

Comments on
“Maternal employment and family caregiving: rethinking time with children in the
ATUS”

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This paper makes a number of important contributions to the study of child care. First, the authors note that women’s time committed to child care has increased over the last 50 years. While employed mothers undertake less child care time per week than mothers who are not working, total time in childcare for both groups of mother has increased. Second, the paper notes that this increase largely arises from increases in interactive care with children (playing with or reading to children) as opposed to routine medical or physical care, where time use patterns have been more consistent across the decades. Third, the authors show the importance of both measuring the total time spent in child care and the proportion of child care performed by mothers and by fathers (though this latter analysis would be more interesting if we had diaries of couples rather than separate samples of mothers and fathers).

Very reassuringly, this paper also shows that the ATUS main activity child care figures line up nicely with the main activity child care time estimates generated in the heritage time use studies in the USA. Somewhat sadly, though, this paper also demonstrates that the ATUS estimates of simultaneous child care time are substantially different from the previous estimates. Perhaps future work may reveal how the “in your care” time may be disaggregated to identify the elements that are comparable with the secondary activity child care time collected in the older datasets.

Like any good analysis, this paper raises a number of questions which can be given further consideration.

First, the paper raises a number of implications for policy, though these are not developed. The relevance of this paper for a wider audience – particularly for the audience which funds the ATUS or can influence those who fund the ATUS. The authors could expand the impact of their work with more emphasis on the policy issues raised in their work.

The authors highlight the great value of the roster with the exact age of children in the ATUS – which allows them to show that child care time decreases as children age, and the proportion of care done by fathers increases as children age. It would also be interesting to see if these same gender trends emerge in relation to other kinds of need – such as the needs of particularly gifted or talented children as well as the needs of children with disabilities or behavioural challenges.

The authors may overplay the constraints on the allocation of time to activities. While it is perfectly true, as the authors state, that “time is finite” – meaning we all only have 24

hours in a day, and it is also true that some activities have finite element – for instance sleep has a biological basis and the human body requires an amount of rest time to remain healthy. The fact that employed mothers get less sleep is particularly concerning, though perhaps this should be reported in the context of total time in sleep and alongside some medical evidence about whether employed mothers might be considered to be sleep deprived or whether non-employed mothers make greater use of the luxury of sleeping in and afternoon naps. Nevertheless, not all other categories of activity are as rigidly fixed as need for sleep.

This is particularly true of housework. Other papers at this conference and other recent conferences have documented a general decline in the total domestic labour time in the USA. This decline has a significant element with the rising popularity of convenience foods and decline of cooking, but the increasing efficiency of cleaning products and technology (stain-resistant fabrics, easy-clean pans, fibres in clothes designed not to require ironing, the internet – which allows faster comparison shopping and research into products) have also reduced time needed to complete some domestic tasks. Rather than asking what gave for women to take up more employment, we might also ask what aspects of necessary task time changed enabling women to take up more employment. Indeed, we also might ask whether the increasing availability of high technology to ease the burden of housework has encouraged men to play a greater role in this dimension of total household work.

Similarly, paid work, at least for people working in some occupations, is changing, with the possibilities opened by internet and messaging technologies making at least some jobs more flexible for accommodating other priorities, like childcare.

If housework were a zero sum activity, then to take up paid work, women either would need to accept lower standards or cleanliness and hygiene or to arrange other means of having the same work performed. Is there any evidence that standards have declined? The authors do show that fathers have increased their housework time from a very low base to a slightly higher level, though that father's housework time may have plateaued. So only a small proportion of changes in mother's time is explained by changes in father's time.

Three significant matters are not discussed here. The first is the question of what the children in these households are doing. Are the children of employed mothers doing more housework than the equivalent aged children of non-employed mothers – and is that a good or a bad thing if there is a difference? Historically, households have relied on children to undertake essential chores for the running of the household, and assuming responsibility for chores has been a means by which children learned to assume responsibility for other areas of life. The media at least regularly offer stories of under-occupied young people causing havoc. Too much free time without purposeful or productive endeavour may not necessarily be a good thing. Second is the question of outsourcing, which in turn depends on household income and availability of opportunities to outsource, either to paid or to unpaid third parties. While such analysis would need additional data, some of this question might be tests be comparing time in household management of employed and non-employed mothers. Third, "employment" is a very

broad category, and it would be interesting to have the analysis expanded to break down the analysis by occupation to see if the pattern emerges equally for all groups of employed women.

