
January 24, 2000

Search for Balance Leads to Patchwork

Ottawa – Governments in Canada are struggling to find the right balance of policies to address the needs of families and children. The different approaches being taken by six provincial governments and the federal government are analyzed in *Comparative Family Policy: Six Provincial Stories*, a study for the Canadian Policy Research Networks by Jane Jenson, with the assistance of Sherry Thompson.

This study for CPRN's Family Network is a high-resolution snapshot on the topics of income security, balancing work and family, and developmental programs aimed at the early years. It provides a comprehensive record of where British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and the federal government stand on policies for children at the dawn of the 21st century.

The study shows that governments across Canada frequently shifted policies in similar directions as they were dealing with deficits in recent years. They often moved from universal programs, accessible to all citizens, to programs targetted at particular groups, and from service delivery to tax credits or other new income transfers. The changed role of the federal government, signalled dramatically by the end of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) and the invention of the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) in 1995 means that variety is growing as all jurisdictions experiment in their own way. For example, Quebec has implemented a five-dollar-a-day universal child care service. New Brunswick, Quebec and Saskatchewan are moving towards a mix of services and income support, while others, such as Ontario, put less emphasis on services and more on income.

"Families see a lot of conflicting messages, and the turbulent environment is a puzzle to anyone watching the evolution of policy in the 1990s," says Judith Maxwell, president of CPRN. "This study shows experimentation as each province tries to find a new balance between income support and providing services." In the past, Maxwell says, the federal government provided leadership in these areas, then it withdrew during the fight against the deficit. "Now we see a patchwork of policies across Canada."

Each province has been innovative in different ways. Nonetheless, Jenson shows that the real needs of two groups are not getting the attention they should be. The first are middle-income parents in dual-earner families, who are being squeezed by the system. "The issue of balancing work and family was a domain of stunning silence in five of the six provincial studies," says Jenson. "With the announcement about extending parental leave made in the last Throne Speech, the federal government has begun to take up this issue, but many matters remain to be clarified and more could be done by the provincial governments."

The second group whose needs are not being met are school-aged children. Schools are being pressed to concentrate on "the basics" and cut out the "frills" of special needs education. After-school and holiday child care services are thin on the ground and not well designed for older children. If their problems have not been "solved" by the time they start school, there is very little provided for them until they graduate into adolescence, confronting school failure, delinquency and teen pregnancy.

Comparative Family Policy: Six Provincial Stories is one of a series of studies prepared by CPRN's Family Network in a three-year project to study the best policy mix for Canada's children. "This study makes an important contribution to the knowledge we have about policies that have an impact on children's lives, and breaks ground in the application of two research techniques," Maxwell says. First, it provides unique comparative data that show who is doing what in various policy areas across the country, which has not been clearly set out before. Second, it tracks the history of relevant policies and key dates to provide a sense of the differences in thinking between parts of the country over time.

Jenson says this study demonstrates that there is no single solution, and that a mix of policies addressing income and services for families is required. The Family Network's three-year project has produced nine in-depth studies that support this theme. The final report, *What Is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children?*, will be released in the next few weeks.

The other papers in the series are:

- Comparative Family Policy: Eight Countries' Stories
- An International Comparison of Policies and Outcomes for Young Children
- Values and Preferences for the 'Best Policy Mix' for Canadian Children
- Building Better Outcomes for Canada's Children
- Outcomes for Young Children in Canada: Are There Provincial Differences?
- Tax Fairness for One-Earner and Two-Earner Families: An Examination of the Issues
- Moving Forward on Child and Family Policy: Governance and Accountability Issues

The primary source of funding was a group of Canadian foundations, with additional support from three provinces and two federal agencies.

CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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