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Regional & Community Outreach

Job quality indicators and child-care access among mothers of young children in New England

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Community Development Issue Briefs

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Abstract

Barriers to employment interfere with the Federal Reserve's maximum employment mandate. Understanding barriers, such as inaccessible child care, may be informative to improve upon employment measures. While much is known about constraints that affect accessibility on both the supply and demand sides of child care (Morgan, 1986; Weber, 2011), less attention is given to mitigating factors that can alleviate or exacerbate constraints. This could include job characteristics, such as flexibility or an unpredictable schedule. Whether or not a job offers supports more aligned with work-life balance—such as paid sick leave or remote work—may be particularly salient to those who need to arrange child care to work. This brief examines job characteristics among a sample of nearly 2,100 New England mothers[1] surveyed in 2022 who either used care, needed care but did not use it, or used care but used less care than needed.[2] The survey asks respondents to reflect on three reference points: the period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the time of the survey, and the next three months (by asking about expectations). I explore the extent to which job characteristics that are more or less aligned with work-life balance[3] are

[1] 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.
[2] Access challenges are defined in two ways: 1) those who need but do not use care (from someone other than the child's parents) are coded as "foregoing needed care," and 2) those who use care but use less care than they need (from someone other than the child's parents) are coded as "use less care than need." See Appendix: Definitions for more details.
[3] In this analysis, characteristics more aligned with work-life balance include flexibility, remote work, and paid sick leave. Those less aligned with work-life balance include a variable schedule set by an employer, working multiple jobs, and a nontraditional work schedule.

predictive of using child care or having to forego needed care. I find evidence to suggest that job characteristics matter for both.

Key findings

- Among surveyed mothers in the labor force, flexibility and remote work increased by 14.0 and 19.0 percentage points from pre-COVID to the time of the survey and were expected to persist.
- White mothers and mothers with a bachelor's degree or more averaged a significantly higher number of work-life balance supports than non-white mothers and mothers with less than a bachelor's degree.
- Job situations less supportive of work-life balance, such as working multiple jobs and nontraditional hours, decreased slightly over time according to mothers' recollections, experiences, and expectations.
- Controlling for other factors, having access to work-life balance supports was associated with increased odds of using care by a multiplier of 3.3, while exposure to job characteristics less aligned with work-life balance was associated with decreased odds of using care by as much as 10.5 percent.
- Using the same controls, both a flexible schedule and paid sick leave were associated with decreased odds of foregoing needed care by as much as 68.9 percent, while a changing schedule increased the odds of foregoing needed care by 71.1 percent.

Introduction

This brief is the third 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. The motivation for the briefs was to examine the intersection between employment and child-care access in hopes of developing a greater understanding around the ways in which inaccessible child care acts as a barrier to work. Barriers to work are particularly relevant to the Federal Reserve's maximum employment mandate (Gascon & Kent, 2025).

The first brief in the series examined child-care usage and access challenges by demographics and New England state of residence, the second examined the employment implications of these access challenges, and this brief explores how job characteristics supportive of work-life balance may act as predictors of child-care usage and associated access challenges.

Background

The employment of mothers with young children is more heavily influenced and shaped by caregiving needs than the employment of fathers with young children (Fry & Aragão, 2025; Glauber, 2018). This is reflected by persistent gaps in labor force participation and wages between mothers and fathers that are largest for parents of children ages 0 to 3 (Kochhar, 2023; U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a). These gaps may lead to lost opportunities for mothers to maximize their participation in the workforce. While mothers historically face wage penalties for having children, fathers enjoy wage premiums (Glauber, 2018). For mothers, this could be due to shouldering more of the child-care burden, leaving less time and energy for paid work, in turn influencing their performance and promotability (Azmat & Ferrer, 2017). Being more likely to have to make tradeoffs between work ambitions and family responsibilities might explain why mothers are disproportionately more likely than fathers to be in jobs without work-life balance supports, such as flexibility, paid sick leave, and invariable schedules (Kalev & Dobbin, 2022). Single parenting is more common among mothers than fathers and more common among non-white mothers than white

mothers. Thus, despite being least likely to get them, mothers are most likely to need work-life balance supports to fully engage in the workforce (Ledić & Rubil, 2021).

