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Upward Shift in Time Spent on Childcare, 1960-2020: Evidence and Explanations

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Abstract

This paper uses harmonized American Time Use data to document changes in time spent on childcare over six decades (1965-2024). We observe two distinct trend breaks in time spent with children. First, there is an increase for both men and women starting in the late 1980s/early 1990s, which persists over time. With the COVID-19 pandemic, there is another stark increase in 2020, with a return to trend for women but not for men. We explore possible determinants for these changes, including generational shifts, concerns about child safety, privatization of youth sports, flexible work options, and rising costs of childcare.

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JEL classification:

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1 Introduction

2 Time Spent on Childcare Literature

Over the past decades, significant social and economic changes have influenced many aspects of childcare, including how much time parents spend with their children, who provides childcare, and what types of activities parents engage in during childcare. Sayer et al. (2004) provides research that is most closely related to our current study. In their analysis, the authors focus on the historical time use survey data from 1960-1998 and document an increase in the total time spent on childcare over that period by both mothers and fathers. Explanations for this level shift include "intensive mothering" and "involved fathering". They cite other researchers that have found that parents report increased concern about child safety as a reason for this increase (Warr and Ellison, 2000). The authors note the following, "For example, the once common practice of unsupervised neighborhood play has been replaced by scheduled play dates, parents driving their children to soccer, Little League, or other activities and then remaining to ferry the children home. As a result, parents today may spend considerably more of their evening and weekend time supervising children as compared to parents in the mid-1960s."

While Sayer et al. (2004) suggested that concerns for child safety likely drove this increase, they also propose other potential explanations. For example, the classic child quantity/quality trade-off suggests that when there is a reduction in total family size over time, parents invest more in their children, including spending more time with each child. Second, the increased prevalence of affordable and reliable birth control measures over this time period has meant that more births are wanted and therefore there is a positive selection effect in parenting. Knoester and Bjork (2025) document continuing increases in participation in private youth sports leagues, which often require high degrees of parental participation to support intense training schedules and frequent travel.

Other research has shown that sudden changes will also impact the provision of childcare. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools did not meet in-person, dramatically increasing the time parents needed to care for their children. Differences in parenting time also followed different patterns depending upon a families socioeconomic class (Fielding-Singh et al., 2024). They found that lower SES mothers relied more on other family members to provide care for children in the face of school closures and the reduction in childcare options. On the other hand, higher SES mothers were often able to take more time off from work, leave the work force, or request more flexible schedules to accommodate the increased childcare requirements during the pandemic.

Data on time use has improved in recent years, resulting in an increase in research examining the quality and quantity of time spent in childcare. A special issue of Review of Economics of the Household (2025) provides a series of articles focusing on these different aspects of childcare. Bigoni et al. (2025) compile a new measure that explicitly measures the total amount of high-quality parent and child interactions. They find that using this novel measure a majority of the time spent with children falls under this category of intense engagement.

In the same volume, Conroy et al. (2025) confirm the findings by others (Ruppanner et al., 2019) that increased availability of childcare options is related to higher total earnings

for mothers. They emphasize the importance of local childcare markets on mother's earnings and how this may drive regional differences in earnings.

Escobar Carías et al. (2025) find that there are strong gender differences in preferences for childcare by parents. The authors find that mothers require less compensation to stay at home and care for children than fathers; this difference is about 8 percent of the women's median wage. Other researchers have documented that childcare is not necessarily more meaningful for mothers than for fathers (Roeters and Gracia, 2016). In this study, mothers report childcare to be more stressful than for fathers.

Research has also shown that childcare is provided on an educational gradient as well. There is a strong positive correlation with parental education and time spent with children (Guryan et al., 2008; Kalil et al., 2025). LaBriola and Schneider (2021) look at three measures to assess whether and how class-based differences contribute to on-going gaps in parental time spent with children. The authors examine family structure, assortative mating, and specialization by partners in childcare delivery. Accounting for these three different dimensions shows that educational gaps increase for childcare focused on child development.

In this project, we bring these threads of research together. Using detailed time use data, we document both long-term and sudden changes in the provision of childcare. We will additionally explore potential mechanisms for these changes, including cost and accessibility of daycare and other childcare options, changes in the socioeconomic status of parents, and increased remote work options.

