
Family Caregiving and Consequences for Carers: Toward a Policy Research Agenda

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The collective effect of demographic, social, economic and policy trends has made family caregiving a policy issue of utmost importance in Canada. The nature of these trends is relatively well-understood. Families are smaller, more diverse, more complex, and less stable. Further, the gendered division of labour within families is being supplanted by 'double duty' lives, typified by simultaneous participation in paid and unpaid work for both men and women. At the same time, population aging, new patterns of chronic illness and disability, and increased survival after catastrophic illness and injury, are changing the landscape of care needs.

Health and continuing care policy reform is shifting responsibility for care from formal to informal carers. Changes in the income security system are reducing the ability of care receivers and care providers to absorb the financial burden that often accompanies the need for care. Conversely, policies and programs intended to defray these costs are evolving. Public and private workplace policies that may mitigate the impact of care responsibilities on carers' employment also are evolving.

Somewhat less is known about the effects these trends will have on family caregivers. Social trends appear destined to stretch the capacity of family members to care for those in need. Population health trends likely mean greater demand for care, higher expectations about the level of care, and more variability in the nature of care demands. Policy trends, too, are probably increasing the demand for family care, but their effect on families' caring capacity, and on caregivers' lives, is unclear. The research agenda that will best inform policy decision making as it relates to family caregiving will:

- Address questions about the nature of caregiving transactions and the extent to which policies affect, or are affected by, caregiving transactions
- Address questions about the effects of changing family environments on informal caregivers' capacity and willingness to provide care, and the extent to which policies mediate the effects of these changes
- Address questions about the effect of the changing health environment on care needs, the availability of care, and the extent to which policies mediate these effects

- Address questions about the way in which changes in the policy environment affect the distribution of responsibility for care between the formal and informal care sectors, and the consequences this distribution has for caregivers and care receivers
- Bring together diverse and isolated literatures, each dealing with different aspects of family caregiving
- Be multi-disciplinary
- Be responsive to rapid changes in family, health and policy environments
- Employ gender-based analysis, and
- Employ a full range of conceptual and empirical tools.

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