To the extent that work-life balance affects or enables workforce participation, it may be a critical defense against barriers to work. To explore this, it is helpful to consider what is meant by work-life balance. There is extensive literature on work-life balance, along with numerous conceptualizations and definitions: one helpful conceptualization describes minimal conflict between work and non-work roles (see Sirgy & Lee, 2018). A definition in support of this conceptualization that acknowledges resource constraints (Fisher et al., 2009; Gareis et al., 2009; Hobfoll, 1989) is offered by Sirgy and Lee (2018): "Work-life balance is achieved through effective management of conflict— conflict or interference results when resources to meet role demand are threatened or lost." This conflict can have many sources, but for mothers of young children, child-care needs and responsibilities may be a common root.

Access to work-life balance supports can affect parents' child-care decision-making (Chaudry et al., 2012). Chaudry et al.'s qualitative study revealed instances of low-income mothers without work-life balance supports having to leave their jobs. The study found that mothers considered their job constraints as fixed, so they modified care arrangements to fit their work. For instance, low-income parents in the study worked to find flexible child-care providers to fit their inflexible work arrangements. A different study by Weber et al. examined employment characteristics as a predictor of the type of child care that parents used (Weber et al., 2018). Parents who faced two or more employment constraints were more likely to use informal care and less likely to use center-based care.

Employment constraints and work-life balance supports vary considerably by type of occupation and the demographics of workers who fill them. For instance, one report estimated that 61 percent of US workers do not have jobs that can be done remotely (Parker, 2023). This is more likely to be the case for non-college educated workers and lower-income workers than for college-educated workers or those with higher incomes. Hispanic workers without a college degree are the most likely to report not working from home. Of those US workers who do work from home, 71 percent indicate that working from home helps with balancing work and personal life. Studies drawing from service-sector workers have shown that non-white workers, particularly non-white women, are subject to the most unpredictable and unstable scheduling practices (Schneider & Harknett, 2019). Parental experience of such practices was shown to cause instability in care arrangements associated with childhood anxiety and behavioral problems.

Studies show that holding multiple jobs can have either depleting or enriching effects on workers, depending on motivation (Campion et al., 2019). Among those who hold multiple jobs, challenges can be less time with family (Bamberry & Campbell, 2012) and difficulties with child care (Gringeri, 2001). Women are more likely than men to hold multiple jobs (U.S. BLS, 2026). Among women, those who are never married or are apart from a spouse are more likely than married women to hold multiple jobs. Black workers are more likely than any other race or ethnicity to hold multiple jobs regardless of gender. While individual characteristics play a role in who works multiple jobs, labor market size is a strong predictor, with nonmetropolitan areas being far more likely than metropolitan areas to have higher rates of multiple jobholding (Hirsch et al., 2017).

This brief acknowledges the recent shift in work-life balance supports partly induced by the pandemic and their unequal distribution (Lund et al., 2020). It builds on prior work that considered employment constraints as one predictor of child-care arrangements (Weber, Grobe, & Scott, 2018) by instead using indicators of work-life balance supports to predict child-care usage and access challenges.[4] Findings in

[4] See Appendix for variable definitions.

this brief may be beneficial to employers who are looking to minimize conflicts between their workers' personal and professional lives, particularly as a strategy to improve recruitment and retention. They also help illuminate a demand-side constraint that is beyond the realm of child care itself.