3 Data Set Description and Empirical Methodology

3.1 Data

The American Time Use Survey (ATUS) is an annual, nationally representative 24-hour time diary survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau on a subsample of respondents who completed the Current Population Survey Flood et al. (2025). Through IPUMS, researchers can access harmonized microdata that include detailed activity records showing what respondents did throughout the day. The data also includes extensive demographic and socioeconomic variables from the Current Population Survey. The ATUS started in 2003 and has continued annually since.

The American Heritage Time Use Study (AHTUS) provides a harmonized collection of U.S. time diary surveys from a range of sources, beginning in the mid-1960s Fisher et al. (2018). Through IPUMS, users can construct extracts that include standardized activity codes and demographic information. The harmonized structure enables consistent comparisons of time use patterns across historical survey waves.

Our analysis focuses primarily on two-parent households to assess the distribution of childcare activities by gender. Additional analyses of single-parent households are utilized to help discern changes in the gendered division of labor from underlying trends in childcare activities.

3.2 Dependent variables

We use three main outcome variables in this analysis, that measure different aspects of childcare. First, we examine the proportion of people who spent time on childcare as a primary activity. This measure captures the extensive margin of childcare, measuring what proportion of people are engaging with childcare at all. Both the heritage datasets and the modern ATUS, spanning 1960 to present day, have a similar measure of childcare when it is listed as a primary activity.

Second, we calculate the average number of minutes spent on childcare as a primary activity among those who spend any time on childcare. This measure captures the intensive margin of childcare. As with our first measure, both the heritage datasets and the modern ATUS, spanning 1960 to present day, have a similar measure of childcare when it is listed as a primary activity, meaning that this measure is comparable across decades.

Finally, we analyze the average number of minutes spent on childcare, whether reporting it as a primary or secondary activity, among those who perform any childcare. In the modern data, respondents are able to list a primary activity and a secondary activity that occurs simultaneously, like childcare. This measure is more inclusive to the total time spent on childcare, capturing the reality for many parents that childcare is frequently occurring at the same time as other activities. This measure is only available in 2003 and later years. This combined measure of childcare as primary or secondary activity is frequently used in analyses of childcare Heggeness et al. (2025).

3.3 Explanatory variables

We include key explanatory variables in our analysis to explore reasons changes in childcare over time. Consistent data availability is a challenge with analyzing the mechanisms of such a long-term change.

3.4 Empirical Methodology

4 Results

4.1 Proportion of People Spending Time on Childcare, 1960-2020

In Figure 1, we show the proportion of people living with a child under 18 and a spouse (heritage data) or spouse/partner (modern data) who report doing any childcare as a primary activity. There appears to be an increase over time that is especially noticeable in the late 1990s and it persists at a constant amount into the 2000s.[1]

[1] In Appendix Figure A1 we show the proportion who report providing any childcare at all for unmarried women as their primary activity.

