
May 14, 1999

Canadian Families have a Social Bottom Line, new Study shows

Ottawa – Canadian families have a social bottom line, says a new study released today by Canadian Policy Research Networks. Labour Market Changes and Family Transactions reports that all families try to balance economic and social goals in an effort to achieve their social bottom line. The study also shows that temporary or contract work can lead to a high degree of vulnerability for the whole family.

Canadian Policy Research Networks interviewed all members over the age of five in 25 families that were living in Surrey, British Columbia in 1996 to find out how they balance the demands of work and home life. This in-depth, qualitative study probes the manner in which families adapt to labour market changes from the point of view of the family unit. It goes beyond the limited information of employment or non-employment statistics by looking at the reasons that underlie the choices that individuals and families make with respect to labour force attachment.

Both lone-parent and two-parent families participated in the study. Some participants had stable employment, some had lost jobs and found new ones, and still others were unemployed for various lengths of time.

The type of job plays an important role in the ability of these families to function well. Families where the breadwinners were working at part-time or contract positions with low pay and little long-term security felt vulnerable to crisis and change. These families usually had difficulties coping with everyday pressures.

Achieving the "social bottom line" sometimes means choosing not to enter the labour market in the short term. Families who decided to either pursue more training or take more time to find a job reported they were coping better, even though their income was often lower as a result of their dependence on income support. Several of the adult caregivers in these families continued to remain actively focussed on the goal of becoming employed in the near future by undertaking job training, continuing their education, or planning their own home business.

Those families where at least one adult worked in standard, full-time employment were more likely to be doing well both financially and in terms of their overall health and well-being.

Joseph Michalski is a research associate with Canadian Policy Research Networks and co-author of the study with Mary-Jean Wason. According to Michalski, "We learned that achieving values-based objectives such as quality child care often drives the economic decisions families make. Recognizing that families have a social bottom line means that even the decision to participate in the paid labour force may be partly contingent on the resources and informal support networks available to families."

The researchers also defined the characteristics that make families either resilient or vulnerable in the face of daily struggles. In terms of the internal dynamics of families, the study found that stronger families agree on household roles and are able to turn to a support network of family, friends or others in the community. The study underlines the importance of child care, flexible work arrangements, external support, life skills counselling and more secure employment in helping Canadian families to cope.

Judith Maxwell, President of Canadian Policy Research Networks, says that this study has national implications: "We are only beginning to examine the impact of the changing labour market on the economic stability, physical well-being, and mental health of families and children. Future policy discussions have to account for the dynamics within the family if employers and governments are going to be successful in buffering the tension between families and their work in this post-industrial era," says Mrs. Maxwell.

This in-depth study is part of a larger research program which documents the ways families are coping with the consequences of government spending cuts and devolution.

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