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).[5] I recruited respondents to complete an online Qualtrics[6] survey in two ways: through Facebook advertisements and through the dissemination of the survey link to state administrators of the child-care subsidy system across New England. 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 subsequent three months. At each of the three referenced time points, respondents were asked if they used care and, if they did not, the reason why (see Appendix: Sample Characteristics and Definitions). At just one time point (the time of the survey), respondents were also asked if they used the amount of care they needed, specified by reason. The survey asked about employment and job characteristics of employed respondents at each of the three points of reference. The analysis is limited to approximately 2,100 mothers. Data are weighted (see Appendix).

Analysis

Employment tended to vary across the reference points. Table 1 shows how reported and expected employment dipped from the baseline period of pre-COVID to early 2022 (the time of the survey). Of mothers who were not employed at the time of the survey, approximately one-quarter expected to be employed in three months. The expectations for a recovery from employment dips are consistent across most subgroups with the exception of mothers with a bachelor's degree or higher and mothers with household incomes of $100,000 or greater. Employment rates for these groups were among the highest to begin with and more likely to be accompanied by better work-life balance supports. They may have been more insulated from pandemic-induced economic pressures.

[5] See Methodology and Appendix in Savage, S. (2025).
[6] https://www.qualtrics.com.

Table 1 | Employed mothers by demographic and time period

	Pre-COVID	Time of survey	In 3 months
Percentage employed	78.6%*	74.30%	78.7%*
Race/ethnicity			
White	76.90%	72.30%	74.30%
Non-white	81.80%	78.00%	87.00%
Household income			
Less than $50K	76.40%	62.40%	78.90%
$50K to $99K	66.20%	60.00%	63.30%
$100K or greater	88.70%	88.10%	86.70%
Education			
Less than a bachelor's degree	68.50%	61.00%	69.70%
Bachelor's degree or higher	89.40%	88.70%	88.30%
Marital status			
Married	79.00%	77.10%	78.10%
Never married or apart from spouse	77.40%	65.00%	80.70%
Subsidy receipt			
No subsidy	75.5%*	71.20%	75.5%*
Received subsidy	89.50%	83.40%	88.00%
Mean age (SD)		35.3 (5.4)	
Mean number of adults in household (SD)		2.1 (0.7)	
Mean number of children under 6 (SD)		1.4 (0.6)	

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.
*Notes: Percentages are weighted. See Appendix: Sample characteristics for unweighted counts. *Between group differences in a single category across reference periods show no significant difference (NSD) at p<.05 level. See Appendix: Statistical testing.*

Table 2 shows a comparison of the six key job characteristics in the analysis and how they varied across the reference points according to mothers. The grey section includes characteristics thought to minimize personal and professional conflicts (named as work-life balance supports), while the remaining three tend to be conflict-inducing.[7] As compared to the pre-COVID period, at the time of the survey, a higher share of mothers reported two of the characteristics in support of work-life balance: flexibility and remote work. The percentage of mothers expecting these to persist in three months remained stable. The percentage of mothers reporting paid sick leave also increased over time but to a smaller degree. This could be reflecting changes to employer policies, whether voluntary (Brown & Monaco, 2021) or in response to

[7] Holding "multiple jobs" is not a job characteristic in the conventional sense, but it presents a certain way of working that is unique from working a single job (see Campion et al., 2019). Thus, for the purpose of the analysis, it is coded as a job characteristic.

new paid leave requirements (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.b) due to the pandemic. Compared to their recollections from the pre-COVID period, a smaller share of mothers reported exposure to two characteristics challenging to work-life balance—a variable schedule set by an employer and working multiple jobs—at the time of the survey. The percentage of mothers expecting to be exposed to these characteristics three months later was slightly lower than at the time of the survey. The percentage of mothers reporting exposure to nontraditional work hours was relatively stable across the time references.