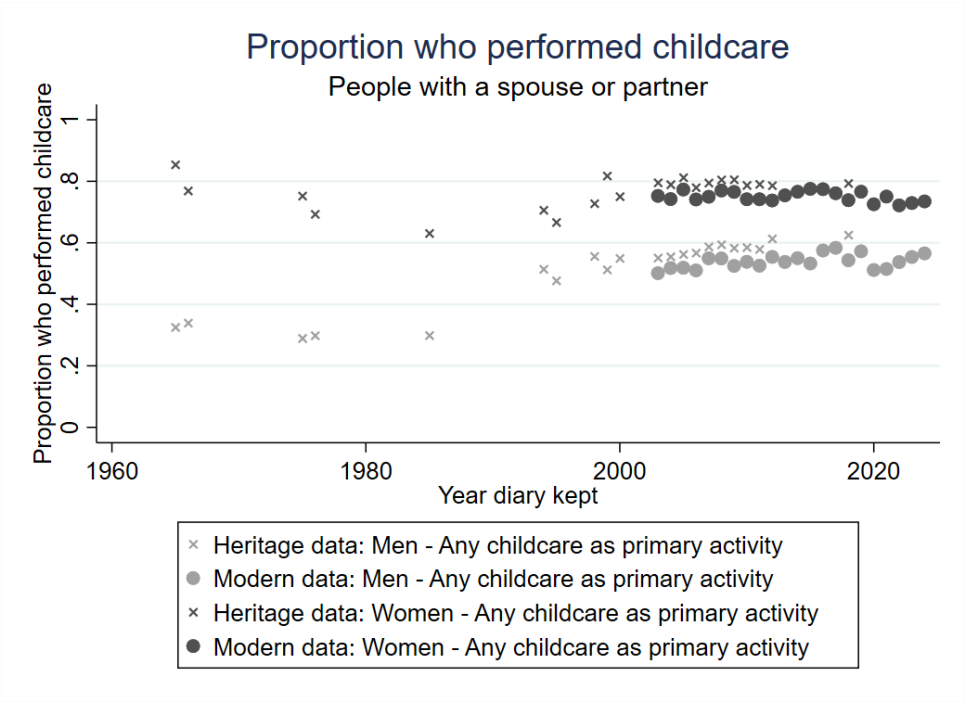


Figure 1: The proportion of people who spent on time on childcare as a primary activity during the diary day. This figure includes people who are married (heritage data) or living with their spouse or partner (modern data), are between the ages of 18 and 65, and have an own child under 18 in their home.

In Figure 2 below, we show the spline regressions for men and women in the family and the likelihood that they provide any time on childcare for married people with children in the home. For women, there appears to be a downward shift between 1960-1990; it is not clear if this is due to the increase in women's labor force participation or the result of just a few observations in total. Nevertheless, there's a clear increase in the decade of the 1990s onward so that there is a level amount of almost 80 percent of all women provide some amount of childcare. For men, however, there does appear to be a change in the proportion providing childcare on average over time. For the first few decades in the data the proportion is pretty constant at about 35 percent of males offering child care, then there is an increase by the late 1990s to 50 percent where it holds steady and increases to slightly higher than 60 percent in subsequent decades.

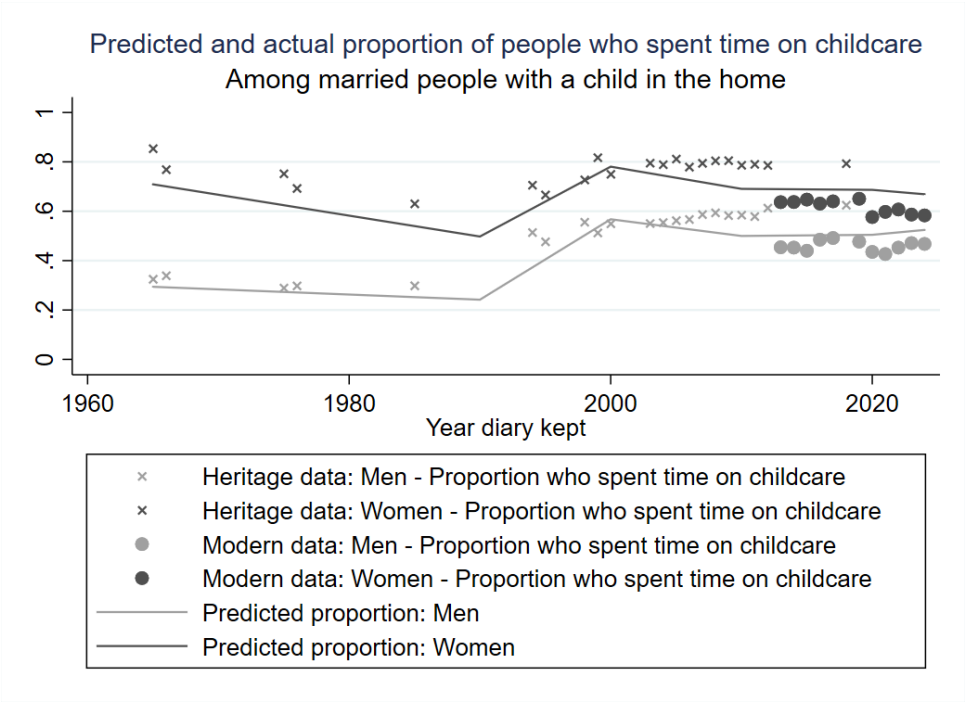


Figure 2: Using spline regressions to estimate changes over time in the proportion of people who spent on time on childcare or spent any time with children during the diary day. This figure includes people who are married, are between the ages of 18 and 65, and have an own child under 18 in their home. These regressions use data from the Heritage IPUMS Time Use. Control variables include employment status, age, and number of children under 18; these are evaluated at their means for the predicted values.

