

Families and Work in Canada

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Families in Canada are diverse, complex and dynamic.



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Modern families in Canada are performing a number of balancing acts, as family members reconcile their work and caregiving responsibilities with family aspirations. On the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family, the Vanier Institute reflects on how families are managing change and complexity with the help of workplace supports.

The International Year of the Family was observed for the first time by the United Nations General Assembly in 1994 to inspire people to recognize and support families, which were described as “the basic unit of society” warranting special attention.¹ This acknowledgement helped people around the world to promote equality with a better understanding of the importance of families as well as the diversity in their forms and functions.

Families in Canada are diverse, complex and dynamic. Social, economic, environmental and cultural forces shape the contexts in which families live and work. What families look like continues to evolve,

but time hasn’t changed what families in Canada *do*. Families provide support in part through paid labour, with family members managing multiple responsibilities at home, at work and in the community. Public initiatives are in place to support families, including maternity, parental, paternity, adoption and caregiving leaves and benefits, as well as nurturing-related job legislation and seniority protection legislation. These supports have adapted over the years to help prevent friction between work and family life, responding to the ever-evolving face of families in Canada. Examining the relationship between work and family life can help enhance our understanding of families in Canada today.

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Families in Canada are increasingly diverse

Today there are more than 9.4 million families in Canada, and these families are increasingly diverse. Although two-thirds of these families include a married couple, common-law couples are on the rise, now accounting for 17% of all census families in Canada and 32% in the province of Quebec.² Most children are raised by their biological parent(s), but there are currently more than 30,000 children being raised by their grandparents. Nearly 30,000 are being raised by foster families and there are more than 460,000 blended families in Canada. In addition, approximately one in five Canadians is either adopted, has an adopted sibling or family member, or is an adoptive parent, birth parent or birth relative.³ Same-sex marriage was legalized across the country in 2005, contributing further to the diversity of families in Canada.

The nature of life transitions continues to change, with certain milestones occurring later in life than in previous decades. The average age at first marriage for women was 29.1 in 2008 (up from 26.3 years in 1994),⁴ and the average age of mothers at the birth of their first child was 28.5 in 2011 (up from 26.2 in 1994).⁵ The average age of first-time mothers is increasing, many of whom have decided to establish careers before having children. The number of first-time mothers aged 40–44 increased by 155% between 1994 and 2011.⁶

There has also been change in how families are managing life transitions. Although family size is shrinking and women are therefore taking fewer maternity/parental leaves, men are increasingly likely to report taking paternity/parental leave (11%), especially in Quebec (84%), in part because two-thirds of first-time grandparents are in the paid labour force and unavailable to provide extended postpartum care for new mothers and to help provide infant care.⁷

Families are reconciling work and family aspirations

The labour force and working patterns have also been continuously evolving, with more family members participating in the paid labour force. For example, the proportion of families in Canada with two earners has been rising steadily over the past 40 years. In 1976, dual earners accounted for approximately one-third of couples with dependent children – this increased to three-quarters by 2008.⁸ In 2012, employed Canadians spent an average of 36.6 hours per week at work (39.6 hours for men and 33.2 hours for women).⁹ However, managing work–family responsibilities, obligations and commitments is more challenging as the rate of working long hours rises. Researchers Duxbury and Higgins found that 68% of men and 54% of women in their study worked more than 45 hours per week, up from 55% and 39%, respectively, in 2001.¹⁰



Living longer and working longer add complications to families providing care to ill, injured and palliative family members.

The labour force participation of Canadian women aged 20–64 who were married or living common-law has increased, rising from 47% in 1976 to 76% by 2009.¹¹ As a result, like elsewhere in the world, many women in Canada are delaying having children while they develop their careers. Career development often includes acquiring post-secondary qualifications, and Canada is a highly educated nation. In 2011, 51% of its adult population held a tertiary qualification (56% of women and 46% of men).¹²

Not only are more family members participating in the paid labour force, but many are also bringing work *home* with them at the end of the day. More than half of the participants in the Duxbury and Higgins study reported that they take work home with them, putting in an average of seven extra hours a week from home. Nearly two-thirds spent more than an hour a day catching up on emails and one-third spent more than an hour emailing on their days off.¹³ Despite the long hours and multiple roles, 15% of the Canadian workforce in 2011 said they put family ahead of work – up from 5% in 1991.