Table 2 | Percentage of employed mothers reporting job characteristics "sometimes" or "all the time" by reference period

	Pre-COVID	Time of survey	In 3 months
Flexible schedule	44.2	58.2*	58.0*
Remote work	33.1	52.1	51.2
Paid sick leave	65.0	68.1	68.6
Employer changes schedule	30.0	28.1	27.4
Multiple jobs	24.7	23.0	22.6
Non-traditional schedule	42.9*	42.7*	41.7

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.
*Notes: Percentages are weighted. *Between group differences not significant at p<.05 level.*

Table 3 presents the number of work-life balance supports the mothers had access to. Note that I reverse coded those thought to be more conflict-inducing.[8] Similar to Table 2, there is a clear indication of an increase in exposure to work-life balance supports over time, likely induced by the pandemic. There are consistent significant increases from the pre-COVID period to the time of the survey and, in most cases, no significant differences from the time of the survey to expectations in three months. While the patterns over time are relatively consistent, they vary by subgroup. White mothers, those with higher household incomes and more education, and married mothers reported exposure to more work-life balance supports than mothers who were never married or were apart from their spouse, non-white and less educated mothers, and those with lower household incomes.

[8] In order to generate a sum of work-life balance supports, job characteristics aligned with work-life balance are coded as 1 for response options "sometimes" and "all the time" and 0 for options "never" and "rarely." Job characteristics less supportive of work-life balance—a variable schedule set by an employer, working multiple jobs, and a non-traditional work schedule—are reverse coded, with response options "never" and "rarely" coded as 1 and "sometimes" and "all the Time" coded as 0.

Table 3 | Mean number of favorable job characteristics (0 to 6) by demographics and reference period

	Pre-COVID	Time of survey	In 3 months
Overall	3.3	3.8*	3.8*
Race/ethnicity			
White	3.4	3.8*	3.8*
Non-white	3.1	3.5	3.6
Household income			
Less than $50K	2.8	3.2*	3.3*
$50K to $99K	3.2	3.6*	3.6*
$100K or greater	3.8	4.2*	4.2*
Education			
Less than a bachelor's degree	2.9	3.3*	3.4*
Bachelor's degree or higher	3.5	4.0*	4.0*
Marital status			
Married	3.5	3.9*	3.9*
Never married or apart from spouse	2.9	3.3*	3.4*
Subsidy receipt			
No subsidy	3.4	3.9*	3.9*
Received subsidy	3.1	3.5*	3.6*

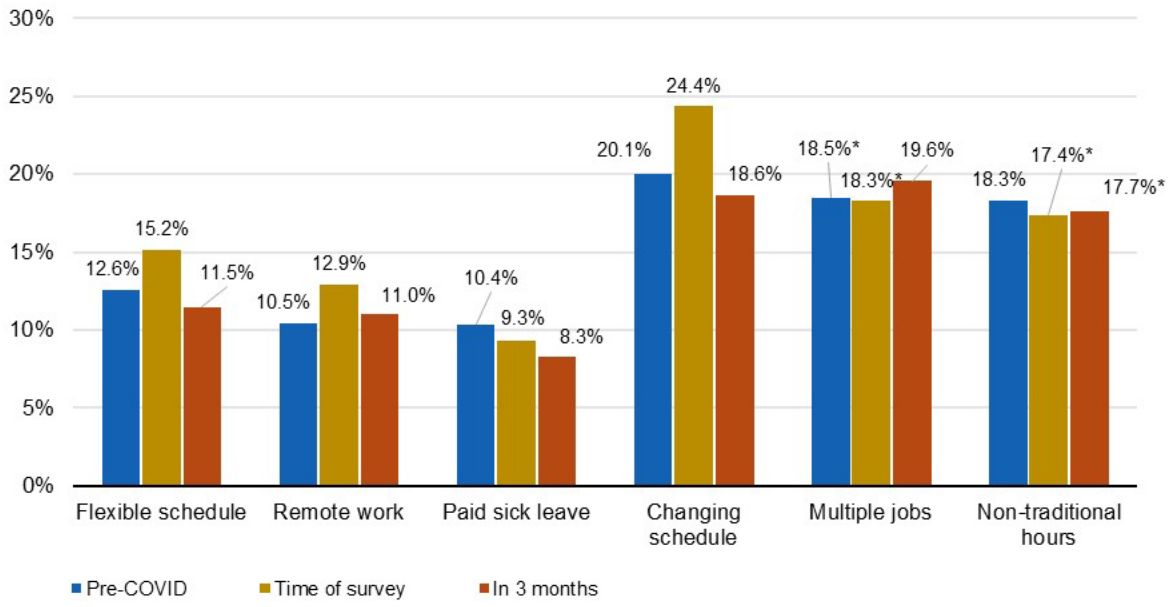
Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.
*Notes: Means are unweighted. *Between group differences not significant at p<.05 level.*