4.2 Average Time in Minutes Spent on Childcare, 1960-2020

In Figure 3 below, we provide the average minutes per day spent on childcare for both men and women where the families indicated a spouse or partner in the home. While the historical data is are more limited, there is some indication that there is an upward trend in minutes spent by both men and women over the six decades examined. In Appendix Figure A2, we provide the average minutes per day for women without a spouse present in the family over the same time period. Here, we see a similar pattern, suggesting a shift in overall norms/expectations related to parenting, rather than solely a phenomenon of men becoming more engaged in childcare.

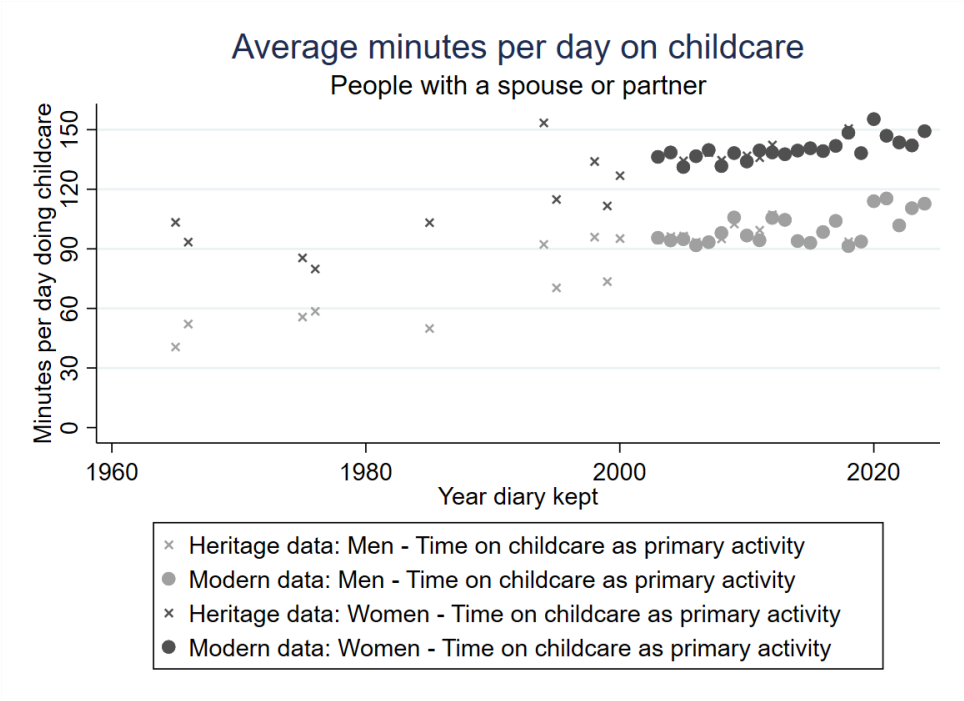


Figure 3: The average number of minutes spent on childcare during the diary day among those who did any childcare that day. This figure includes people who are married (heritage data) or living with their spouse or partner (modern data), are between the ages of 18 and 65, and have an own child under 18 in their home.

In Figure 4 we provide spline regressions for different years. There appears to be an upward shift in the average minutes spent on childcare in the decade of the 1990s where it remains at a permanently higher amount. Over the 1960-1990 period, there was a relatively flat amount on average time spent on childcare at around 50 minutes for men and slightly increasing amounts for women ranging from 60 minutes to almost 100 minutes. When combined with Figure 2, we see that men's childcare activities increased on both the extensive and intensive margins, more consistent with a societal shift than a gradual change.

