



L'Institut Vanier de la famille

VANIER

The Vanier Institute of the Family

FAMILIES COUNT

2024

Preface

The Vanier Institute of the Family is pleased to present *Families Count 2024*. Drawing on the latest statistics and research, this publication informs readers about how families in Canada have changed (and not changed) over the past few decades. *Families Count 2024* is organized into four main sections based on the components of the Vanier Institute's [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#): Family Structure, Family Work, Family Identity, and Family Wellbeing.

This year marks the [30th anniversary of the United Nations International Year of the Family](#). Throughout the year, the Vanier Institute is working with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) to recognize and articulate its global agenda to support family wellbeing in societies around the world. The Vanier Institute published the first edition of *Families Count* in 1994 to provide a foundation for the discussions and debates of that year. This year's 30th anniversary provides an opportunity to re-engage in these important conversations, which we support with new information and research.

The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) has also provided momentum and focus for *Families Count 2024*. In 2015, Canada joined 192 member states in adopting this framework for action at the United Nations General Assembly. Many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the heart of this agenda are closely intertwined with family wellbeing, addressing issues such as poverty, hunger, inequalities, and education. At the halfway point between Canada's adoption of the framework and its end date of 2030, timely and accurate information on families can help inform actions that will drive progress toward the goals.

Families Count 2024 presents data and findings in a way that is accessible to a wide range of audiences. The goals of this publication are to enhance the national understanding of families; to stimulate conversations among policymakers, educators, researchers, and journalists; and to strengthen the evidence base to facilitate the development of policies, programs, and services to enhance the wellbeing of all families in Canada.

Norah Keating, Board Chair

Margo Hilbrecht, Executive Director



Introduction

Norah Keating, Board Chair

Nathan Battams, Knowledge Mobilization Specialist

We all know families. We experience them variously as safe havens or sources of trauma; with members close to home or separated by vast distances; and who may be chosen, inherited, or left behind. We also know families through various representations of “ideal” family types that have emphasized some while marginalizing others. We talk about how families have changed, with some highlighting and celebrating the evolution that has taken place over generations, while others lament and think back to an idealized past when things were “simpler.”

Since 1965, the Vanier Institute of the Family has been addressing these issues through its work with organizations that support families, scholars who create knowledge about families, and governments charged with creating policies that reflect these understandings. Yet, while we all know families in our own ways, our understandings are diverse and changing, often making sound policy and program solutions frustratingly elusive. Families may be the “basic unit of society,”¹ but mapping all the boundaries and interactions of families is a challenging undertaking.

Families Count 2024 is released during the 30th anniversary of the United Nations International Year of the Family (IYF+30). This publication is set within evolving perspectives on families that influence what knowledge is created and which policies are developed. We trace these perspectives as a backdrop to our rationale for the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#)² that guides this publication.^a

Evolving perspectives on families

In the next section, we highlight influential family theories and beliefs over the Vanier Institute’s 60-year history.³ We emphasize two: family structure and the “ideal” family, and family function and the universal core contributions of families to society.

Family structure was a dominant family perspective in the early years of the Vanier Institute. In Canada, we see its roots in post-World War II policies that aimed to provide a stable environment for families to thrive. Policy goals at the time were to provide employment for men returning from

^a *Families Count 2024* follows previous editions published in 1994 (*Profiling Canada’s Families*), 2000 (*Profiling Canada’s Families II*), 2004 (*Profiling Canada’s Families III*), and 2010 (*Families Count: Profiling Canada’s Families IV*).



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overseas, to increase the birth rate, and to encourage women to leave the labour force and become full-time homemakers. The “ideal” family structure was a household of a married couple and their children, with a male breadwinner and female homemaker. This became known as the “Standard North American Family” (SNAF),⁴ a lens through which beliefs about ideal families were framed. The influence of this lens is evident from the naming of this mid-20th century family to laments about its decline and the labelling of those who did not reflect this ideal as “deficit families.”^{5, 6} Households became interchangeable with families for national data collection in Canada.

By the early 2000s, diverse family forms in Canada were more widely recognized in legislation and policy. The Ontario Law Commission noted that the “traditional” family is only one of a variety of family types, although other family forms “such as those formed by gays, lesbians and bisexuals are sometimes not recognized as families; while adoptive and foster family relationships are considered less valuable than other family forms.”⁷ Legislation at the time reflected this expanding view. A landmark change came with the passage of Bill C-38 which defined (civil) marriage as “the lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others,” thus extending marriage to same-sex couples.⁸ The family status of people in common-law relationships is less clear. A recent review of common-law relationships shows that the

provinces and territories in Canada differ in the extent to which they approach marriage in terms of rights and obligations.⁹

Boundaries around how children are counted as family members have also expanded. For the first time, in the 2006 Census, foster children were named as “other relatives” and therefore part of Census economic families.¹⁰ Those in the process of adopting a foster child are now eligible for parental benefits.¹¹ We continue to address issues of family membership as families in Canada change and evolve.

