

Quebec's baby boom [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Quebec experienced a mini baby boom in 2006, recording the biggest one-year rise in births in nearly a century.

It's not quite a full-fledged boom, provincial government officials said yesterday at a news conference presenting an overview of Quebec's parental-leave program, launched last year.

But it's good news for a province battling what for a time was one of the lowest birth rates in the nation.

The number of births in Quebec rose to 82,500 last year from 76,250 in 2005, said Employment and Social Solidarity Minister Michelle Courchesne, putting the birth rate at 1.6, compared with the national rate of 1.5. It was an eight-per-cent jump over the previous year, the highest increase since 1909.

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"It's too early for the government to say whether the rise in births is directly related to the (parental-leave) program, but it lets us be optimistic," Courchesne said.

While it's doubtful the program's increased benefits influenced a couple's decision to have their first child, discussions with families indicate it might be a factor in deciding whether to have a second or third, she said.

Quebec's parental-leave program, its subsidized daycare system and other incentives, might have played a part, said Evelyne Lapierre-Adamcyk, former president of the Federation of Canadian Demographers.

But demographic studies of Quebec indicate that the growing tendency for women to wait later in life to have children, coupled with more women entering their 30s, might have more of a role in the rise, she said.

"It's not impossible that the programs are playing a part, but we can believe that the people who put off having their first or second child have decided to have that child now that they're in their 30s," she said.

Quebec's parental-leave program, which replaced the federal government's plan on Jan. 1, 2006, aided 97,692 parents in Quebec with 66,000 births and 640 adoptions. Quebec is the only province to run its own parental leave program.

Under the provincial program's more generous scheme, which pays up to 75 per cent of insurable earnings, the average weekly payout rose to \$450 a week from \$325. The number of fathers taking time off rose from 18 per cent to 36 per cent, spurred by new "paternity benefits" that are paid over three to five weeks.

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Programs that facilitate the raising of a family have been shown to have success in Quebec and other parts of the world where shrinking populations have raised fears there won't be enough wage earners to support an aging society.

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Canada's fertility rate is below that of the United States (2.0) and France (1.9) but is above those of Germany (1.4) and Italy (1.2), according to a 2002 review done by the Canadian Council on Social Development.

- reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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