Additionally, we should note that childcare is not simply an individual or family issue, but also a community and societal issue, as the proper care of children contributes to the stability, renewal and continuing functionality of communities and societies. This paper focuses on the child care time of parents, and makes brief mention of the child care provided by the state in schools. The paper could give some consideration to changes in school hours and schedules over the last 50 years, and also to changes in the childcare time of people who are not parents. We would need to consider the total picture of childcare being performed in order to fully understand the changes in that care.

The authors offer the explanation that child care time might increase to compensate for women's sense of loss of an important function of motherhood and thus reflect an effort to meet social expectations to "be there" for their children. Availability to children as children need parental time can be achieved in a number of ways, though, and e-mail, mobile phones, and other technology now do offer parents an opportunity for regular contact with children even when they are in more remote locations. The paper could give more time to discussing the concept of what being there means.

The paper indirectly raises questions of values, asking both what is better for children and what is better for women in terms of achieving gender equality. These are legitimate questions, but in addressing them we should be cautious about making implicit value assignments to categories of time use. More free time is not always a good thing (feeling you have too much time on your hands can be boring or even depressing), and time in paid work is not always a bad thing that needs to be minimised (especially if you really enjoy and feel enriched by your paid work).

I finally address the question of the meaning of the "in your care" time recorded in the ATUS. In separate work, I have been examining what Americans report doing as their main activity when they report secondary childcare time using the American Heritage Time Use Study (AHTUS) dataset. Across the decades, simultaneous child care predominantly occurs during four activities:

- meals and snacks not at work or school
- food preparation or cooking
- watching TV, videos or DVDs
- travel related to consumption

These four activities contain 58.7% of simultaneous child care time in 1965/66, declining (55.1% in 1975/76; 50.7% in 1985) to 40.8% in 2003. Eight further main activities:

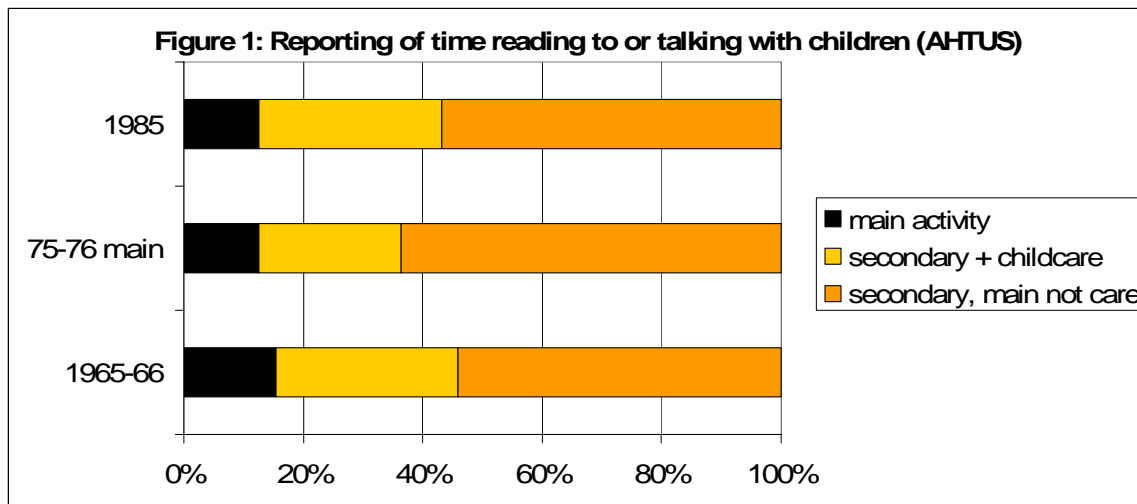
- cleaning
- laundry, ironing, clothing repairs
- purchase routine goods
- travel for personal or adult care
- travel for voluntary activity or worship
- receive or visit friends

