
Backgrounder

The Assets of Canadian Families, 1997: A National Survey of Clients Accessing Family Service Agencies

Joseph Michalski

Family Service Canada has a network of 120 agencies across Canada, many of which have extensive first-hand experience with individuals and families who present with a range of issues. These agencies provide services to thousands of clients and their families each week. While some families continue to struggle, many cope successfully and even thrive despite the most difficult of circumstances. Those who seek support and advice not only bring a set of issues but typically have an array of different "assets" or "strengths" that may ultimately serve as the building blocks for solutions to the apparent problems at hand. Thus the basic dilemma of how to intervene with troubled clients and their families can be reframed accordingly: How are families coping with the various challenges and stressors of daily living? Why are some coping more successfully than others? What are the types of resources to which some individuals and families have access that enhance their capacity to cope? What strengths and assets do they possess?

Methodological Overview

Family Service Canada, with the research assistance of the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN), conducted a snapshot study of clients accessing the services of family service agencies during one week in May 1997. The broad purpose of the study was to develop a profile of clients accessing family service agencies, including insights into their family functioning and assets or resources that might be relevant in the context of planning interventions. More specifically, the Assets of Canadian Families research study was designed to meet four main objectives:

1. To provide a snapshot of the demographic characteristics of clients who receive services from family agencies across Canada;
2. To provide new information on the positive aspects of how individuals and families function;
3. To provide a baseline for future surveys; and
4. To encourage agencies to focus on clients' family strengths and the assets of family, friends, and the community.

To achieve these objectives, the study investigators requested the help of Family Service Canada's network of member agencies who provide direct services to clients. A total of 25 agencies actively participated by administering questionnaires to their clients during the week of May 12-17, 1997. The agencies administered five instruments, two of which were completed by the service provider (a demographic instrument and an assets inventory). The clients themselves completed the other three instruments – which were available in English, French, and Spanish – including an assets inventory, a family functioning scale, and a family resiliency and dynamics scale.

Client Sample Characteristics

The survey provided a rich description of 1,445 participating clients, with some interesting differences when compared to the Canadian population as a whole. The sample included proportionately more individuals from Ontario and the Prairies, while Quebec was under-represented. The client sample was more urban than the general population of Canada, with more younger and middle-aged adults, and twice as many women. The average household size was 2.68 individuals per household. More than one-fourth of the clients in the sample were adults who lived alone on a regular basis at the time of the survey.

Clients were more likely to be divorced or separated than individuals within the general Canadian population. Married couples with children, lone-parent females, and single adult females were more likely to access family service agencies, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all contacts during the study week in May 1997. The ethnicity and immigration data were often incomplete, though the sample appeared to be primarily of Canadian, British, French or of other European heritage. Some 5.7 percent had some Aboriginal heritage and 9.0 percent had other ethnic heritages.

In terms of education, employment, and income, there were some interesting findings in comparing these characteristics with the Canadian population in general. Clients were more likely to be high school graduates and hold university degrees, but less likely to have obtained a post-secondary certificate or diploma. They were less likely to be employed full time and much more likely to be unemployed than the population. Clients' household incomes were well below the Canadian average for family incomes (\$55,247 in 1995), as the average income reported fell within the \$20,000 to \$29,999 income range. One-third of the respondents indicated that they had received social assistance within the last six months and three-fourths of those recipients were women.

Service providers identified a total of 5,909 presenting issues for 1,430 clients, or 4.13 presenting issues per client on average. Three-fourths of the clients presented one or more issues listed under the category of "family relationships and parenting," while health and/or disability issues affected 44.7 percent of the sample, and 38.5 percent presented issues related to violence or abuse.

Presenting Issues and Services Provided

The most common presenting issue was that of "couple relationship," which affected three in eight clients. Other common issues included depression, parent-child problems, parenting issues, problems with social contacts, and separation and divorce. The female clients presented on a range of issues more often than males, including the various family relationships and parenting issues, health and disability, and violence and abuse issues. In contrast, males were more likely to present on issues of substance abuse. Clients who were classified as "poor" on the basis of family income presented on a variety of issues more frequently than their "non-poor" counterparts.

The services rendered were similar regardless of presenting issues, with counselling the most common service. Nearly 90 percent of couples, adults living alone, and "non-poor" families received counselling as a primary service. About two-thirds of those with health or disability problems or basic needs problems received counselling as well. Family life education, family advocacy, and homemaker services were more commonly provided for those families with children in comparison with couples or adults living without children in their homes. Support groups were most often provided for lone parents, followed by couples with children and then adults living alone.

