

MINDING THE CHILDREN

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is sponsoring the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), the first federal survey of how Americans spend their time. During a time-use interview, respondents provide information about how they spent their time during the previous day. In addition to providing a chronological list of their daily activities and the times at which they occurred, respondents also provide contextual information such as where they were and who was with them during each activity. This 24-hour recall diary is the core of the time-use survey. Additional information is collected through a series of summary questions that are administered after the 24-hour time diary. Summary questions may probe for additional details about already reported activities or may elicit reports of time spent in activities outside the 24-hour reference period.

One of the proposed summary questions for the ATUS measures secondary childcare. Briefly, secondary childcare refers to those times when a parent or caregiver may be mindful of and responsible for a child while engaged in a non-childcare primary activity. For example, a respondent might report that at 6:00 PM, he was cooking dinner. In response to a summary question, he could indicate that during that time period, he was also providing childcare.

Preliminary development of a methodology to collect information about secondary childcare began in 2000. Stinson (2000) conducted focus groups in which participants were shown examples of the kinds activities BLS is interested in capturing and were asked to provide descriptors for those activities. Focus group participants suggested the phrases “*looking after*,” or “*in your care*,” to describe the respondents’ secondary childcare activities¹. The primary goal of this research was to determine if respondents distinguish between “*looking after*” and “*in your care*” in meaningful ways.

2. STUDY 1 DESIGN

Twenty-two parents² (9 men, 13 women) participated in a mock ATUS interview followed by a

¹ Participants preferred the phrase “*taking care of*.” However, this phrase was not included in testing because it includes a more active component than is intended by the concept of secondary childcare.

retrospective cognitive debriefing. Respondents were recruited through a database maintained by BLS’ Office of Survey Methods Research (OSMR), and through advertisements in local newspapers, flyers, and word-of-mouth. Respondents were paid \$25 for their participation.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Half of the respondents were asked about times during the previous day when they were “*looking after*” children 12-years old or younger. The other half were asked about times when children who are 12-years old or younger were “*in their care*.”

2.1. Mock ATUS Interview

Respondents were tested individually. Prior to the collection of the 24-hour time diary, respondents completed a short employment status screener and the interviewer collected a roster of the names and ages of all children living in the household, as well as any of the respondents’ own children not living in the household. Consistent with ATUS methodology, the time diary and summary questions were administered over the telephone. The time diary began at 4:00 A.M. the previous day and concluded at 4:00 A.M. on the day of testing. The summary question was administered immediately upon completion of the time diary³. Half of the respondents (n=11) were asked, “*During any part of the day yesterday, were you looking after a child who is 12-years old or younger?*” [If yes], “*At which times or during which activities were you looking after a child who is 12-years old or younger?*” The other half of the respondents (n=11) were asked, “*During any part of the day yesterday, was a child who is 12-years old or younger in your care?*” [If yes], “*At which times or during which activities was a child who is 12-years old or younger in your care?*”

² Five other respondents who had self-reported that they regularly provided unpaid care for children also participated in this study. Their data is not included in this report.

³ Lead-In: – “*Now I’d like to talk with you, in a little more detail, about childcare. Childcare certainly includes active things, like feeding or playing with your children. But it also includes things that you could do even while doing something else.*”

2.2 Cognitive Interview

Upon completion of the mock ATUS interview, a face-to-face cognitive interview was conducted to assess the impact of cognitive and linguistic factors on data quality.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Demographic Composition of Experimental Groups

The *looking after* group was comprised of 5 men and 6 women. Five of the 11 respondents in this group were single parents. Seven of the 11 respondents in this group were black. In comparison, the *in your care* group comprised 4 men and 7 women. Of the 11 respondents in this group, 5 were single parents and 5 were black. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of both groups.

Table 1

	Looking After		In Your Care	
	White	Black	White	Black
Married	3	3	6	0
Single	1	4	0	5
Education	16	13.7	17.5	16.8
Male	2	3	2	2
Female	2	4	4	3
Income	\$35.7K	\$26.7K	\$69.1K	\$46.6K

Respondents in the *looking after* group averaged significantly fewer years of education ($M = 14.5$, $sd = 2.0$) than did respondents in the *in your care* group ($M = 17.2$, $sd = 1.9$), $F(1,20) = 9.76$, $p < .01$. Similarly, respondents in the *looking after* group earned significantly less income (median = \$25K) than did respondents in the *in your care* group (median = \$63K), $F(1,20) = 5.46$, $p < .03$.