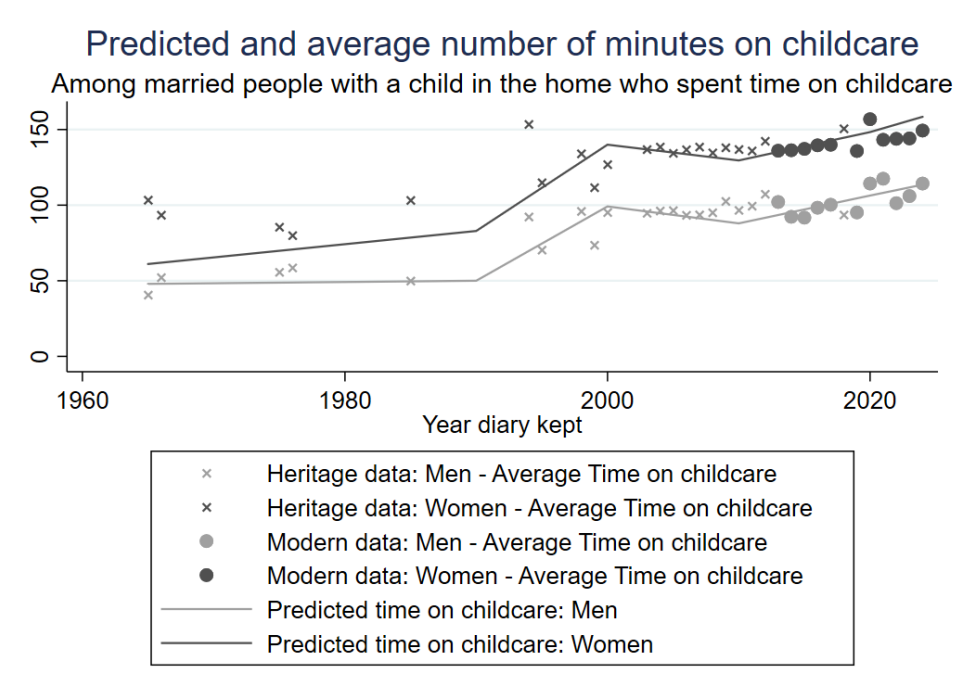


Figure 4: Using spline regressions to estimate changes over time in the average number of minutes spent on childcare among those who did any childcare and the average number of minutes spent with children present among those who spent any time with children during the diary day. This figure includes people who are married, are between the ages of 18 and 65, and have an own child under 18 in their home. These regressions use data from the Heritage IPUMS Time Use. Control variables include employment status, age, and number of children under 18; these are evaluated at their means for the predicted values.

4.3 Estimating Year Fixed Effects in Time Spent on Childcare (Primary or Secondary Activities) for 2003-2024

In Figure 5 we provide the year fixed-effect for the modern ATUS data for the years 2004-2024 (with 2003 serving as the omitted year). We have shown earlier that there was a level shift upward in the historical data for providing any childcare and average number of minutes involved in childcare between 1985 and the mid-1990s for both women and men in Figure 1 and Figure 3. In this modern data, we calculate the time spent on childcare whether it is the primary or secondary activity (secondary time-use categories were not collected in the earlier data). In this analysis, we see a pronounced increase in the amount of time spent on childcare most clearly in the COVID-19 era.

In Figure 5 we show a dramatic increase in total minutes spent on childcare (whether it is primary or secondary) over two decades. There is a large average increase in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and a reduction in subsequent years. However, on average the total minutes spent on childcare are persistently greater than prior childcare averages. This suggests that there may be a new equilibrium in place for men in childcare in the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

