



Quebec, Daycare, and Household Strategies of Couples with Young Children

About the Brief

This research brief is based on [Glenn Stalker](#) and Michael Ornstein, "Quebec, Daycare, and the Household Strategies of Couples with Young Children", Canadian Public Policy 39.2, 2013. The brief was prepared by Carmina Ravanera.



Target Audience

- ◆ Researchers
- ◆ Policy Makers
- ◆ Graduate Students

Summary

In 1997, Quebec adopted a policy providing universal pre-school daycare for five dollars per day. Comparing Quebec to the rest of Canada, we use 1996, 2001, and 2006 Canadian census data to determine the impact of this policy on couples' strategies for combining employment and child care. We find that, in addition to increasing mothers' labour force participation, the policy reduced the number of families in Quebec with a traditional division of labour, particularly for common-law couples. However, we also find that the policy does not increase the proportion of families with egalitarian work and child care arrangements.

Key Findings

- ◆ From 1996-2006, Quebec's daycare policy increased the labour force participation of mothers of young children.
 - Relative to the rest of Canada, the policy resulted in a 4.8 percent decline in the proportion of Quebec families where the father is employed full-time and the mother is not employed and does more child care.
 - Couples tended to shift to strategies where both parents are employed full-time and the mother does more child care, or where the father is employed full-time and the mother, part-time.
- ◆ Overall, common-law couples' family strategies were much more strongly impacted by the policy than married couples'.
- ◆ Despite increased female labour supply, the policy did not significantly increase the proportion of families with egalitarian work and child care arrangements, especially for married couples.
- ◆ Although the policy produced a decline in the effects of education and age on parents' child care strategies, it did not affect couples in which neither or only one partner had completed high school.



Background

In Canada, the only province to adopt a universal daycare program is Quebec. In 1997, the province began offering subsidized daycare to four-year-olds and extended full-time kindergarten to all five-year-olds. Over the next three years, daycare coverage was extended to children one year or younger. The cost was five dollars per day. This policy aimed to fight family poverty by increasing female labour force participation, and to enhance child development and equality of opportunity. However, there has been little attention paid to its impact on household child care strategies. We therefore examine how Quebec's policy has shaped the combination of two parents' labour force participation, as well as the way they share responsibility for child care.

According to "unitary" household models, partners seek to maximize household economic utility; therefore, if both partners have high human capital, they will both work long hours if possible (Bloemen and Stancanelli, 2008). However, feminist perspectives argue that partners have distinct, potentially conflicting utilities, and that household decision-making is shaped more by gender roles, economic resources, and availability of child care than it is by utility (Crow, 1989; Hoschchild and Machung, 1989). Consistent with feminist perspectives, we expect that Quebec's daycare program not only increased the labour force participation of women, but also that it decreased the proportion of couples with a traditional division of labour, where men work full-time and women spend all their time on caring work.

Additionally, we predict that the policy diminished class differences in parental strategies. Parents are more likely to participate in the labour force and equally share responsibility for child care if they have high human capital (e.g. a high level of education). However, Quebec's policy means that daycare cost is low enough to change the child care strategies of parents who have a low income and low human capital. Therefore, the policy may have produced a decline in the effect of human capital on parents' choice of strategies.

Data and Method

We liken Quebec's daycare program to that of an experiment, capturing its effect through a before-and-after comparison using 1996, 2001, and 2006 census data from Quebec and from the rest of Canada.

For data analysis, we grouped data of both parents' hours spent on child care into six categories: zero, one to four, five to 14, 15-29, 30-59, and 60 or more. We then classified each parent's hours of employment into seven similar categories, and combined these with the categories of time spent on child care. From these combinations we created a typology with eleven categories of child care/employment strategies, such as "Father employed, mother not employed, mother spends more time on child care". Further, we used regression models to compare the likelihoods of these strategies occurring in Quebec and in the rest of Canada. Finally, we also used regression models to control for the impact of variables like number of children, age, and education on family strategies. See full report for details.

To rule out the effects of child care provided by older children and other family members, our analysis is restricted to opposite-sex couples with one or more children between the ages of one and five, and with no younger or older child or other adult family members.

Results

Child Care and Employment in Quebec and the Rest of Canada (ROC)

Table 1 is a condensed version of the report's original table: it shows nine of the original eleven categories of child care/employment strategies. The table demonstrates that the proportion of Quebec couples adopting the traditional strategy, whereby the father is employed full-time and the mother is not employed and does more child care, declined by 5.3% between 1996 and 2006, compared to a 0.5% decline in the ROC. This means that there was a significant relative decrease in Quebec couples' use of the traditional division of labour after the policy implementation.

Couples in Quebec therefore shifted their employment and child care strategies between 1996 and 2006. The decline of the traditional strategy is accounted for by a relative increase of 2% in the proportion of Quebec couples where both parents are employed full-time and the mother does more child care. There were also small but significant increases in the proportions of families where the father is employed full-time and the mother, part-time, as well as families where the mother works longer hours than the father.