3.2 Time Diary Statistics

The administration of the time diary instructions, 24-hour diary and childcare summary question took an average of 0:18:02 minutes ($sd = 0:05:45$). The average diary listed 31.5 activities ($sd = 9.6$) and included an average of 4.9 (3.2) primary childcare activities. There were no differences between groups with respect to any measures obtained in the time diary.

3.3 Summary Question Statistics

It is important to note that secondary childcare is, by definition, a simultaneous activity. Therefore, respondents could legitimately report secondary childcare that occurred concurrent with a primary childcare activity (e.g., “*I was looking after my child⁴ while I was reading to her.⁵*”). When primary and secondary childcare occurred simultaneously, the time associated with those activities was attributed solely to primary childcare. Estimates of the amount of time spent in secondary childcare are derived only from secondary childcare activities that were concurrent with non-childcare primary activities (e.g., “*My son was in my care while I was cooking dinner.*”).

Across groups, respondents reported an average of 3:26:00 hours ($sd = 3:36:00$) engaged in secondary childcare activities. This stands in contrast to 2:23:00 hours ($sd = 1:47:00$) engaged in primary childcare activities.

3.4 Differences Between Groups

Analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted with condition (*looking after* vs. *in your care*) as the between-subjects variable. The results indicated that there were no differences between groups with respect to any of the time diary measures. However, groups were significantly different with respect to both the number of activities and hours spent doing secondary childcare. The relevant data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

	Looking After		In Your Care	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
# activities per diary	28.2	5.3	34.2	11.9
# primary childcare	5.1	2.8	8.1	5.0
# secondary childcare	3.9	1.9	10	5.2
time in primary	1:11	1:31	0:47	1:29
time in secondary	1:26	1:01	5:22	4:38

As seen in Table 2, respondents in the *looking after* group reported significantly fewer secondary childcare activities ($F(1, 21) = 13.47$, $p < .01$) which resulted in their spending significantly less time in secondary childcare, as well, ($F(1, 21) = 7.56$, $p < .02$).

⁴ Secondary childcare

⁵ Primary childcare

One possible explanation for this finding is that it reflects respondents' different interpretations of "looking after" and "in your care." During the cognitive interview, respondents reported that "looking after" may be understood literally as meaning "within eye sight." In comparison, "in your care" had a broader conceptualization that connoted responsibility and nurturing, and hence could encompass a broader array of daily activities. This interpretation is supported by respondents' reported preference for the phrase "in your care." Respondents in both groups said that they preferred the phrase "in your care" because it seemed to emphasize nurturing and responsibility whereas "looking after" didn't convey the same sense of parental responsibility. However, because educational level (and income) were confounded with condition, it is impossible to determine whether any one of these variables or their interaction was responsible for the observed differences between groups.

Two additional findings complicate this analysis. Inspection of respondents' time diaries revealed inconsistencies in reporting styles both within and across respondents. First, some respondents reported providing secondary childcare when they, themselves, were asleep. Second, some respondents reported providing childcare when their children were asleep. While both perceptions may be true (e.g., parents who sleeps with baby monitors on beside the bed could legitimately claim that they are caring for their children while sleeping), these inconsistent reporting styles dramatically influenced the estimates. The inclusion of times when a parent was sleeping increased the estimates of secondary childcare by an average 2:47 hours and the inclusion of times when children were sleeping added an average of 1:49 hours for those who reported childcare in that way (Frazis, personal communication).

4. STUDY 2 DESIGN

Study 2 was designed to address the methodological flaws that complicated analysis in Study 1. To address the confound between experimental condition and educational attainment, respondents with less than a college education were recruited for Study 2. To control for inconsistencies in reporting styles, the time period during which secondary childcare could occur was restricted to times when both the parent and at least one child younger than 13-years old were awake. The implementation of this restriction required collecting information about the time the first child got up and the time the last child went to bed the previous day.