Most of the contacts occurred in agency offices, though younger clients were somewhat more likely to meet outside of the agencies. The dominant payment methods included subsidized (non-EAP), sliding fee scales, free services and Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), which cumulatively accounted for nearly four-fifths of the payments offered by clients.

Clients' Assessments of Assets

The study results indicated that most clients were indeed connected to a wide variety of assets or resources, including family, friends, and professional services. Clients were asked to identify their personal assets that they had used during the two years prior to the study. The vast majority reported using a combination of resources or relationships to deal with their problems, including friends, counsellors, physicians, relatives, parents, and/or spouses.

In general, friends were the most frequently used assets as 91.6 percent of clients who responded identified that particular resource. Despite the heavy reliance upon family members and other intimates as measured by usage, these were not the resources typically deemed most helpful by the clients. In terms of the helpfulness of different assets, the professionals were generally ranked "very helpful" by most who had accessed them in the last two years. A broad range of other supportive programs and services typically were ranked as "very helpful" by at least half of those who had accessed them, including in-home support workers, non-profits or charities, child or senior care, emergency shelters, preschool programs, and mutual support groups. The only other category to be considered "very helpful" by at least half of the client sample was friends.

While the rankings were similar between men and women, the female clients accessed a broader cross-section of assets and were more likely to rate these as "very helpful." Men tended to find their spouses more helpful than women. Indeed, for women, spouses were on the 10 least helpful list. Regardless of family type, employment or income status, a clear majority within each group of clients drew upon friends, counsellors, relatives, parents, and doctors as assets within the last two years.

There were differences, however, in terms of which particular assets individuals within each category considered "most helpful." In general, mental health professionals, non-profit organizations, in-home support workers, child or senior care, emergency shelters, women's groups, mutual support groups, and 12-step programs were frequently ranked among the top ten "most helpful" assets.

The main sources of support for child care, household tasks, and employment or educational support came from informal sources, such as parents, spouses, relatives, and friends. The clients turned to others more often for emotional support compared to any other issue, which included an extensive array of both informal and formal networks of support.

Service Providers' Knowledge of Client Assets

The service providers identified a core group of assets that included counsellors, friends, parents, relatives, spouses, and doctors. Beyond these assets, the service providers typically expressed a rather narrow view of other assets that might be available to their clients. Non-profit and charitable organizations and the clients' children were the only other assets believed to have been accessed by more than one-third of the clients in the past two years. In contrast, more than one-third of the clients themselves identified a total of 28 different assets that they had accessed.

In terms of the relative helpfulness of different relationships and resources, service providers appeared to have an understanding somewhat similar to that of their clients in the aggregate. In total, 9 of the 10 assets identified as "very helpful" by the service providers appeared on the clients' lists as well. Similar percentages of both groups ranked in-home support, child or senior care, non-profit or charities, mutual support groups, and women's organizations as "very helpful." The service providers, however, tended to underestimate the helpfulness of counsellors, emergency shelters, and preschool programs by roughly 10 to 15 percent.

An analysis of each service provider's views of the helpfulness of each asset of individual clients revealed only modest levels of agreement for most of the assets considered. The broadest areas of agreement between clients and service providers tended to revolve around several categories of relatives, agencies and government services, with some examples of friends and other professionals, groups, and associations displaying a greater degree of shared understanding. The more specific areas of more widespread agreement between clients and service providers included in-home support workers, 12-step groups, government housing, community charities, child or senior care, emergency shelters, stepchildren, spiritual leaders, lawyers, pets, spouse's or partner's parents, and pre-school programs.

Family Functioning and Family Dynamics

The clients completed two additional scales to assess aspects of family functioning and family dynamics in general: General Functioning Subscale of the McMaster Family Assessment Device (Part III: Family Functioning) and an original measure developed by CPRN known as the Family Dynamics and Resiliency Scale. Both of these scales displayed high levels of reliability.

Compared to the general population norms, a much larger percentage of these clients accessing family service agencies for supportive counselling scored in the dysfunctional range. Several demographic variables were then examined to determine whether or not there were specific correlates of family functioning. There were no statistically significant differences identified for many of these factors, including gender, income, social assistance status, and age. On the other hand, three factors were correlated weakly with family functioning: family type, employment status, and education. More specifically, adults who reported living alone, those who were unemployed, and those with lower levels of education tended to score higher on the scale (indicating higher levels of family dysfunction) than the comparison groups.

The Family Dynamics and Resiliency Scale (FDRS) proved to be highly reliable as well, with lower scores indicating a healthier response or "positive coping strategy" in terms of the family's capacity to handle stress. While there were no population data available with which to compare FDRS results, the measure correlated strongly with the Family Assessment Device. Some of the variables were not correlated with the measure of family dynamics and resiliency, including income, social assistance status, and age. Gender was weakly associated with FDRS scores, such

that female clients tended to score slightly higher than their male counterparts, indicating a somewhat more negative evaluation of their family dynamics. The more significant differences were associated with family type, labour force status, and education.