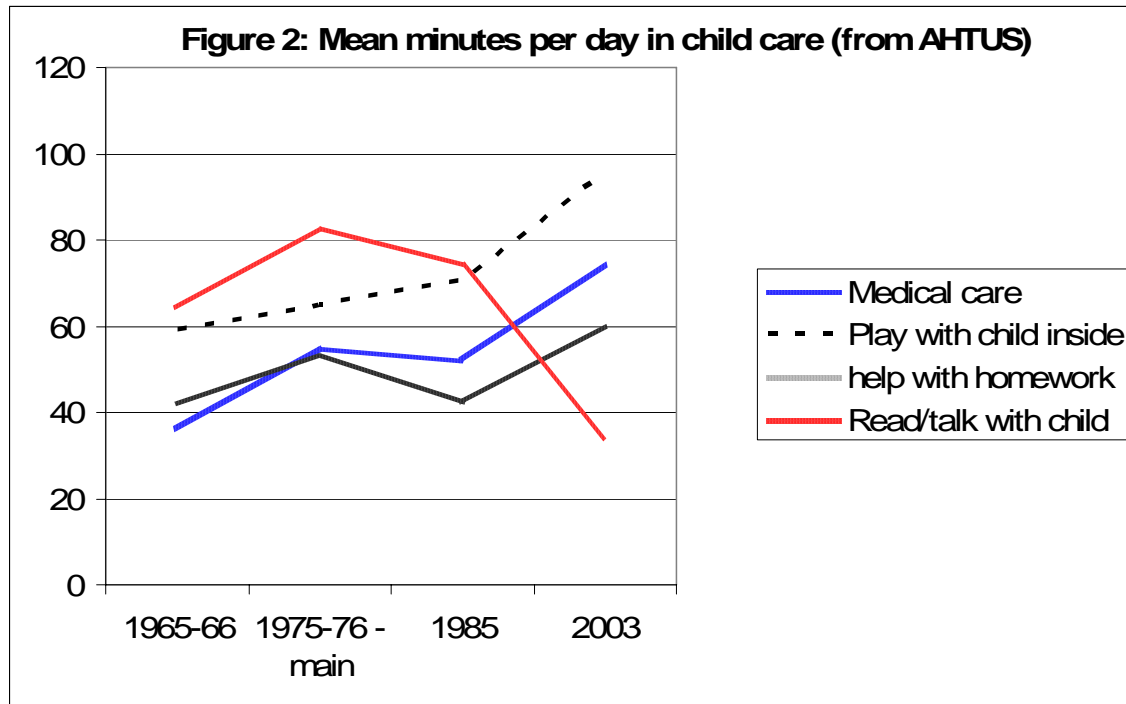
- conversation in person or by phone
- wash, dress, personal care

account for 75% of simultaneous child care time in 1965/66 and 1975/76, 81% of time in 1985, and 71% of time in 2003. This paper demonstrates that non-employed mothers spend more time in many of these twelve activities, hence it is not surprising that they spend more time than employed mothers with children in their care.

The “in your care” time overlaps the concept of secondary child care time, but very likely is lumping more and less intensive interactions with children into a single category. That is, time diaries collecting secondary activity are likely to collect time where parents actively engage with their children while doing other things but not to capture alert monitoring time where the parents may not directly interact (such as being on the bus with a child but talking to someone else on a mobile phone), while the ATUS in your care concept captures both but does not distinguish between the two.

In the historical time use studies, most child care activities are recorded more often as main activities than as secondary activities. There are two notable exceptions: socialising with children and reading to or talking to children. As Figure 1 demonstrates, time spent reading with children (a similar pattern emerges with secondary socialising with children) is predominantly recorded as a secondary than as a main activity. This reporting reflects cases of parents who read to their children on public transport, in waiting rooms, and at other opportunities when there is down time or waiting time during the waking day. Figure 2, however, reveals the time spent reading or talking to children apparently drops off dramatically in the 2003 ATUS – most likely this is an instrument effect arising from the substitution of the “in your care” question for the secondary activity question. (These figures cover all diarists who reported any time engaged in childcare on their diary day and is not limited to childcare time by parents, the definition used in the paper).





More methodological work will need to investigate what is captured by the concepts of secondary childcare and having children in your care. Fully capturing care in future time diary research even may benefit from the use of both concepts.

This paper has demonstrated that the nature of care itself has changed over the last few decades, with parents investing more time in interactive care with their children. While changes in women's employment patterns have not changed the tendency of all mothers to preserve space in their daily activities for children, women's labour market activity significantly shapes their patterns of interaction with their children. This paper gives us fertile ground from which to expand our understanding of this important dimension of social activity.