Figure 1 shows the percentage of working mothers with work-life balance supports who forewent needed care, meaning they needed care but did not use it.[9] Mothers with access to work-life balance supports were less likely to forego needed care than those with job characteristics less aligned with work-life balance. Foregoing needed care was, on average, lowest among mothers reporting access to paid sick leave and highest on average among mothers reporting a variable schedule set by an employer. In some cases (for mothers with flexible schedules, remote work, or a variable schedule set by an employer), the percentage of mothers foregoing needed care was highest at the time of the survey but was expected to return to pre-COVID levels. Although the data are not shown, the pattern is in the opposite direction for care usage. For instance, the average care usage across the reference periods for mothers with access to work-life balance supports ranged from 80 percent for those with flexible schedules to 85 percent for those with paid sick leave.[10] The average usage across periods for mothers exposed to job

[9] See Savage, 2025 for a more thorough analysis of care usage using the Parent Demand Survey data.
[10] The percentage of mothers who used care plus the percentage of mothers who forewent care do not sum to 100 because there is a portion who indicated not needing care.

characteristics less aligned with work-life balance ranged from 74 percent for those with a variable schedule set by an employer to 75 percent for those working nontraditional work hours.

Figure 1. Percentage of working mothers who forewent needed care reporting job characteristics by reference period



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.
*Notes: *Differences between foregoing needed care by mothers reporting multiple jobs were not significant from pre-COVID to the time of survey at p<.05 level. Differences by mothers reporting non-traditional hours were not significant from time of survey to "in 3 months." Percentages are weighted.*

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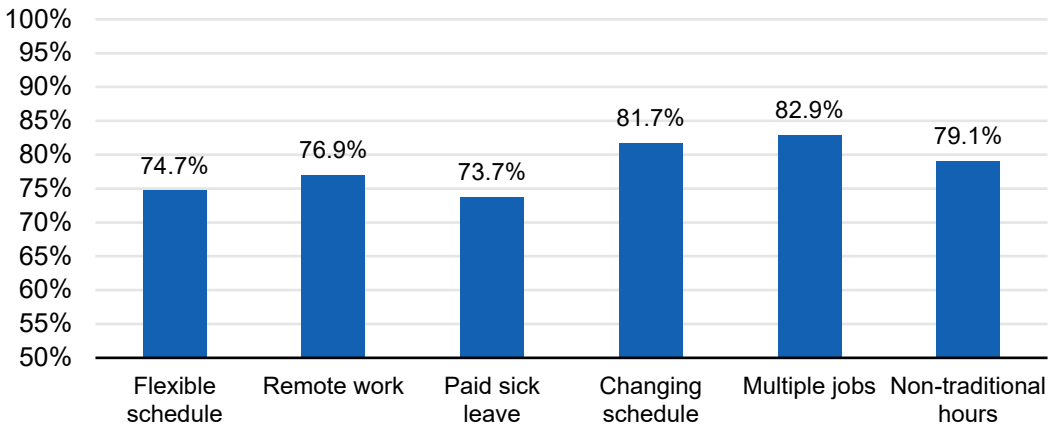
Figure 2 also shows an indicator of child-care access among working mothers with certain job characteristics. This is limited to only mothers who used care at the time of the survey because we know that even mothers who use care are not always able to use the amount they need.[11] The figure shows the percentage of mothers with each job characteristic by whether they used *less* care than needed at the time of the survey. It should be noted that 77 percent of mothers reported using less care than needed for at least one reason, so the percentages in Figure 2 vary around this mean. Mothers with job characteristics less aligned with work-life balance were, on average, 6.1 percentage points more likely to report using less care than needed than mothers with characteristics more aligned with work-life balance.[12]

