

Babies make comeback - except in Canada [CA] ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Canada is what statisticians call an outlier: an exception to a well-established trend.

The fertility rate in most developed countries is climbing after a 40-year drop. It is still below the population replacement level - 2.1 children per woman - but it has turned around in a way demographers never anticipated.

Three western nations are not experiencing a millennial baby boom: Canada, Japan and South Korea.

This puzzles Hans-Peter Kohler of the Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania, whose paper, *Advances in Development Reverse Declines* (in the current edition of *Nature* magazine), is attracting worldwide attention.

"Further research is required," he says, suggesting that one of the relevant factors may be a country's support for families.

Canada would be an ideal test case for Kohler's hypothesis because it has its own outlier: Quebec.

Since 1997, the province has implemented a panoply of measures to support women who want to be good mothers without sacrificing their careers.

They include generous parental leave, affordable child care, tax incentives for child-bearing, and employment premiums for working parents.

They appear to have worked: Twelve years ago, the province's fertility rate stood at 1.51 children per woman. Today it stands at a 30-year high of 1.72 children per woman, significantly higher than the Canadian average of 1.58.

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Quebec's programs are expensive. The province will spend \$6.5 billion to support families this year (45 per cent more than Ontario).

But its fertility rate is on par with those of the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Britain.

Critics call Quebec's approach costly social engineering. But the majority of citizens support their government's family policies because they make life easier for parents and safeguard the province's francophone identity.

No other government in the country is following Quebec's example.

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A few provinces have taken isolated steps - Ontario and Newfoundland recently implemented strategies to reduce child poverty and Manitoba has invested in subsidized child-care spaces - but most are waiting for leadership and resources from Ottawa.

As Canada's workforce ages and the nation becomes increasingly dependent on immigrants to maintain its standard of living, federal policy-makers might want to examine jurisdictions that are reversing these trends.

They needn't look far:

Quebec spends 3.2 per cent of its gross domestic product on families. Canada spends 1.2 per cent.

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Should Kohler update his study in a few years, he'd probably find that Canada is moving closer to the norm, thanks largely to Quebec.

With national leadership, Canada could become a truly family-friendly country.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Canada ^[2]

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