

CPRN Research Highlights

Working and Looking after Mom and Dad: The Face of Caregiving in Canada¹

Overview

The aging of the Canadian population has a number of implications for the country, not the least of which is a greater proportion of Canadian employees responsible for the care of elderly dependents. Research has projected that the number of Canadians in the workforce involved in eldercare will increase from one in five to one in four in the next decade. Demographic projections also suggest that Canada has yet to feel the full effects of eldercare issues. Despite the trends in increasing eldercare responsibility, relatively little is known about employed caregivers in Canada. “Employed caregivers” is defined as a caregiver who is employed full-time but also provides caregiving to family members.

This document presents highlights of the research report, *Balancing Paid Work and Caregiving Responsibilities: A Closer Look at Family Caregivers in Canada*, co-authored by CPRN Research Associate Dr. Linda Duxbury (Carleton University), Dr. Chris Higgins (University of Western Ontario) and Bonnie Schroeder (VON Canada). The authors have allowed their full report and executive summary to be posted on the CPRN website.

The report was funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

Research Objectives

Caregivers provide care or assistance, either in their home or the recipient’s home, to a family member who has a physical or mental disability, is chronically ill, frail, or at the end of life. *Balancing Paid Work and Caregiving Responsibilities: A Closer Look at Family Caregivers in Canada* portrays the key issues and challenges facing employed caregivers in Canada and identifies the support that key stakeholders (e.g. the dependent, family, organizations, and governments) could offer to assist caregivers.

¹ The full report, *Balancing Paid Work and Caregiving Responsibilities: A Closer Look at Family Caregivers in Canada*, is available at www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1997&l=en and the Executive Summary is available at www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1996&l=en.

To examine caregiving in Canada, the researchers conducted two major research studies – one quantitative and one qualitative (see Research Methodology). The quantitative study allowed Canadian employees to be grouped into four categories:

- *No caregiving* – employed Canadians who do not spend time each week in providing childcare or eldercare.
- *Parents* – employed Canadians who spend time each week providing childcare but do not provide eldercare.
- *Elder caregivers* – employed Canadians who spend time each week providing eldercare but not childcare.
- *Sandwich group* – employed Canadians who spend time each week providing both childcare and eldercare.

The grouping noted above allows comparisons to be made with those different caregiving roles with each other. As noted, concerns over eldercare responsibilities are now increasing due to a number of important demographic shifts underway in Canada. The primary focus of this highlights document is on caregivers who try to balance the demands of both paid work and the additional responsibility of looking after an elderly relative.

Research Methodology

This report is based on two research components:

1. A quantitative study of original empirical analysis using data collected for the *National Work, Family and Lifestyle Study*. It was conducted in 2001 by the research team of Dr. Linda Duxbury and Dr. Chris Higgins and funded by Health Canada (n = 32,800).
2. A 2008 qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews with 30 employed caregivers who provided care for at least 10 hours a week and six months prior to the study.

Key Findings

- Over one in four (27.8%) employed Canadians have responsibilities for the care of elderly dependents – a percentage likely to grow as the baby boom population ages.
- Almost one in five employed Canadians (16.8%) have responsibility for both childcare and eldercare (i.e. they are in the “sandwich” group).
- Rarely do employed Canadians provide care to an elderly dependent who lives with them, but over one in 10 provide care for an elderly dependent who lives nearby (12.7%) or in another location (9.7%).

Caregiver Grouping Is Associated with Life Cycle Stage

- Employees in the *no caregiver group* are younger (i.e. under 35) single men and women who live in larger communities.
- Employees in the *childcare only group* are married men and women aged 35 to 45.
- Employees in the *eldercare only group* are typically older, unmarried females without children and living in large centres.
- Employees in the *sandwich group* are more likely to be older (over 45) men and women who live in smaller communities.

Caregiving Is a Labour of Love

The majority (75%) of employed caregivers in the interview study are middle-aged women who combine paid employment with the care of an elderly parent with a chronic health problem. The average age of the individual receiving care was 76.7 years. For most of the study participants (57%), caregiving is a “labour of love” – **the individual wants or chooses to care** for an elderly dependent. For a substantive number of employees (40%), this is a role they take on because “there is no one else who can do it.”

Employed Caregivers Have Two Full-Time Jobs

Employed caregivers face heavy demands. The majority in the interview study “work” the equivalent of two full-time jobs – they spend an average of 36.5 hours per week in paid employment and 34.4 hours per week in caregiving.

For Many, the Role of Caregiver Is Emotionally Draining

Employed caregivers spend the majority of their time (68%) **performing two caregiving roles**: providing physical care and emotional support. The typical caregiver in the interview sample spends over 13 hours per week in physical care and eight hours in support activities such as personal care, nursing, and co-ordination.

A majority of respondents identified emotional support as the most stressful aspect of caregiving, while a substantive number of respondents identified the co-ordination role as the most stressful part of caregiving.

