BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

Statistical Brief

Who's Minding the Kids?

In fall 1991, there were 31 million children under age 15 living with their employed mothers. Increases in the numbers of employed mothers with children have made child care concerns an important issue in upcoming employment and welfare legislation. How these children were cared for while their moms were at work is the focus of this Brief, which also presents data on the costs of this care.

These statistics were collected in the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) between September and December 1991 and are compared to similar data collected in SIPP in earlier years. Unless otherwise noted, arrangements refer only to *primary* arrangements — those usually used *most* (if not all) of the hours the child's mother was at work.

Most preschoolers receive care in a home environment.

About two-thirds of preschool-age children were cared for either in their own home (36 percent) or another home (31 percent) while their moms were away at work. Nearly one quarter (23 percent) received care in an organized facility, such as a nursery school or a day care center. Virtually all the remaining kids (9 percent) were cared for by their mothers while they worked; most of these moms worked at home.

Grandparents and fathers often play a role in preschooler care. Sixteen percent of these children were cared for by their grandparents during their mother's working hours. And increasing numbers are receiving care from their fathers (20 percent in 1991, up from 15 percent in 1988).

It's notable that as "father care" became more common between 1988 and 1991, care by "family day care" providers (i.e., care in the homes of nonrelatives) became less frequent, dropping from 24 percent to 18 percent of all primary preschooler care arrangements.

Care in organized facilities fell from 26 percent to 23 percent.

Some gradeschool kids return from school to empty homes.

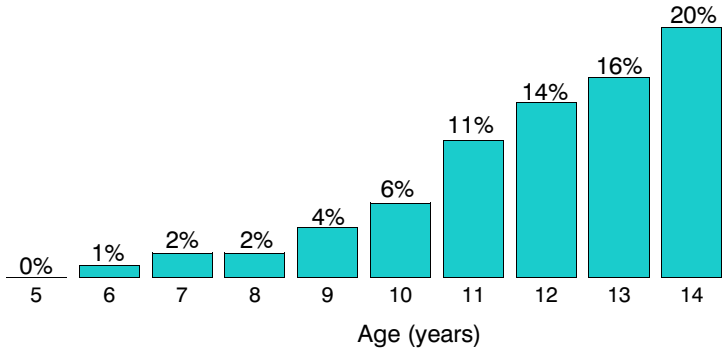
Three-quarters of the 21 million children aged 5 to 14 of employed mothers were in school most of the hours their mothers worked. Many of the rest (11 percent) received care in their own home — usually from their father — or were involved in a school-based activity (3 percent) for most of this period.

But this doesn't mean that all these gradeschoolers received supervision *the entire time* their mothers worked. A fairly substantial number (8 percent, or 1.6 million 5 to 14 year olds) were "latchkey" kids — they spent *some or all* of these hours home alone. (In other words, self-care was either their primary or secondary child care arrangement.) The odds of being a "latchkey" kid rose with the following factors:

- *Child's age* — The graph below shows that the likelihood of a child being a latchkey kid climbed with their age. Fewer than 5 percent of children 5 to 11 years old were latchkey kids; by age 14, about 1 in 5 children spent some time alone during their mother's work day.

Who's Home Alone?

Percent of latchkey kids (children aged 5 to 14 of employed mothers who cared for themselves for some part of the time their mothers were working), by child's age: 1991



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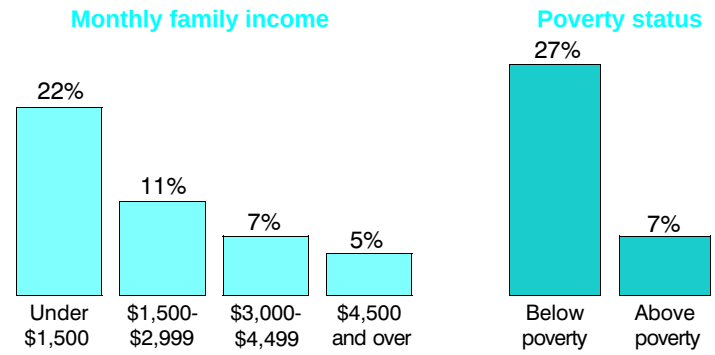
- *Mother's employment status* — Children aged 5 to 11 whose mothers worked full-time were four times more likely to be latchkey kids than those whose moms worked part-time.

- *Area of residence* — It was twice as common for suburban kids as for children living outside metro areas to be latchkey children. The proximity of neighbors and other children in the suburbs may account for this difference.

Child Care Costs Are More Burdensome for Low-Income Mothers

Percent of monthly family income employed mothers spent on child care, by income level and poverty status: 1991



Mothers working evening or night shifts have an easier time arranging in-home care.

The type of shift that a mother works makes a big difference in the kind of primary child care arrangement she uses. To illustrate, we can compare mothers working day shifts (at least half their working hours fell between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. on a regular basis) and those who work non-day shifts (all others).

Preschoolers whose mothers worked non-day shifts were nearly twice as likely to receive care in their own home as those whose moms worked a day shift (47 percent compared with 27 percent). Father care accounted for 31 percent of arrangements for the children of non-day shift moms and 12 percent for day shift-mother's kids.

On the other hand, preschoolers with day shift-working moms were more frequently cared for in either another home or in an organized facility (64 percent) than kids whose mom worked a non-day shift (41 percent).

Patterns by the *number of hours* worked are similar — 44 percent of preschoolers of mothers who worked *part-time* received care in their own home. The same was true for 30 percent of those whose moms worked *full-time*; nearly twice as many of these kids received care in organized facilities as did children whose moms worked part-time (28 percent compared with 15 percent).

For many women, child care is a costly expense.

In fall 1991, there were 19.2 million employed women with children under 15 years old living with them. Thirty-five percent of them made cash payments for child care services, down from 40 percent in 1988. They paid an average of $63 per week, no significant change (in 1991 constant dollars) from 1988, but up $11 from 1985. Women who paid for care had an average monthly family income of $3,838; these payments consumed 7 percent of their family income.

Women with at least one preschooler were more apt to pay for care (60 percent) than those with only gradeschool-age children (17 percent). Mothers of preschoolers also paid more each week ($72 versus $40).

Care is more of a burden for poor women.

Relatively fewer poor than non-poor women paid for child care (24 percent versus 36 percent). But care consumes an especially large share of the family budget of poor women who do pay. Poor women who paid for care spent 27 percent of their monthly family income on it, compared with 7 percent for non-poor women. Why? Both paid about the same weekly amount (about $60).

More information:

Who's Minding the Kids? Child Care Arrangements: Fall 1991. Current Population Reports, Series P70-36. Contact Customer Services (301-763-4100) for ordering information.

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This Brief is one of a series that presents information of current policy interest. All statistics are subject to sampling variability, as well as survey design flaws, respondent classification errors, and data processing mistakes. The Census Bureau has taken steps to minimize errors, and analytical statements have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources.