

Seven reasons we should care about caregivers

April 5 2023, by Bev Betkowski



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Having a full-time job is challenging enough for most people—but add in a friend or relative who depends on you for their care, and the workload becomes much heavier and more complex.

That's the daily reality for 5.2 million Canadians who find themselves juggling paid employment while helping loved ones who, for various health reasons, need extra help in their daily lives. Yet the plight of unpaid caregivers is often invisible to employers, [policy makers](#) and the public, and that's a concern, says University of Alberta researcher Janet Fast.

"This needs to be understood as a serious challenge for [family caregivers](#) and as a legitimate policy issue," says Fast, a professor in the Department of Human Ecology in the Faculty of Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences who studies the economics of aging, and family/friend caregiving.

The vast majority of care, 75 to 90%, is and has always been done by family and friends, Fast notes, and those day-in, day-out responsibilities go "over and above" what people would normally do, taking a toll on their health, their [social life](#) and their finances, she adds.

"If that care disappears we will all face challenges in meeting the needs of everyone. We don't have anywhere close to the infrastructure to provide that amount of care through formal services."

To raise awareness of the situation, researchers are analyzing the most recent data from Statistics Canada's [General Social Survey on Caregiving and Care Receiving](#), using a subsample of 4,940 working people aged 19 to 70 who were also providing unpaid care to family and friends.

The work is generating [infographics](#) co-created by the U of A's Research on Aging, Policies and Practice and its research partners, Caregivers Alberta, the Vanier Institute of the Family and the Canadian Center for Caregiving Excellence.

The analyses will support Caregivers Alberta's development of a work and care educational and outreach program for caregivers and their employers, with the ultimate hope of improving the situation, says graduate research assistant Andrew Magnaye, who worked on the [survey data](#) along with Fast, U of A social gerontologist Jacquie Eales and Choong Kim, also a graduate research assistant.

"We want to help inform employers so they understand what their employees are going through and it gives them more awareness on how to better support them," says Magnaye.

The work also helps acknowledge what unpaid caregivers live every day, he adds.

"We hope that caregivers can see themselves in the data and research, so they feel like their experience is being spotlighted and so they don't feel like they are doing this in the dark."

Based on the analyses and in recognition of National Caregiver Day, here are seven things you need to know about unpaid caregivers who also hold down jobs.

One in four Canadians of working age is a caregiver

As of 2018, an estimated [5.2 million working people](#) aged 19 to 70 were family caregivers, just over half of them women. Most—74% of women and 88% of men—worked full time, 30 or more hours a week. On top of their paid jobs, women spent almost four hours more per week on caregiving, at 13.8 hours, than men, at 10 hours.

"What that tells us is that family caregiving will challenge every one of us at some point, whether as a [caregiver](#) or a care receiver," Fast notes. It also points to a need for more robust workplace policies to give

caregivers accommodations, adds Eales. While EI caregiving benefits are available in critical injury and illness or end-of-life circumstances, "they're not adequate for meeting the ongoing needs of many caregivers," she notes.

Caregivers may also be unaware of available benefits or be reluctant to tell their bosses about their situations, she adds. "They are worried for their jobs."

Most working caregivers are older

Almost one in three employed caregivers was aged 50 to 59, followed by 22% aged 40 to 49.

"This shows that the vast majority of caregivers are of employment age, making caregiving a current workplace issue, and one that will become more pressing in the future as the demographics of the workforce and the population change," Eales notes.

With the fastest-growing age segment in the workforce falling between 55 and 75, "employers should be concerned, because that is their biggest talent pool, the middle managers and the long-term workers who are mentoring people within the organization. These are much more difficult positions to fill if somebody leaves the workforce in their 50s to meet caregiving duties."

One in five employed caregivers has low income

Twenty percent of caregivers made less than \$20,000 per year before taxes, with another 23% making under \$40,000 a year. As well, more female than male caregivers made less than \$60,000 annually, with the average personal income (before taxes) for women sitting at \$51,000,

versus \$72,000 for men.

This suggests that unpaid caregiving affects future financial health along with other worrisome side-effects, says Fast.

"Because of the financial, health and social implications of taking on care earlier in life or throughout the life course, those people are going to be the sick, lonely, and poor seniors of tomorrow. They aren't going to be able to save adequately for their own retirement, they're going to be reliant on public pensions and they are going to require more resources from the health-care system."

Caregiving hurts job security and productivity, especially for women

Women accounted for almost [60% of the 214,000 workers](#) who left the paid labor force in 2018 because of their caregiving responsibilities. They were also more likely to work fewer hours for pay so they could balance their responsibilities between their paid job and their unpaid caregiving, and they missed more days of paid work than their male counterparts. One in two employed caregivers missed partial or full days of work because of caregiving.

The data reflect a gender divide, with women more likely to be caregivers—and suffering employment consequences, says Fast. "That carries into their retirement income as well."

More caregiving means less work-life balance

Employed caregivers who provide more hours of care are [at risk for poor work-life balance](#), the U of A analysis showed.

Those who provided more than 20 hours of care per week were almost twice as likely to have poor work-life balance and 1.7 times more likely to have to reduce their hours of paid work. They were also twice as likely to have to leave their jobs entirely, compared with people providing fewer than 10 hours of caregiving per week.

That work-life imbalance affects "every aspect" of caregivers' well-being, says Eales.

"It's a ripple effect that can have [a cumulative impact and last for decades](#)," she says, adding that [support](#) offered by Caregivers Alberta may help people develop coping strategies.

Cancer and mental health issues increase the burden

Caring for people with cancer and mental health and addiction issues takes a higher toll on care providers than looking after people with aging-related issues (excluding cognitive conditions).

Compared to caregivers looking after loved ones with age-related issues, those caring for people with cancer are 2.5 times more likely to have to reduce their paid work hours, while those caring for someone with mental health and addiction issues are almost twice as likely to have poor work-life balance.

"We think it has to do with the intensity of end-of-life care involved with cancer, and the uncertainty of providing care to someone with mental health and addiction issues," when care requirements are likely less predictable and harder to maneuver around job responsibilities, says Eales.

Such situations point to the importance of flexible work arrangements, says Fast.

"There aren't easy solutions. They are going to be different for various industries and different employers and for different types of employees. But it means policy makers and employers need to be more flexible about how they try to solve problems."

Unpaid caregiving doesn't stop—even in residential care

The analyses also showed that people caring for someone in assisted living or residential care facilities were almost twice as likely to reduce their work hours than those looking after someone living in the same household.

That holds true even when contributing factors like age and hours of care are held constant, and "contradicts a common belief" that unpaid [caregiving](#) responsibilities end with the aid of formal care, Kim notes.

That's possibly due to the high and complex needs of people living in care facilities, Fast suggests.

"People in long-term care are older, sicker and more likely to have advanced dementias, so the need is probably much greater than for care receivers living in the community."

Unpaid caregivers continue to support their loved ones in care facilities in various ways, she adds.

Instead of preparing a meal or bathing a loved one at home, they're now showing up at the facility at mealtimes to help that person eat or taking them to medical appointments.

"It's never been the case that family members have stepped away when

someone is placed in long-term care; they just do other things."

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Seven reasons we should care about caregivers (2023, April 5) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-04-caregivers.html>

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