Employed Caregivers Are at Risk of Experiencing High Levels of “Caregiver Strain”

Employees who care for elderly dependents are considered “at risk” for a particular type of work-life conflict referred to as *Caregiver Strain*, characterized by physical, financial and emotional burdens (see text box on Caregiver Strain for more details).

Caregiver Strain

What do we know about financial strain?

- Financial strain is not a significant problem for employed Canadians.
- Employees providing care for dependents who live near, but not with them, have lower levels of financial strain than those who live elsewhere. Employees who “care at a distance” incur greater costs.
- High levels of financial strain are associated with poorer physical and mental health, greater work-life conflict, increased absenteeism, lower job satisfaction, a higher number of visits to the emergency room at the hospital, and reduced fertility.

What do we know about physical strain?

Physical strain results from the physical efforts required to provide care for an elderly dependent.

- The main predictors of physical strain are distance (employees with their dependent living with them are at higher risk), gender (women have more problems than men), age (older employees have more problems than younger employees) and the families’ financial situation (the lower the income, the greater the strain).
- Higher levels of physical strain are associated with poorer mental health, increased work-life conflict, increased absenteeism, and lower levels of family satisfaction.
- Both studies (survey and interview) suggest physical strain is largely caused by demands – the more time and the greater the responsibility for caregiving, the greater the physical strain. The amount of time caregivers spend giving care needs to be reduced.

What do we know about emotional strain?

- Approximately one-quarter of the employed Canadians report moderate to high levels of emotional strain attributed to the stresses of caring.
- Emotional strain is very strongly associated with poorer physical and mental health, increased work-life conflict, higher job stress, increased absenteeism and emotional fatigue, lower levels of family well-being and reduced fertility.
- Having children at home seems to provide employees with elderly dependents at home some increased ability to cope with eldercare demands. Employees in the sandwich group are less likely to report high levels of physical or emotional strain than are those with just eldercare.
- Conditions such as living in a family with limited financial resources, physically and emotionally heavy caregiving, and gender (women are more predisposed to experiencing this form of strain than men) result in greater emotional strain.

How Can We Reduce Caregiver Strain?

This research provides some answers to this question. Caregiver strain is the result of the amount of time spent in eldercare activities and reducing demands is the key to reducing strain. Increasing community supports for employed caregivers and more respite care programs are required.

It is also known that a families' financial situation is an important predictor of financial and emotional strain. The tighter the families' finances, the greater the strain. The lower the financial resources, the less ability to buy supports from outside and the more care that they have to provide themselves and the more they need their job income. Increased flexibility at work lowers both financial and emotional strain. By meeting both work and caregiving demands, an employed caregiver is healthier emotionally and is not as worried about the financial aspects of caregiving. Financial strain decreases when the dependent lives nearby, but not with the employed caregiver. Communities wanting to attract and retain labour need to invest in assisted eldercare facilities.

Physical strain is caused by two factors: physical dimensions (hours per week in care, lifting, lack of sleep) and emotional aspects (individual feels personally responsible for the dependent). Reducing the amount of time an individual has to spend in care can reduce physical strain. Respite care, eldercare referral services, assisted eldercare facilities and home nursing services can also help.

Women are more likely to experience emotional strain. This finding is cause for concern given the very strong association between it and physical and mental health problems, absenteeism, and reductions in fertility.

To decrease financial and emotional strain one can either increase the amount of control the employee has over their circumstances and/or reduce the demands they face (i.e. community and government supports for people with eldercare, respite care, eldercare referral services, assisted eldercare facilities, home nursing services).

The Way Forward

In the interviews conducted for this research, caregivers were asked what would help them cope with this role. The respondents provided examples where family, employers, governments, and caregivers themselves could help.

- Employed caregivers want more tangible support from their families – not just sympathy and understanding.
- Employed caregivers appreciate (and need) flexibility from their employer to deal with the uncertainty in dealing with caregiving responsibilities. They specifically mentioned the benefits of access to alternative work arrangements and time-off flexibility. Many noted that simply having supportive policies in their workplace were necessary, but not sufficient on their own. Policies must be actually put into practice and employees must feel comfortable that they can actually use them.

- Elder caregivers offered advice on how best to cope with the employed caregiver role: practical advice from an expert; look after self and family, and access professional support to help them deal with the stress of the role.
- Governments need to look at ways to reduce the financial burdens associated with eldercare (i.e. tax write-offs, paid time off work, supported care services in community).
- Employed caregivers want their communities to offer services that make their job easier: respite care and help with travel, greater flexibility by community service deliverers in determining who gets care and improving coordination among different service providers.
- Caregivers suggested that federal government leadership in supporting employed caregivers is needed. This could include:
 - stronger policies to support time off from work for longer time periods;
 - provide one central place where caregivers arrange for eldercare support services;
 - provide more community programs and services, especially respite care; and
 - provide more financial support to caregivers.