[11] See Appendix: Definitions for more details on the operationalization of access challenges.
[12] See Savage, 2025 for additional reasons mothers reported using less care than needed.

Figure 2. Percentage of working mothers reporting using less care than needed at the time of survey by job characteristic



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

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The bivariate patterns in Figures 1 and 2 could be explained by factors other than access to work-life balance supports. To determine the contribution of work-life balance supports to care usage and child-care access challenges reported at the time of the survey, I ran logistic regression models, controlling for several potentially confounding factors. These include factors that have been shown to be predictive of the type of child care used, including socioeconomic variables, work schedule, demographics, family composition, and subsidy receipt. The main independent variable in each of the logits is one of the six job characteristics more or less aligned with work-life balance. The outcomes of interest include 1) *used child care* and 2) *forewent needed child care*. The analysis is limited to a single reference point (the time of the survey). I report the odds ratios comparing the odds of an outcome occurring when a mother has access to a particular job characteristic to the odds of the outcome occurring if they do not have access.[13]

For both dependent variables (*used child care* and *forewent needed child care*), the unadjusted odds ratios are significant and in the expected direction (see Table 4). The odds of using care are greater when mothers report having access to flexibility, remote work, or paid sick leave. The odds are greatest for paid sick leave, which multiplies the odds of using care by 4.6. The odds of using care decline for mothers reporting characteristics less aligned with work-life balance (a variable schedule set by an employer, multiple jobs, and nontraditional work schedule). The odds are the lowest for mothers reporting a variable

[13] An odds ratio of 1 indicates no association, greater than 1 indicates a positive association, and less than 1 indicates a negative association.

Table 4 | Job characteristics on care usage and foregoing needed care

	Used care				Forewent needed care			
	Unadjusted	95% CI	Adjusted	95% CI	Unadjusted	95% CI	Adjusted	95% CI
Flexible schedule	1.043	(1.026, 1.060)	0.950	(0.932, 0.968)	0.844	(0.829, 0.859)	**0.920**	(0.900, 0.939)
Remote work	1.635	(1.609, 1.662)	0.849	(0.831, 0.866)	0.610	(0.599, 0.620)	1.092	(1.068, 1.116)
Paid sick leave	4.557	(4.481, 4.633)	**3.255**	(3.189, 3.324)	0.230	(0.226, 0.235)	**0.311**	(0.304, 0.318)
Variable schedule set by employer	0.616	(0.606, 0.627)	**0.895**	(0.876, 0.915)	2.113	(2.075, 2.152)	**1.711**	(1.673, 1.750)
Multiple jobs	0.748	(0.735, 0.762)	**0.951**	(0.929, 0.973)	1.199	(1.175, 1.224)	0.836	(0.814, 0.857)
Nontraditional schedule	0.796	(0.783, 0.809)	**0.940**	(0.921, 0.958)	1.128	(1.109, 1.148)	0.996*	(0.975, 1.017)

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Parent Demand Survey, 2022.
*Notes: Percentages are weighted. *No significant difference at the p<.05 level. Adjusted models include the following control variables: full-time work status, age of respondent, race/ethnicity indicator, number of children under 6, marital status, education, income, subsidy receipt. Complete models are available upon request.*

schedule. However, once adjusting for factors that could also influence care usage and access challenges, the magnitude changes and, in some cases, reverses. Also, some of the odds ratios are no longer significant. Note that the bolded ratios in the adjusted column indicate ratios that continue to be significant and in the expected direction.