As families adapt by working more to meet their needs, many employers are responding to this modern reality by providing more flexibility to facilitate work-life harmony. In the Duxbury and Higgins study, 69% of respondents reported having high (27%) and moderate

9.4 million Number of families in Canada in 2011

47% & 76% Proportion of married women or women living in common-law relationships in Canada who participated in the labour market in 1976 and 2009, respectively

68% & 54% Proportion of surveyed men and women in Canada, respectively, who worked more than 45 hours per week (up from 55% and 39% in 2001)

56% Proportion of surveyed Canadians who say they expect to work past age 65 (27% full-time, 29% part-time)

25% & 80% Proportion of recent fathers in Canada (all provinces) and Quebec, respectively, who took parental leave in 2012

69% Proportion of surveyed Canadians who report having high (27%) and moderate (42%) flexibility with respect to work hours and location



All provinces combined, 25.4% of recent fathers took parental leave in 2012, up from 3% in 2000.

(42%) flexibility with respect to work hours and work location.¹⁴

Most family members are expecting to remain in the paid labour force longer than their predecessors. According to the polling firm Ipsos, while 28% of Canadians expect to be fully retired and not working for pay at age 66, twice as many (56%) are expected to work past the traditional retirement age (27% full-time, 29% part-time).¹⁵ Baby boomers were in their 40s during the International Year of the Family in 1994 – today they are in their 60s, the traditional time for retirement. Statistics Canada reports that 12.6% of the senior population was in the labour force in 2012, a figure that had almost doubled in the previous 10 years.¹⁶ This trend has transformed the Canadian workforce and the nature of retirement in Canada.

Families are managing work and caregiving responsibilities

Living longer and working longer add complications to families providing care to ill, injured and palliative family members. In 2012, about 8.1 million individuals, or 28% of Canadians aged 15 years and older, provided care to a family member or friend with a long-term health condition, disability or aging need. Six in 10 caregivers in Canada were also managing their care responsibilities with paid work (81% of caregivers with children).¹⁷ Women represent the slight majority of caregivers at 54%, and caregiving responsibilities most often fall to those aged 45–64 (with 44% of caregivers in this age category).¹⁸

Ailing parents were the most common recipients of care, with 39% of caregivers looking after the needs of their own parents and another 9% doing so for their parents-in-law. The least common were spouses, at 8%, and children, at 5%. Caregivers of spouses and children devoted the most time to helping activities. Spousal caregivers typically spent 14 hours a week on some form of care, while caregivers of children (including adult children) spent 10 hours a week.¹⁹

Despite the fact that Canada has one of the largest economies in the world and one of the most stable banking systems, families feel global economic forces at home. In March 2014, the unemployment rate among Canadians aged 15–24 was 13.6%, compared to 5.7% for workers aged 25–54 and 6% for workers 55 and older.²⁰ Many Canadians react to economic uncertainty by building on their education and/or adjusting their living arrangements. Approximately 2 million Canadians attend college or university, many of whom graduate with debt. With jobs being harder to find than before the 2008 recession, 42.3% of young adults aged 20–29 years are living with their parent(s) – a significant increase from 30 years ago. Of those, almost one-quarter had left the household at some point in the past and then returned home.²¹

For families with children, managing child care and work responsibilities is always a significant part of their lives. While there is still no national child care policy and there are only regulated child care spaces for 20.5% of Canada's children aged 0–12,²² Canada has a long history of providing maternity benefits. Outside of Quebec, maternity leave is available to mothers for up

to 17 weeks, and parental leave is available to be split between mothers and fathers for up to 35 weeks. Federal maternity and parental benefits are available to parents who are eligible for employment insurance. Payments are equal to 55% of the parent's prior earnings up to a maximum of \$45,900 as of 2012. Low-income families are also eligible for an additional Employment Insurance Family Supplement.²³

As part of its comprehensive family policy, Quebec mothers are eligible for maternity benefits for 70% of prior earnings up to a maximum of 18 weeks under the Basic Plan (under the Special Plan, they can receive 75% of their earnings for 15 weeks). Fathers in Quebec can receive paternity benefits amounting to 70% of their prior earnings for five weeks under the Basic Plan or 75% of their prior earnings for three weeks. Quebec has also maintained a child care program since 1997 in which parents can spend \$7 per day to receive licensed child care (which can cost over \$50 a day elsewhere in Canada).²⁴

All provinces combined, 25.4% of recent fathers took parental leave in 2012, up from 3% in 2000. However, since the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan was introduced in 2006, the number of fathers who claimed or intended to claim parental benefits has tripled, from 27.8% in 2005 to 80.1% in 2012.²⁵ Since 2004, families in Canada who leave work to care for a terminally ill family member also have access to a Compassionate Care Benefit, paid at the same rate as maternity and parental leave.

Families in Canada are constantly evolving, as is the labour market through which many provide support. It's a two-way street of constant adaptation: family members adjust their labour market participation to meet their needs while workplaces adapt their policies and supports in reaction to change. While there is still much work to be done to address the needs of seasonal, low-wage, contract, late-career and low-skilled workers and those in remote, high-risk and 24/7 work environments, progress is being made and will continue in the years to come. ◀

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