

Québec's subsidized childcare network^[1]

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Source: Oxford University Press

Format: Book / booklet

Publication Date: 8 Jul 2022

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Introduction

It was on this strong stand in defence of children's development that, on 23 January 1997, the then Québec premier Lucien Bouchard revealed the family policy White paper 'Les enfants au coeur de nos choix',² under which the Centres de la petite enfance (CPEs)³ would be created. Nine months later, in the autumn of 1997, Québec's CPE network, a cornerstone of its family policy, was implemented. This chapter provides insight into the policy success that the development and implementation of subsidized childcare in Québec represents. Described as Québec exceptionalism (Arsenault et al., 2018), the provincial system, still in place, is unique in Canada. For more than twenty years, it has outlived changes in governing political parties, withstood policy changes, survived budgetary crises, and adapted to harsh criticisms.

A number of factors have influenced the evolution of family trends in Canada and Québec (Baker, 1994), leading to different family policy decisions. Arguably, a chief factor is the decline in Québec's fertility rate. Although Canada experienced a baby boom between 1945 and the early 1960s, the province's fertility rate has since fallen sharply to 1.5 children per woman, below the population replacement rate set by demographers at 2.1 children per woman. Other changes, such as rising divorce and common-law union rates, sharp increases in the number of single-parent families (from 289,000 in 1976 to 698,000 in 2014)⁴ and family debt (176.9 per cent of disposable income in 2020) have contributed to the changing face of Canadian families over the years and brought the problems facing families and governments into sharper focus. For instance, while declining fertility rates are not necessarily a problem per se, they have direct consequences for how society is organized, and they impact the provision and diversity of public services. They also raise important public policy challenges (permanent closure of some schools, for example). Changes in the labour market, such as the increased participation of mothers with young children in the workforce and the rise of single-parent families, challenge governments to develop concrete measures to ensure a work-family balance. The level of family debt highlights important concerns about individuals' purchasing power, and its effects on intergenerational transfers and the erosion of the middle class. The increased participation of women in the labour market brings attention to the heavy burden of women's dual responsibilities and questions the role of governments in this regard (Mathieu, 2016; Bergeron, 2005; Jenson and Sineau, 2001; Porter, 2003; O'Connor et al., 1999). These transformations shape government conceptualizations regarding families and parental roles, while raising questions around how to best integrate the market, the family, and the state into policy (Burlone and Couture, 2011) through pertinent instruments (Burlone, 2009).

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