In the case of care usage, the adjusted model shows that paid sick leave continues to increase the odds of using care by a strong magnitude: in this case, increasing the odds by 3.2 times. However, access to a flexible schedule and remote work no longer increases the odds of using care. The characteristics less aligned with work-life balance continue to decrease the odds of using care in the adjusted model, though by a smaller magnitude. The only work characteristic less aligned with work-life balance that continued to be in the expected direction in the adjusted model was a variable schedule, which declined in magnitude but was still associated with increased odds of foregoing needed care by 71.1 percent.

Limitations

When it comes to child-care and employment, causality can be bidirectional. For instance, one could start with an employment situation first and arrange care second to align with employment constraints. Alternatively, one who is without a job or between jobs may need to secure child care first in order to pursue a job opportunity. This could influence the type of employment pursued. The analysis was limited to employed mothers at each time point, but I do not know the temporal ordering of their child-care decision-making and employment situations. It is possible that the ordering would make a difference in the outcomes.

Additional limitations exist with the operationalization of key variables. I applied a work-life balance supports lens when coding the six job characteristics but acknowledge that there could be variability. For instance, working non-traditional schedules could be a solution for some mothers to address child-care needs, while it could be an impediment for others (Kim, 2020). However, since non-traditional work schedules have been shown to be associated with indicators of poorer well-being (Suleiman et al., 2021), I coded non-traditional hours as less aligned with work-life balance. Similarly, holding multiple jobs could be depleting or enriching depending on one's motivation (Campion et al., 2019), but since it has been shown to be depleting in the case of work-life interactions (Bamberry & Campbell, 2012), I coded it as less aligned to work-life balance.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that there is the potential for error with regard to both recall and expectations. Relying on recall prior to COVID-19 introduces the possibility for errors as does asking respondents to predict the future, about which they may or may not be correct. (See Savage, 2025 for additional limitations).

Discussion

Studies have demonstrated that employment constraints influence child-care decision-making and are predictive of the type of child care that families use (Weber, 2011). It is also well-documented that work-life balance supports can make balancing child-care needs easier. The ability to survey mothers around the time of the pandemic offered a window into work-life balance supports that shifted in unprecedented ways due to the economic shutdown and how these interacted with child-care usage and access challenges. This study builds on prior research and seeks to capture the changing ways many mothers worked due to the pandemic. I find that the percentage of mothers with work-life balance supports increased over time, but not across all groups. White mothers, higher-income and more educated

mothers, and married mothers were all more likely to be exposed to more work-life balance supports. Yet, even when controlling for work schedule, demographics, socioeconomics, and family composition, exposure to certain job characteristics more aligned with work-life balance was shown to be associated with increased odds of using care and decreased odds of foregoing needed care. Similarly, exposure to job characteristics less aligned with work-life balance was shown to be associated with decreased odds of using care and, in the case of a variable schedule, increased odds of foregoing needed care. While the magnitude lessened when adjusting for key factors, some job characteristics remained in the expected direction and statistically significant.

This brief examined work-life balance in a nuanced way to understand how it interacts with inaccessible child care as a barrier to work. To the extent that work-life balance supports mitigate child-care access challenges, they may signal opportunities for helping to address this barrier to work and thus contribute to achieving maximum employment. Employers faced with workforce challenges might be interested in this nuance and its applicability to their organization. Researchers interested in child-care decision-making may find this useful for expanding conceptualizations and measures of decision-making. For instance, child-care decision-making frameworks that consider the bidirectionality of child-care access and employment could apply this brief to help unpack employment. This brief helps shed light on the larger child-care equation that parents confront, since the provision of child care is likely to be only one component of how families meet their care needs.