Table 1: Child Care and Employment Strategy by Location (condensed)

Child Care and Employment Strategy												
Responsibility for Child Care		Mother More						Equal				
Paid Employment of Partners	1996-2006 Difference	Father Employed Mother Not Employed	Father Full-Time, Mother Part-Time (<15 hours)	Father Full-Time, Mother Part-Time (15+ hours)	Both Full-Time	Mother More Hours of Work	Sub-total	Father Employed Mother Not Employed	Father Full-Time, Mother Part-Time	Both Full-Time	Mother More Hours of Work	Subtotal
		Quebec	1996-2006 Difference	-5.3	-1.2	-2.1	1.1	-0.4	-8.0	1.0	1.1	6.5
Rest of Canada	1996-2006 Difference	-0.5	-1.4	-2.3	-1.0	-0.9	-6.1	0.4	0.6	6.4	-0.5	7.0
Difference in Differences		-4.8	0.2	0.2	2.0	0.5	-1.9	0.6	0.4	0.1	0.7	1.8

Further, the data show a potential trend towards more equal sharing of child care in Quebec. For example, the proportion of all couples in Quebec undertaking equal sharing increased by 1.8% relative to the ROC. There was also a relative 0.1% increase in the proportion of families in Quebec with both parents employed full-time who share child care equally.

Regression Models

We used regression analysis to find the probability that a couple in Quebec adopts each of the ten other employment/child care strategies, as opposed to the traditional division of labour (see full report for data). Our results show that, compared to the ROC, Quebec married couples from 1996-2006 were:

- 5% more likely to have both parents employed full-time, with the mother doing more child care,
- 30% more likely to have both parents employed full-time and doing equal sharing of child care, and
- 35% more likely to have the father employed full-time and the mother part-time, with equal sharing of child care.

Additionally, regression models showed that Quebec common-law couples were much more strongly impacted by the policy than married couples. For example, relative to ROC married couples and compared to the traditional strategy, the proportion of Quebec married couples with both parents employed full-time who share child care equally increased by 9% from 1996-2006. For common-law couples, this figure was 36%. Further, the proportion of Quebec married couples with both parents employed full-time and the mother doing more child care increased by 34%, but for common-law couples it increased by 59%.



Parents' Human Capital

Including number of children, parents' ages, and parents' education in our regression models shows that human capital still has very significant impacts on family strategies. For instance, we discovered that families with more children are much more likely to adopt the traditional division of labour than parents with fewer children. Further, older parents are more likely than younger parents to both work full-time, or to combine the father's full time-employment with the mother's intensive (15+ hours/week) part-time employment.

Moreover, when both parents have more education, particularly if they are both college or university graduates, they are more likely to be employed full-time. Mothers especially are much more likely to be employed if they are more educated. Interestingly, however, educated mothers are equally likely to do more child care than their partners as they are to choose equal-care strategies. Therefore, it is only to the extent that the daycare policy decreases the use of the traditional strategy does an educational advantage of the mother translate into greater equity.

Reducing Socio-Economic Differences in Parental Strategies

As mentioned above, mothers who are less educated and younger are less likely to seek employment than better-educated and older mothers. However, since the cost of daycare is set by the market, reducing the cost and increasing the availability of daycare may indeed have decreased differences in family strategies based on socio-economic status.

Through regression models, we discovered that the program substantially narrowed the differences in parental strategies between families of different education levels, so long as both parents were at least high school graduates. These differences were much greater in Quebec than in the ROC in 1996, but by 2006 there was not much difference between the regions. Thus, the Quebec daycare program produced a decline in the relationship between couples' strategies and their human capital, which we interpret as increasing equity. However, couples with the lowest levels of education were unaffected, likely due to other barriers to their employment.

Conclusion

We find that Quebec's policy of providing low-cost daycare for children up to age five increased the labour force participation of mothers of young children, because there was a significant relative decrease in the choice of the traditional family strategy in Quebec. The effect was much greater on common-law than on married Quebec parents, suggesting that common-law couples are less traditional and therefore more sensitive to policies that address structural barriers to maternal employment.

The policy also produced a decline on the effects of age and education on parents' strategy. While the reduction in the price of daycare has relatively little impact on the highest earning couples, for couples from the low to upper middle-income levels, five dollars a day means a steep decline in cost. Nevertheless, this policy does not impact couples with low levels of education, whose very low human capital limits their labour force participation.

However, the policy-induced shift of families away from the traditional strategy could, but actually does not, tend to increase the proportion of families with egalitarian work and child care arrangements, despite increasing female labour supply. This is especially true for married Quebec couples, where the increase in the number of families where both parents are employed full-time and the mother does more child care exceeds equal-care strategies. This finding is consistent with feminist economic theory, which places household decision-making in a larger structural context affected by social policy. Here, we see that men's relative human capital advantage is not easily overcome.

Therefore, it seems that the Quebec daycare program mainly succeeded in increasing gender equity in two distinct ways: firstly in decreasing the proportion of families with a traditional division of labour, and secondly in reducing the effects of socio-economic differences on parental strategies.

References

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