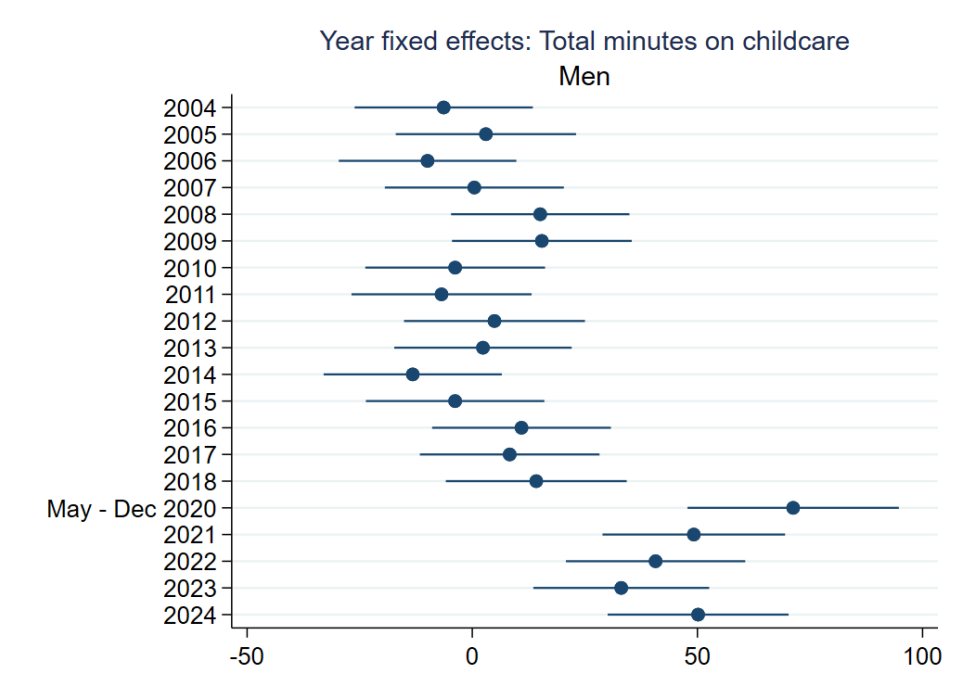


Figure 5: Coefficients on the year fixed effects when regressing the total amount of time spent on childcare (as either the primary or secondary activity) on year fixed effects, employment status, education, age, marital status, age of the youngest child, number of children, citizenship status, state fixed effects, and race/ethnicity. Sample includes men who are between 18 and 65, live with an own child under 18, live with a spouse or partner, and who performed any childcare on the diary day. 2019 and January - March 2020 are the omitted groups. The ATUS was paused from mid-March to mid-May 2020 because of COVID.

In Figure 6, the year fixed-effects show that for women, there was a dramatic increase in time spent on childcare in the first and second years of the COVID 19 pandemic. The total minutes, however, decreased back down to a long-run average in 2022; perhaps due to the return to school for most children in the household by then. In contrast, the change in time allocation for men's childcare has persisted. This is true even controlling for the adult caregiver's age, which suggests that it cannot be solely explained by generational differences in parenting styles.

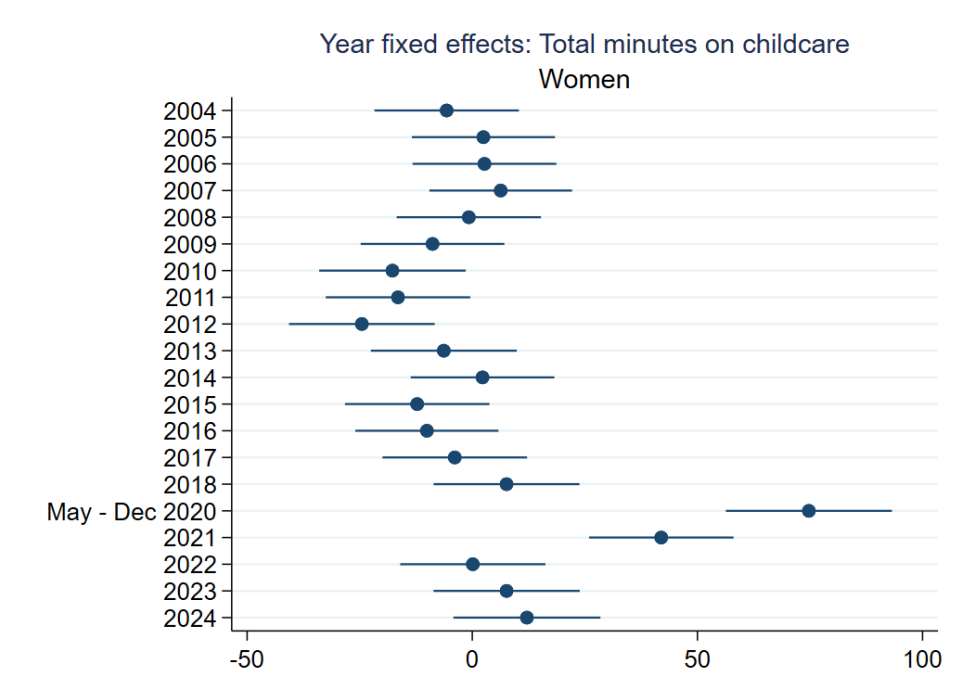


Figure 6: Coefficients on the year fixed effects when regressing the total amount of time spent on childcare (as either the primary or secondary activity) on year fixed effects, employment status, education, age, marital status, age of the youngest child, number of children, citizenship status, state fixed effects, and race/ethnicity. Sample includes women who are between 18 and 65, live with an own child under 18, live with a spouse or partner, and who performed any childcare on the diary day. 2019 and January - March 2020 are the omitted groups. The ATUS was paused from mid-March to mid-May 2020 because of COVID.