In particular, adults living alone scored significantly higher on the FDRS (29.8) than the other three family types identified. Those clients who were unemployed scored more than 2 points higher than clients who were employed and nearly 2 points above those not in the labour force. Finally, a significant difference emerged in comparing those with a high school education or less with those who had a professional or post-graduate degree. To some extent, these various correlates suggest that living with others, being employed or not in the labour force, and more education are "protective" factors even among those families seeking professional assistance at family service agencies. Indeed, the small number of clients who were living alone, unemployed, and who had a high school education or less were clearly the most vulnerable group, with an FDRS score of 33.6. No other combination of demographic factors produced comparable results.

Policy Implications and Future Research

The final sections of each chapter and the concluding chapter of the study discuss the policy implications of these results primarily from a service planning and delivery perspective. For example, a general conclusion that can be reached involves the distribution of clients who participated in the study and, by extension, who tend to access family service agencies across the country. The evidence points to a preponderance in the study sample of adult female clients, while children, men, seniors, visible minorities, and newcomers were under-represented in comparison with the general Canadian population. One implication suggests that family service agencies with a mandate to service the general population need to engage in more formal outreach activities, especially in the area of community needs assessments, and attempt to be as inclusive as possible in providing access to services.

There are at least three main conclusions that can be drawn from the survey results that pertain to the issue of service planning and delivery in the context of informal support networks. First, the evidence revealed that presenting problems consisted not only of family relationships and parenting issues, but involved a diverse array of other issues pertaining to health and disability, violence and abuse, basic needs, and work or school. Second, most clients indeed had access to or had recently turned to informal support networks consisting of friends, parents, children, family members, even as they cited as well a tendency to use health-related professionals (counsellors, physicians) or institutions (hospitals and clinics) to assist in coping with their problems.

Finally, the importance of certain types of professional supports cannot be underestimated for these individuals and families, many of whom were in acute crisis situations and seeking direct counselling support. Indeed, the evidence suggests widespread support for a variety of professional and quasi-professional assets, including mental health specialists, in-home support workers, non-profit or charitable organizations, child or senior care, emergency shelters, preschool programs, mutual support groups, women's programs and organizations, and 12-step groups (among others).

These are the resources that the majority of the clients found most helpful – and yet, at the same time, many of the agencies that provide such services have experienced fiscal cutbacks, staff reductions, and other constraints that have reduced their capacity to deliver these services. The steady erosion of public support and funding for specific services has meant that some groups, such as lower-income households, are likely to continue to be at greater risk for negative social and economic outcomes even as the access and availability of supportive community services decline.

Informal support networks were certainly important as the "first line of defense" for most of those included in the client sample. Clients who were lacking in these assets were more isolated and perhaps more at risk than those who had ample supports to turn to in times of need. There may yet continue to be areas wherein family service agencies could help to promote further usage of informal supports or be catalysts in promoting neighbourhood networks of support or self-help groups. In particular, innovative strategies can be pursued by way of hiring more community development workers rather than maintaining a more narrow clinical or one-on-one focus with clients in agency settings.

The evidence appears to suggest that, apart from some basic demographic information evaluations of clients' assets, service providers need to engage in a more concerted effort to broaden and monitor the effectiveness of different interventions. Counselling remains the dominant intervention provided, regardless of presenting problem. Yet little information exists to suggest that such an intervention yields more positive results than other possible interventions, or that specific problems tend to be addressed more effectively through other types of interventions. Moreover, the current study in no way could assess the long-term impacts of various interventions. These are issues that need to be considered in the context of future research directions in particular.

In conclusion, the study confirms that the vast majority of individuals and families who turn to family service agencies tend to evaluate the services provided by professionals as "very helpful." Those who access these services clearly express high levels of satisfaction. Furthermore, a growing body of outcomes-based research points to the positive impacts that supportive services can have, particularly in regard to responding to the needs of "at-risk" families, in helping to reduce domestic violence or in providing essential resources to cope with violence, in helping children adapt to and cope effectively with separation and divorce, and for a range of other issues. While the evidence from the study seems to suggest that people tend to draw upon their informal support networks and assets before seeking more formal supports, any further erosion of public supports for family services may increase the risks for a great many families. The low-income families in the current study were especially likely to seek supportive services for a much broader range of problems than their wealthier counterparts. Thus any further reductions in funding or staffing will likely have the most direct negative impact on these families and may further marginalize those groups already struggling the most for social and economic survival in Canadian society.

(April 29, 1999)