

Canadians can't complain: Better Life Index^[1]

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EXCERPTS

All in all, Canadians are a pretty comfortable and happy lot.

The country ranks at or near the top in many of 11 well-being indicators in a new quality of life index, unveiled Tuesday by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Only Australia topped Canada.

"Overall, I think Canada seems to be a pretty good place to be," said Matthias Rumpf, an OECD spokesman in Washington. "But," he cautioned, "it shouldn't make them complacent about everything." The prominent Paris-based organization, better known for financial forecasts and economic policy advice, has been increasingly advocating for the inclusion of a broader range of yardsticks for gauging prosperity. Its Better Life Index includes housing and health, governance and work-life balance, environment and life satisfaction.

Marking its 50th anniversary this week, the OECD is holding a forum in Paris, where world leaders will focus on finding new ways of generating growth and jobs while at the same time protecting the environment and strengthening the position of women. The aim of the online index is to get citizens involved, allowing them to take stock of their country's social and economic successes as well as its shortcomings.

Globally, Canada stacks up well.

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Canadians have one of the highest self-reported rates of satisfaction, with slightly more than three-quarters declaring life is good. Perhaps that's a reason Canadians are, as often billed, truly nice. More of us reported helping a stranger than anywhere else in the OECD. But there is room for improvement, the Better Life Index shows. From troubling levels of obesity to pressing childcare challenges and insufficient leisure time, several key fissures are standing in the way of building a better Canada.

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Child care

Finding affordable and good quality child care is a challenge for parents across Canada, the OECD notes.... Single parents are particularly vulnerable. Their child-care costs are among the highest in the OECD.

"I think we really are off the mark when it comes to understanding the importance of child care to economic stability and economic growth in Canada," said Paulette Senior, YWCA Canada's chief executive. "We need to take it as seriously as we take education, as we take health care."

The YWCA, the country's largest women's service organization, is one of several groups calling for a national child-care plan. Policies vary from province to province. Quebec is often held up as a model, offering \$7-a-day daycare along with other family friendly benefits. Federally, parents are offered \$100 per month to cover care for children under six and they can use that money however they wish.

Leisure time

It's a common gripe for Canadians: There never seems to be enough time for socializing, hobbies, and even sleep. The amount and quality of leisure time is important for an individual's mental and physical well-being, the OECD notes. Canadians, however, devote 62 per cent of their day to leisure and personal care, below the OECD average.

A 2010 study by a pair of Dalhousie University economists suggests middle- and lower-income families in Canada are facing the biggest time crunch. They're working more hours, but their real income hasn't grown at the same pace.

Meanwhile, families at the top income level experienced large increases in real income from 1994 to 2006, with little change in hours worked. This disparity, the economists point out, suggests an inequality in well-being may be growing more rapidly than income inequality, possibly fuelling greater health-care problems down the road. One potential aid, according to the study, could be a national program offering paid parental days to deal with sick children, snow days or meetings with teachers.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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