

Economically "inactive": How does childcare impact mothers' ability to re-join the labour market?

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The trade-off between the costs of childcare provision and benefits of having an increased proportion of women, and particularly women with dependent children, in employment is one of the most challenging social issues for western governments. In countries like Northern Ireland the limited subsidised childcare provision for preschool and primary school children has been partially offset by a rise in informal childcare. This study provides a first glance into the impact that informal childcare provided by co-resident grandparents in Northern Ireland has on mothers' employment rates, especially on mother's full-time and part-time employment, considered in the literature as vital for women in managing both family and work, and how these relationships are affected by the health of the co-resident grandparent.

What we did

This empirical analysis is based on the entire population enumerated in the 2011 Census for Northern Ireland. This unique resource provides population-wide data relating to mothers and their household circumstances and composition, including the presence of children and co-resident grandparents. The study sub-population includes all women aged between 20 and 60 inclusive. Teenage mothers, 15 to 19 years of age, were not included as earlier research demonstrated that they were more likely to be in school and living with their parents (Wright et al. 2016). The choice of upper age limit was driven by the state pension age, which was aged 60 for women in 2011.

Why it matters

While there has been an increase in women's labour force participation across Europe in the last few decades there is still a considerable gap between the employment rates of men and women. The Northern Ireland context is similar to the rest of the UK, though with generally lower employment rates; the employment rate for women aged 16 to 64 was 66.9%, in October-December 2018. Employment levels were higher amongst women with dependent children than for those without, 73.1% and 62.8% respectively, with levels ranging from 65.4% for those with children aged 0 to 2, 78.0% for those with children aged 5 to 10 years and 73.7% for children aged 16 to 18. Stereotypical child caring responsibilities may therefore be an important factor that deepens the gap between men and women employment rates, and it is perhaps unsurprising that 40% of women not participating in the labour market in the UK gave "*looking after family /home*" as their reason (ONS 2014). Women are more likely to have caring roles within the family and to be a stay-home-parent especially when, as in the case of Ireland and UK, the related childcare costs are more than 23% of a net family income (EC 2015). The situation for working mothers in Northern Ireland

is particularly bleak. The early learning programmes offers only 12.5 hours of free care per week for children of pre-school age and has no flexibility in timetabling or in the choice of provider. This rigidity makes it more difficult for working parents to avail of the benefits of the programme and in some cases more expensive as they will have to supplement this free care with half-day nursery or childminder costs, typically more expensive than a full-day. (Employers for childcare 2019)

What we found

To the best of our knowledge, this empirical paper is the first to use the entire census dataset to quantify the effect of informal childcare provided by co-resident grandparents on mothers' labour force participation. Using a cohort of 195,922 mothers with children aged 1 to 16 years of age; we have found that co-resident grandparents have a significant impact in maternal labour force participation in Northern Ireland. Although we cannot determine causality, this association remained significant even after adjustment for a wide array of demographic, socio-economic and area-level factors known to be associated with labour force participation.

The presence of a co-resident grandparent was associated with 16% greater probability of employment for single parent mothers and 10% increase for mothers in two parent households. These results hold when we consider grandparental health.

Mothers with co-resident grandparents had 12% higher probability of being in full-time rather than part-time employment than mothers without. The presence of a co-resident grandparent was associated with increase in employment by at least 15% among mothers with primary-school age children.

What next?

In the next stage, we would like to explore further mothers' decision to return to work after birth, expanding the analysis to look into the structural composition of the household, mothers' employment status before birth, local labour condition, proximity from childcare providers as well as the cost of childcare. The results are now part of a report to inform change in childcare policies in Northern Ireland and we are working closely with stakeholders to identify key areas for future research.

The Administrative Data Research NI (ADR NI) takes privacy protection very seriously. All information that directly identifies individuals will be removed from the datasets by trusted third parties, before researchers get to see it. All researchers using the Network are trained and accredited to use sensitive data safely and ethically, they will only access the data via a secure environment, and all of their findings will be vetted to ensure they adhere to the strictest confidentiality standards. The help provided by the staff of the ADR NI and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) Research Support Unit is acknowledged. The ADR NI is funded by the Economic and Research Council (ESRC). The authors alone are responsible for the interpretation of the data and any views or opinions presented are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the ADR NI or the data custodians. The Census branch data has been supplied for the sole purpose of this project.