5 Discussion

In this section, we will work on identifying some potential factors that explain the upward shift in time spent on childcare. The first will be the cost of childcare. We will also examine differences across different social economic status households.

6 Conclusion

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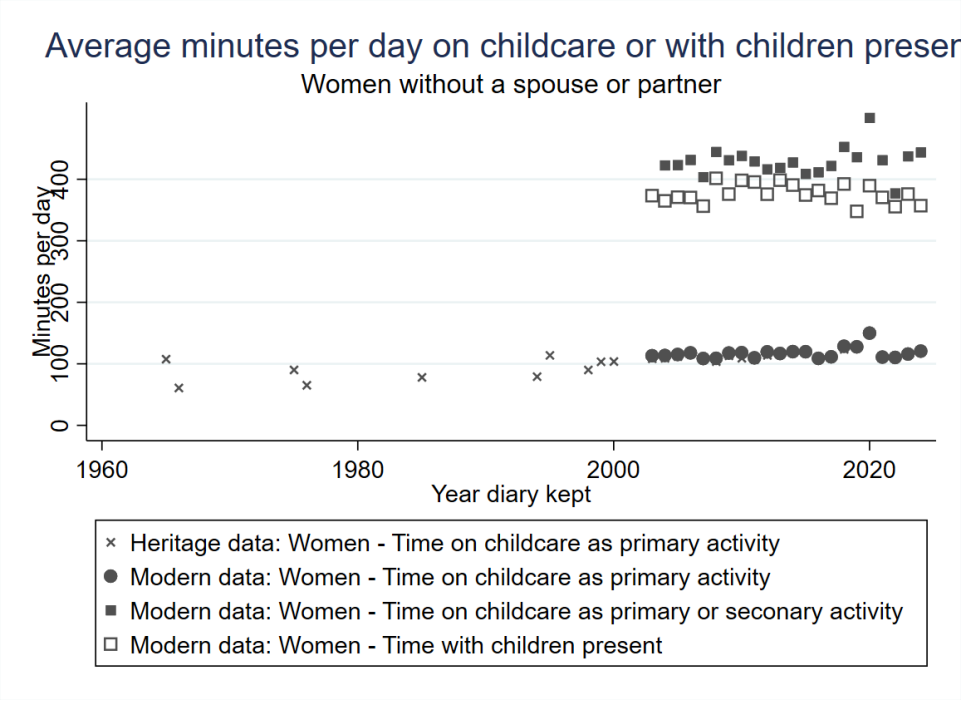
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A Appendix Tables



In Appendix Figure A1 we show the proportion who report providing any childcare at all for unmarried women as their primary activity. As with those living with a spouse or partner, the proportion of single women performing any childcare increased over time, with an especially noticeable increase in the late 1990s and it persists at a constant amount into the 2000s before declining slightly.

