

Expansion of parental benefits saved marriages ^[1]

Using Statistics Canada data, professor Rachel Margolis found a policy change to parental benefits in Quebec led to a 6-per-cent decrease in separation and divorce among heterosexual couples.

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EXCERPTED

An expansion of parental benefits in Quebec 15 years ago revolutionized the province's labour force – the intended outcome – but it also saved some marriages, a Western study has found.

Rachel Margolis

Using Statistics Canada data, sociology professor Rachel Margolis and her collaborators discovered that the Québec Parental Insurance Plan led to a 6 per cent decrease in separation and divorce among heterosexual couples in the five years following its implementation in 2006. The study is published in *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

The ground-breaking QPIP 2006 aimed to increase gender equality in the labour force and at home by reserving some benefits for the non-birth parent, a policy that became known as the “daddy quota.” Overall payments for new parents were also increased.

QPIP contributed to Quebec having one of the highest rates of female labour force participation in the world – about 85 per cent – and a large number of those working women are mothers with young children. A spinoff benefit was the ever-increasing number of fathers spending more time caring for their children.

“Policies that encourage both mother and father to take time off work to parent when a child is born helps each parent develop competence and confidence in caretaking,” said Margolis, a demographer and sociologist who studies family dynamics. “That can have long-run effects on family relationships.”

The transition to parenthood is often very stressful, especially among egalitarian couples who end up taking on traditional gender roles after a birth, she said. “The policy made it easier for couples to share parenting more equally, which improved their relationship and made them far less likely to break up.”

Quebec's policy is the most progressive in Canada. Some European countries, such as Sweden, Norway and Iceland, have been offering markedly more gender-equal parental benefits for years, and those policies have led to more equal sharing of child care and housework.

In 2019, the Canadian government tweaked its parental benefit policy, including one element of QPIP but not all. Now, there are an extra four weeks of parental benefits if both parents are using them.

“Hopefully, in the future, we will see more parents sharing leave in the rest of Canada,” said Margolis, who collaborated on the study with economics professors Anders Holm and Nirav Mehta from Western and Youjin Choi, a Western PhD alumna who works at Statistics Canada.

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