjust hours when working multiple jobs (Beckhusen, 2019) and tougher to navigate child-care needs, so this might explain why this group sees a greater drop in work hours when they cannot find needed child care.

Survey respondents indicated location as important when they are seeking to use all the child care they need. Mothers who cited "location" as the reason they used less care than needed were also the smallest percentage of mothers working full-time. It is worth noting that answering "location" can be interpreted multiple ways, including calling out a lack of nearby options, difficulty getting to where options are available, or something else.

The association between child-care access and employment status seemed strongest when the impacts of the economic shutdown were greatest. Though mothers were generally positive about their employment when they were asked to look three months down the road, the survey pointed to a coming trend of less full-time work and more part-time work. So, the positive outlook by mothers may have been a reaction to greater flexibility and access to remote work during the shutdown or an expectation that policies supporting greater work-life balance would continue. It is important to note that pre-COVID levels of employment were highly sensitive to care usage and access challenges, so signs of a return to this baseline should not be mistaken for overcoming access challenges. Instead, it should be viewed as a return to challenges of accessing high-quality, affordable care that is available when, where, and for whom parents need it: all of which were identified well before the pandemic.

Overall, based on mothers' reports, employment trended higher when they used care, both in terms of being employed and working more hours. This highlights the downstream effects of child-care access challenges. It does not just impact children and their parents' employment but also employers who need a reliable workforce and communities that benefit from tax revenues. Employment outlooks were more favorable when employers were experimenting with unprecedented work-life balance supports for workers. But these can vary by industry and occupation. Ultimately, the more child care is needed for work, the more sensitive parental employment is likely to be to child-care access challenges.

About the author



Sarah Savage

Sarah is a senior policy analyst & advisor at the Boston Fed. As part of the Bank's work to increase employment opportunities, Sarah is conducting research on barriers to positive labor force engagement of low- and moderate-income (LMI) parents in the region, with an intensive examination of the role of child-care needs. Sarah's efforts have also focused on issues related to household economic security and prosperity. Sarah earned her B.S. from Babson College and her Ph.D. from the University of New Hampshire.

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Appendix

Parents in New England with at least one child under the age of 6 were recruited to participate in the online survey through Facebook advertisements and Boston Fed community partner outreach (mainly through partner networks of state administrators of the child-care subsidy system). Respondents were offered a chance to win one of 30 \$100 Visa gift cards. Data are weighted¹⁰ to a New England subsample of mothers of children under the age of 6 from the American Community Survey (ACS) on age, state, race, number of adults in the household, number of children under 18 in the household, and income. While the survey was open to both mothers and fathers of young children, the vast majority of respondents were mothers, so analyses focus on these 2,094 respondents.

Sample characteristics

Among the mothers included in the analysis, slightly more than half were recruited through partner outreach and just less than half through Facebook advertisements. Eighteen percent of the mothers were non-white¹¹ compared to 35% of New England mothers with at least one child under age 6 in the ACS data (Ruggles et al., 2023), and 32% had household incomes less than \$50,000 compared to 24% in comparable ACS data. Nearly 90% of the mothers lived in households consisting of two or more adults compared to 88% in the ACS data. Forty percent of the mothers had less than a bachelor's degree compared to 50% in the ACS data.

Table A1 | Unweighted sample counts

		Unweighted counts	
		N	%
Recruitment method	Facebook	998	47.66
	Partner outreach	1,096	52.34
Race/ethnicity	White	1,710	81.78
	Non-white	381	18.22
Income	Income at or above \$50,000	1,415	67.8
	Income below \$50,000	672	32.2

¹⁰ The author used a raking technique that uses a process of iterative proportional fitting. By using a set of variables where the population distribution was known, the procedure iteratively adjusted the weights for each case until the sample distribution aligned with the population for the known variables.

¹¹ Unweighted estimates.

Marital status	Married	1,561	74.6
	Never married or apart from spouse	532	25.4
Education	Less than bachelor's	834	39.92
	Bachelor's or higher	1,255	60.08

The survey

The Parent Demand Survey was designed to capture child-care utilization and employment based on recollections, experiences, and expectations at three points in time—three months preceding the pandemic (December 2019–February 2020), the time of survey completion (February–April 2022), and three months after survey completion. The survey asks about the employment and job characteristics of the respondent and the respondent's spouse/partner at these three points in time, along with child-care usage and reasons for avoiding usage at these same timepoints.

Definitions

The analysis includes the variables *child-care usage* and *foregoing needed care*. At times, I refer to the latter more generally as “access challenges.” To arrive at usage, I asked respondents, “Were you using child care for any child(ren) under the age of 6 from someone other than you or your child's other parent?” during a time in question (e.g., during December 2019 to February 2020). The responses were “yes” and “no”, so the “yes” responses are coded as *using child care*. Respondents who answered “no” were then asked, “Which of the following reason(s) best explain why you did not use caregiving help for any child(ren) under the age of 6?” A number of reasons were offered relating to affordability, quality, and availability, and respondents could select all that applied. The only responses coded as *did not need care* included “I didn't need it” and “my child aged out of child care.” A response of “other” could be coded more specifically if respondents offered an optional text response. Respondents who selected reasons other than those indicative of not needing care were coded as *needed but did not use care*, also referred to as “foregoing needed care” or “access challenges,” more generally. As an example of another way access challenge variables were operationalized, *use less care than need* is based on a Likert scale question asking respondents how much they agreed with statements at the time of the survey. Respondents were asked if they used less care than needed due to a number of reasons relating to affordability, availability, and quality. Respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with at least one of the items were coded as *used less care than needed*. This indicator of access challenges among mothers who used care was used in the analysis also.

Table A2 | Standard deviations for Table 1 showing average typical hours worked per week by care status and demographic characteristics

Usual hours worked per week (M/SD)					
		Use care		No care	
		Use less than need	Do not use less	Forego needed care	
Overall	37.7/10.1	38.5/9.4	38.5/9.6	38.8/8.7	34.4/11.4
Less Than bachelor's	37.1/10.7	38.4/9.9	38.2/9.5	39.4/11.4	35.0/11.2
Bachelor's or higher	38.1/9.5	38.6/9.1	38.7/9.7	38.6/7.4	33.0/11.6
One child under age 13	38.4/8.1	38.9/7.4	39.2/7.3	37.9/7.4	37.8/7.9
Two children under age 13	37.8/10.7	38.6/10.1	38.3/10.2	39.3/9.7	32.5/12.7
Three or more children under age 13	36.7/10.9	38.1/9.9	38.1/10.6	38.5/7.7	31.5/12.8
White	37.2/9.4	37.8/8.8	37.7/9.4	38.3/7.3	33.5/11.0
Non-white	38.6/11.1	39.9/10.3	39.9/9.9	40.2/11.8	35.5/11.8
Married	38.0/9.9	38.8/9.2	38.9/9.7	38.5/7.5	33.6/11.5
Never married or apart from spouse	36.6/10.7	37.3/10.2	36.2/8.9	39.9/12.5	36.6/10.7
Less than \$50K	34.9/10.2	35.3/8.5	35.3/8.5	35.6/8.2	35.7/11.4
\$50K–\$99K	39.4/10.7	40.8/10.1	40.4/9.4	42.2/12.5	33.8/12.1
\$100K or greater	38.1/9.6	38.7/9.2	38.7/9.7	38.7/7.4	33.4/10.6

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