A second family perspective gained international prominence with the launch of the United Nations International Year of the Family in 1994. The declaration of a UN year signalled the global importance of families, which were described as the basic unit of society. The main principle of the declaration was that families have a common set of responsibilities that they are expected to assume. UN member states were encouraged to develop programs to help families meet these responsibilities. States were not to provide substitutes.¹

The UN Declaration reflected the thinking of many family scholars and organizations at the time. The Vanier Institute’s definition of the family, first published in 1992, is one example. It is “a functional definition ... that focuses on relationships and roles—what families do, not what they look like.”¹² The list of what families should do is familiar: provide food and shelter, nurture family



members, care for them when they are sick.^{3, 13, 14} These family functions have been broadly categorized as social reproduction, including providing food and shelter, and nurturing household members¹⁵ and providing care work.¹⁶

For at least 50 years, feminist scholars have raised awareness of social reproduction by challenging its taken-for-granted nature, arguing that everyday tasks are indeed work and that this work contributes to society. In fact, Statistics Canada has been calculating the value of unpaid household work since the 1990s.¹⁷ Despite such longstanding evidence of its economic value to society, reproductive¹⁷ labour remains largely the responsibility of families, especially women. In contrast, parental leave programs have been important policy levers that have helped women manage their reproductive work while participating in the labour force.⁹

Like social reproduction, the responsibility for caring for young children and for family members with chronic illnesses has largely been a family responsibility. Yet, care for young children is increasingly seen as a pressing national issue in the context of cycles of economic precarity, pandemics, childcare deserts,¹⁸ and fragmented childcare systems.¹⁹ National childcare programs have been proposed as a way to provide substantial support to families.²⁰

The role of families in caring for older persons has been placed on the global agenda with the proclamation of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing

(2021–2030). It signals a shift toward greater public responsibility for care, and calls on countries to establish long-term care systems.²¹ However, evidence from the recent global pandemic highlights the challenges for Canada in achieving this goal. Despite shortages of facilities, staff, and funding for nursing homes and home care,²² public programs to support family caregivers are mostly temporary and modest in scope.^{23, 24} We continue to address issues of family versus government responsibility, and to evaluate them as views on their economic and social value evolve.

A framework for Families Count 2024

Theories are social constructions based on research, practice, and creative thinking. They are expected to change.

Bengston et al., 2005³, p. xv

The change reflected throughout this publication is the updating of our approach to understanding families. The [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#)² builds on earlier thinking about families. It places diversity firmly at the centre. Looking at families through the lens of **Family Structure** allows us to see how members are connected and how these patterns change over time. Through this lens, we can assess the extent to which we continue to see the “traditional family” form of the mid-20th century. **Family Work** draws attention to how families distribute their responsibilities for social



reproduction and paid work. This lens is particularly relevant for understanding the extent to which the division of labour in families continues to be gendered. We have added a third lens, **Family Identity**. We believe it is timely to add this lens given our conversations in Canada about how family identity can be exclusionary.²⁵ Family wellbeing is the outcome. If we are to build a society that is inclusive of all families, we need a barometer of our progress.

The goals of this publication are:

- to enhance understanding of the diversity of families in Canada today;
- to stimulate and inform conversations among policymakers, educators, and researchers; and
- to strengthen the evidence base to promote the development of policies, programs, and services that support family wellbeing.

Structure of the book

Families Count 2024 is organized into four main sections based on the components of the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#). Each section has several chapters that provide concise, plain-language overviews of relevant topics or trends accompanied by clear, accessible charts and tables using data from Statistics Canada and other statistical sources.

Family Structure examines the different ways people come together to form and grow families, patterns and trends in

marriage and other intimate relationships, relationships across generations, and family living arrangements. **Family Work** examines the distribution of paid and unpaid work in families, including unpaid household work and care work, the interfaces between paid and unpaid work, and remote work. **Family Identity** includes explorations of families based on citizenship status, Indigenous status, sexual orientation, race, and religion, which are often linked to historical and/or contemporary exclusion. Finally, **Family Wellbeing** considers material, relational, and subjective outcomes for diverse families: poverty, food and housing insecurity, satisfaction with family time and relationships, and work-life balance. Each section begins with an introduction that provides a more detailed summary of the chapters and their relevance to the family lens it addresses.

Data sources

While family lenses influence the way we see families, data allow us to measure what we see. The importance of good data is highlighted in the announcement of IYF 30th anniversary activities. The United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UNDESA) encouraged Member States to:

improve the collection and use of data, disaggregated by age, sex and other relevant criteria, for the formulation and evaluation of family-oriented policies and programmes to effectively respond to the challenges faced by families...^{26, p. 5}



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Most of the data used in the charts, tables, and analyses in *Families Count 2024* are sourced primarily from national datasets developed by Statistics Canada. The primary data source is the 2021 Census of Population.²⁷ Data from earlier census years are used to highlight trends over time, focusing on 1991 to 2021 (with earlier references where appropriate). This period was chosen to approximate the period from the International Year of the Family in 1994 to its 30th anniversary in 2024.

Other Statistics Canada surveys used in this publication include various cycles of the General Social Survey (GSS), selected Vital Statistics databases, the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey (EICS), and the Canadian Social Survey (CSS).

Surveys from other organizations cited in *Families Count 2024* include the Canadian

Institute for Health Information (CIHI), the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), and public opinion surveys from Ipsos and Abacus Data.

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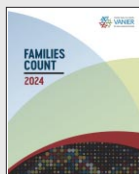
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Families Count 2024 is a publication of the Vanier Institute of the Family that provides accurate and timely information on families and family life in Canada. Written in plain language, it features chapters on diverse topics and trends that have shaped families in Canada. Its four sections (Family Structure, Family Work, Family Identity, and Family Wellbeing) are guided by the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#).

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