This brief highlights the potential mitigating effects of work-life balance on balancing care needs critical for engaging in the workforce. For instance, a flexible schedule may make a child-care provider's operating schedule less problematic for working parents, and paid sick leave could help ensure employment stability when children are sick and unable to attend a care setting. Perhaps remote work could also reduce the number of hours working parents need care coverage, with benefits to their budgets and ability to save for the future. Considering the ways that working parents could be empowered to meet care needs could have implications for needed solutions.

Access to high-quality child care supports parents, children, employers, and communities who rely on a supply of workers. The reality is that mothers oftentimes modify their care arrangements to fit their work demands. The findings in this brief suggest that employers have the potential to affect the child-care decision-making challenges their working parents face.

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 thirty $100 Visa gift cards. Data are weighted[14] 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 (see Table A1). Eighteen percent of mothers were non-white,[15] compared to 35 percent of New England mothers with at least one child under age 6 in the ACS data (Ruggles et al., 2023), and 32 percent had household incomes less than $50,000, compared to 24 percent in comparable ACS data. Nearly 90 percent of mothers lived in households consisting of two or more adults, compared to 88 percent in the ACS data. Forty percent of mothers had less than a bachelor's degree, compared to 50 percent in the ACS data.

Table A1 | Unweighted sample counts

		Unweighted counts	
		N	%
Recruitment method	Facebook	998	47.7
	Partner outreach	1,096	52.3
Race/ethnicity	White	1,710	81.8
	Non-white	381	18.2
Household income	Income at or above $50,000	1,415	67.8
	Income below $50,000	672	32.2
Marital status	Married	1,561	74.6
	Never married or apart from spouse	532	25.4
Education	Less than bachelor's degree	834	39.9
	Bachelor's degree or higher	1,255	60.1

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

[14] 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.
[15] Unweighted estimates.

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

There are two main ways I operationalized *work-life balance supports* in the analysis. The first is by coding frequency responses to a set of job characteristics. The job characteristics were captured among employed mothers based on their recollections in the three months prior to COVID-19, experiences at the time of the survey, and expectations three months from the survey date. Mothers were asked, "How often could your work be described as follows?" Characteristics used in the analysis include the following: consisting of more than one job, remote work (one or more days per week), flexible schedule, a variable schedule set by an employer, non-traditional hours (e.g., nights and weekends), and offered paid sick leave. I coded "sometimes" and "all of the time" responses as 1 and "rarely" and "never" as 0. I examine these individually in the logistic regression. For descriptive tables, I took the sum of the number of job characteristics mothers reported having access to. After reverse coding "variable schedule," "working multiple jobs," and "non-traditional hours," I summed the number of items. This resulted in a sum ranging from 0 to 6.

Another set of variables key to the analysis includes *child-care usage* and *access challenges*. To arrive at usage, I asked respondents during a time in question (e.g., during December 2019 to February 2020), "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?" 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 apply. 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." This group is considered to have had access challenges.

Another way I operationalized an access challenge variable, *used 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. Items asked if respondents 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 also used in the analysis.

It should be noted that other measures of child-care access have been offered by scholars including: "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" (Friese et al., 2017). My operationalization of access and access challenges is broader, since I do not ask about reasonable effort. I could be overstating "accessible" care by operationalizing it as "use care" or

"use amount of care needed" alone. "Use amount of care needed" may get closer to the access definition offered by Friese et al.

Statistical testing

It should be acknowledged that the Parent Demand Survey data were gathered through a convenience sample. The data are weighted, and differences are tested for statistical significance. Only instances of no significant difference (NSD) are noted. Otherwise, results are significant. However, given the nature of the non-probability sample, readers should consult the magnitude of differences rather than relying on statistical testing alone. Larger differences that are statistically significant are likely to be more reliable than very small differences that are statistically significant. I tested for significance as a caution so as not to imply that differences that would not be significant in a random sample were significant in this case.

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