In other respects, the study design was the same as Study 1. Based on respondent preferences in Study 1, all respondents in Study 2 were asked about times or activities during which a child who is 12-years old or younger was *in their care*.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Demographic Composition of Group

Eighteen parents (3 men, 15 women) participated in a mock ATUS interview and debriefing. Twelve participants were black and 6 were white. All of the white respondents and 6 of the black respondents were married. Respondents were recruited through OSMR and were paid \$25 for their participation. Their demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3.

Study 2	Mean	SD
Age	36.9	9.3
Education(years)	14.8	2.2
# of children	2.1	1.1
Age youngest child	5.6	3.4

With respect to their level of educational attainment, respondents in Study 2 were not statistically different from the respondents in the *looking after* group in Study 1 and were statistically different from the *in your care* group in Study 1 ($F(1,27) = 12.06, p < .01$).

5.2 Time Diary Statistics

Respondents reported an average of 31.5 activities in their time diaries (sd = 9.6) of which an average of 6 activities were primary childcare (sd = 2). This resulted in an average of 2:10 hours (sd = 1:41) of primary childcare. There were no differences between respondents in Study 2 and either group of respondents in Study 1 with respect to the information obtained in their time diaries.

5.3 Summary Question Statistics

In response to the modified summary question administered in Study 2, respondents reported an average of 12.5 (sd = 5.7) activities during which they were providing secondary childcare. This resulted in an average of 6:10 hours (sd = 4:31) spent providing secondary childcare.

Table 4 presents the estimates of time spent providing childcare obtained in both studies.

Table 4.

	Primary Childcare		Secondary Childcare	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Looking after (study 1)	2:17	1:22	1:26	1:01
In your care (study 1)	2:23	1:57	5:22	4:38
In your care (study 2)	2:10	1:41	6:10	4:31

As seen in Table 4, despite their educational similarity to respondents in the *looking after* group in Study 1, respondents in Study 2 reported significantly more time in secondary childcare activities, $F(1,27) = 11.55, p < .01$. Their reports were comparable to those obtained from respondents with significantly higher levels of education in the *in your care* group in Study 1.

It is important to note that direct comparisons of secondary childcare estimates are complicated by the modifications to the summary question that were implemented in Study 2. Study 2 bounded the time period by the time the first child under the age of 13 got up and the last child under the age of 13 went to bed. These restrictions were not imposed in Study 1. Given that respondents in Study 2 could only report childcare during a portion of the 24-hour recall period, it is somewhat surprising that their estimates were even higher than those obtained from the *in your care* group in Study 1. One possible explanation for this is that more parents of infants participated in Study 2 than in Study 1. The *in your care* group in Study 1 included three parents of children under the age of 4 and only one parent of a one-year old or younger child. In comparison, the participant in Study 2 included 5 parents with children under the age of 4 and 3 parents of children one-year old or younger. While it is impossible to draw conclusions from such a small sample, their data are informative. Parents of infants ($n = 4$) reported an average of 2:32 hours ($SD = 1:56$) of primary childcare and 11:19 hours ($SD = 3:38$) of secondary childcare. In comparison, parents of toddlers and school-age children ($n = 25$) reported an average of 1:28 hours ($SD = 1:40$) of primary childcare and 4:47 hours ($SD = 3:19$) of secondary childcare.

These data, while not conclusive, shed some light on the findings in Study 1. The findings from Study 2 suggest that the expression *in your care* may be more broadly interpreted than *looking after* and

that this broader interpretation is shared across respondents with different levels of educational attainment.

6. DISCUSSION

Although some respondents had difficulty remembering the times their children got up and went to bed, bounding the childcare time period in this manner seems to be worthwhile. In the absence of a clearly defined childcare period in Study 1, respondents varied widely in their perceptions of when their parental responsibilities began and ended. In Study 2, bounding the time period decreased the variability in our time-use estimates.

7. REFERENCES

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8. AUTHOR'S NOTE

The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not constitute policy of the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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A more detailed version of this report has been submitted to Public Opinion Quarterly.