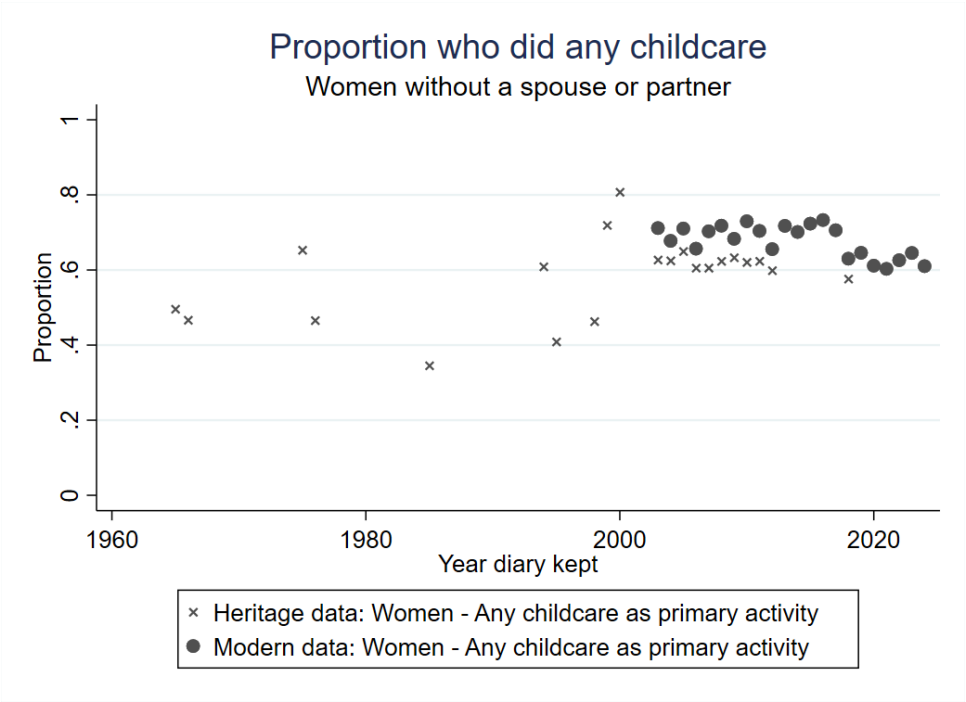


Figure A1: The proportion of unmarried women who did any childcare during the diary day. This figure includes women who are not married (heritage data) or not living with their spouse or partner (modern data), are between the ages of 18 and 65, and have an own child under 18 in their home.

In Appendix Figure A2, we provide the average minutes per day for women without a spouse present in the family over the same time period. There is an upward trend for this data as well.

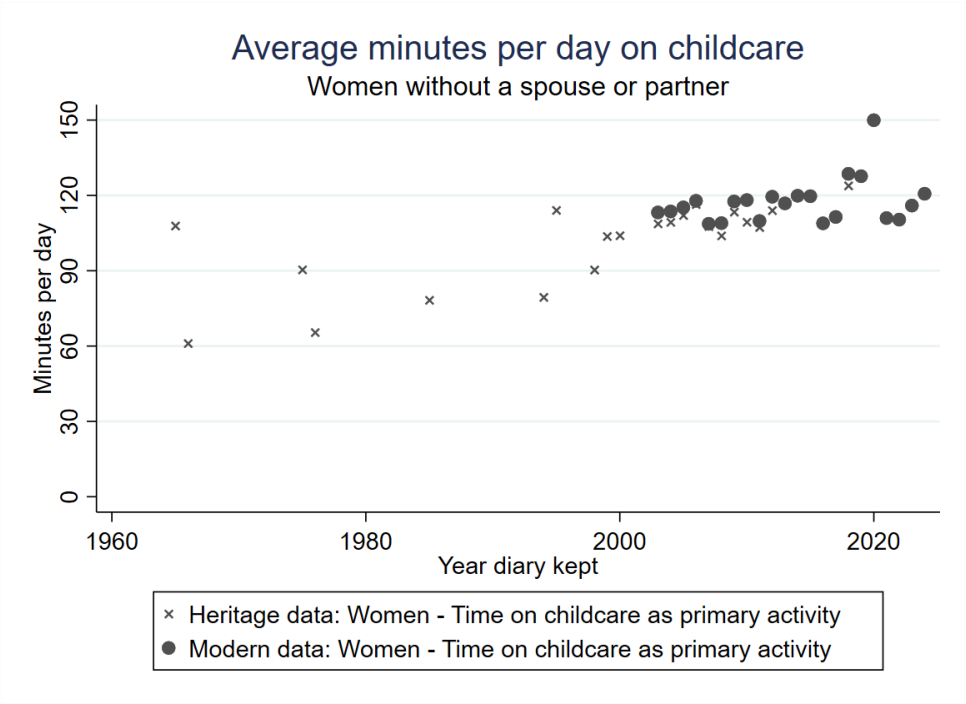


Figure A2: The average number of minutes on childcare during the diary day among unmarried women who did any childcare that day. This figure includes women who are not married (heritage data) or not living with their spouse or partner (modern data), are between the ages of 18 and 65, and have an own child under 18 in their home.