

A Labour of Love: Consequences of Caregiving for An Autistic Child on Mothers’ Employment, Financial Status, and Well-Being

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BACKGROUND

Parents of autistic children report many benefits of caregiving, including improved family relationships and personal growth. However, there are also significant financial and emotional costs associated with this role. This has important consequences on women and mothers who often tend to be the primary caregivers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference in income between mothers and fathers in the same household?
2. Does the number of hours mothers spend navigating services predict their mental health after controlling for family income and education?
3. What is the impact of caregiving responsibilities on maternal work and employment?

METHODS

- 900 Ontario mothers completed a survey with both closed- and open-ended questions.
- Inclusion criteria specified that parents had an autistic child aged 17 years or younger.
- The survey was available online in both English and French between June 30-July 23, 2021.

DISCUSSION

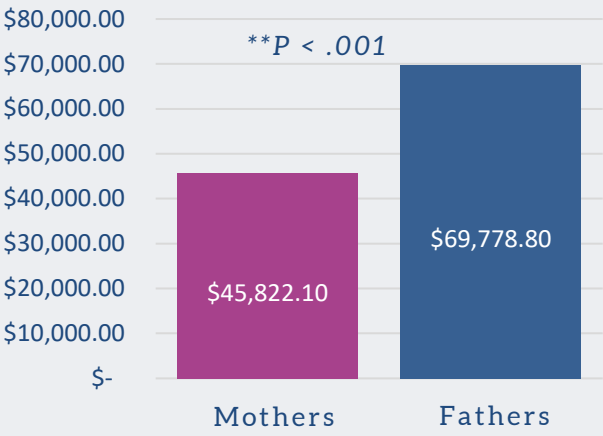
There are significant gender inequities in income and employment having a detrimental impact on women’s financial independence and well-being. Policies are urgently needed which recognize the important contributions that caregivers, who are mostly women, provide to the health care and social service system by providing improved services for children, and flexible employment opportunities and improved supports for parents.

This research was conducted in partnership with Autism Ontario. For full acknowledgements and more information, see www.wlu.ca/LARC

RESULTS

RQ1:

Comparison of Average Annual Incomes For Mothers vs. Fathers



RQ2:

| Variable | Model 1 | | | | Model 2 | | | |
|------------------------------|---------|------|-------|-------|---------|------|-------|-------|
| | B | SE B | β | p | B | SE B | β | p |
| Highest Education | -.006 | .030 | -.006 | .856 | -.002 | .030 | -.003 | .939 |
| Family Income | -.000 | .000 | -.011 | .741 | .000 | .000 | .002 | .962 |
| Child Level of Support Needs | .253 | .044 | .191 | <.001 | .236 | .044 | .178 | <.001 |
| Hours Navigating Services | | | | | .009 | .003 | .113 | .001 |

In this analysis, we considered factors such as maternal education, family income, and the child's level of support needs, which previous research has shown can influence mental health. This helped us to accurately assess the specific impact of mothers' time spent navigating services on their mental health. Our findings revealed that mothers who spent more time navigating services tended to have poorer mental health, regardless of these other factors.

RQ3:

Theme 1: Sacrificing Career

“I am not able to secure the executive level job and pay I am qualified for because of the unpredictability of my child's outbursts and inability of the school to provide EA support which he requires to be successful in the school environment. This puts financial pressure on the family and forces us to choose the types and levels of support our child receives.”

Theme 2: Balancing Act

“It’s not about the pandemic, they need us all the time. I have mental stress as I am to financially support my family and have to take care of my kid. On the other hand, all these expensive therapies force us to work more.”

Theme 3: Job Satisfaction

“This is the first year since my son was born that I've even been able to have a job. I found the most amazing employer who accepts and celebrates my family. He allows me to tailor my schedule to fit my son’s school and therapies. I never thought this would happen, we are so very blessed.”