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Mothers of kids with autism earning much less than fathers, study finds



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Janet McLaughlin, an associate professor of health studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, and her son

Sebastian. | Provided Photo



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Mothers of children with autism are earning far less than their male spouses due to a lack of flexible employment and wraparound services, according to a new study out of Wilfrid Laurier University.

"The statistics speak for themselves — it's far more than just an anecdotal experience, it's a very, very common and prevalent experience," said Janet McLaughlin, lead researcher and an associate professor of health studies at Wilfrid Laurier University.

The study — "A labour of love: Consequences of caregiving for an autistic child on mothers' employment, financial status, and well-being" — surveyed 902 mothers of children with autism aged 17 or younger and found that they earned, on average, just 66 cents per cent of what their male spouses earned.

This, said McLaughlin, is "significantly less" than the national gap within the broader workforce. According to a recent StatCan [post](#), women aged 25-54 earned 89 cents for every dollar men earned in 2025.

"We realized that women, on average, are giving up their employment or being fired or working part-time in order to care for their children," she told *The Trillium* on Tuesday.

"Women talked about the different demands that led them to this, and they talked about the grief and frustration they felt in losing their careers or changing their careers — there were teachers, there were nurses, there were all sorts of professionals who had trained and wanted to work and couldn't," McLaughlin said.

The reason for this, she said, was twofold — "inflexible employment" and a "lack of wraparound services."

This included employers that wouldn't or couldn't provide the women with accommodations so they could also manage other demands, McLaughlin said. Families also experienced challenges with finding child care that could accommodate their child's needs, getting calls from school to pick up their child or facing exclusions from school and long wait-lists for autism services.

"Parents are waiting a long time for therapy, they're waiting a long time for respite, and then when they finally get those services, they're often insufficient," she said.

McLaughlin said they found the resulting impacts on mothers' lives were huge.

"Women (were) reporting depression, anxiety, poor sleep, just elevated stress, a feeling of frustration, a feeling of guilt ... just tremendous impacts on their overall well-being," she said, adding that the lower incomes also created more strain on the household.

McLaughlin and her co-authors, Margaret Schneider and Vanessa Fong, recommended that employers offer more "flexible, hybrid and remote work arrangements," adjust workloads, enable parents to leave if their child's school calls for a pick-up and provide benefits and programs for mental health support.

In terms of services, they called for more funded child-care centres and before- and after-school programs that could accommodate children with complex needs, "adequately funded" schools that could support children without relying on parents to pick them up, well-funded respite programs so there aren't long waits and timely access to services through the Ontario Autism Program.

McLaughlin said once families get off the wait-list for respite services, the funding is "often still inadequate."

She said, for example, that she needs to have someone be with her 14-year-old son with autism any time he's not in school or in her care "to keep him safe and to manage issues that might arise for him."

McLaughlin said the idea for the study came from an "organic place." When her son was first diagnosed, she felt "overwhelmed" and didn't think she could keep teaching full-time, she said.

"It just I just felt like I couldn't manage all of the responsibilities of work and child care, and I ended up being able to receive an accommodation from Laurier to teach remotely and to develop online courses, which enabled me to keep my job," she said, adding that she started wondering if other parents were having similar experiences.

A previous study she worked on that found women were more likely to work fewer hours than they desired due to increased caregiving demands led the research team to look into the income disparity between spouses as part of the recent study.

"When we have nurses and teachers and other professionals who could be contributing to society not being able to do those jobs, that doesn't make economic sense," said McLaughlin. "So investing in child care and care for people with disabilities is a wise financial investment if it could be viewed in that way."

In response to questions about the study's findings, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) touted this year's \$779 million in funding for the Ontario Autism Program, saying the program has served tens of thousands of kids through different service streams.

"Every child deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive. That is why the Ontario government created a world-leading, family centered Ontario Autism Program. We listened to people with lived experiences, families, and experts and built a new program for the community, by the community," the ministry stated.

MCCSS also said it has also put more than \$635 million various programs for children with special needs, \$90 million for the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program and up to \$26.7 million over three years for around two dozen programs providing training opportunities for low-income women.

"Recognizing that caregivers may face socioeconomic barriers, the program provides wraparound supports, such as childcare or transportation to support program participation and completion," the ministry said.

Education Minister Paul Calandra's office did not provide a response before publication.