

# Quebec's child care program and low-income families <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

In a previous post, I argued that some of the main features of Quebec's child care system are poorly understood. I pointed to three myths about the province's child care system that journalists, politicians and academics often take as fact.

These myths, however, are not the only frustrating features of the current dialogue around the Quebec experience. Another problematic issue relates to the data reported when discussing the impact of Quebec's child care system, especially data related to the utilization rates of subsidized child care among high- and low-income families.

In some cases, the data used by journalists are blatantly wrong. Alain Dubuc of *La Presse*, for example, recently stated that 42.3% of families with an income of less than \$20,000 did not have access to a subsidized space, in comparison to 13.5% of families with an income of more than \$140,000. However, it appears Dubuc misread the report of the Institut de la statistique du Québec from which he drew those data (see table 3.2). Rather than presenting the proportion of families using subsidized child care, he presents data on the proportion of families using non-parental care. Those data include, for example, children that are being taken care of by their grandparents while their parents work or study. As a result, Dubuc over-estimates the proportion of high-income families that have access to a subsidized child care space.

In other cases, data used are considerably dated or have been the object of debates among specialists. For example, economist Stephen Gordon has often referred on Twitter and on his blog to an MA thesis that found, based on NLCSY data, that take-up rates of subsidized child care in Quebec were more than twice as high among those in the top income quartile as among those in the bottom quartile. Those findings have recently been quoted in columns (here, here and here) and editorials (here and here) in the wake of the NDP's recent child care proposal.

However, those data are from 2002, just five years after the then \$5-a-day program started to be rolled out. It should also be noted that some scholars have raised concerns about potential misinterpretations of the NLCSY data on child care when investigating all Quebec families with children under five, rather than only families in which all parents work (see Annex).

The most recent reliable data we have come from a report on the use of child care in Quebec published in 2011 by l'Institut de la Statistique du Québec (ISQ), which drew on a large survey, conducted in 2009, of families with children under five. The report presents data on the use of subsidized child care amongst parents who use the \$7-a-day program because of work or study (see Table 6.1). In short, access to subsidized child care spaces does increase with income, from 66.2% for families with an income of less than \$20,000 to 78.1% for families with an income between \$120,000 and \$140,000. Interestingly, the proportion of families using the \$7-a-day program is lowest among families earning more than \$140,000 (65.1%).

Those data exclude families that use child care for other reasons than work or study, especially families on welfare. However, I obtained from the ISQ data on all Quebec families with children under five.

Those data point to significant differences between high- and low-income families, although perhaps not as dramatic as sometimes reported. They show that utilization rates increase with income, although they decline for families with earnings of more than \$140,000.

How then can we explain these lower rates of access to subsidized child care low-income families? As I explained in a recent article written with my colleague Mélanie Bourque and published in *Le Devoir*, there are three main causes. The first can perhaps be described as cultural. Another study by the Institut de la Statistique du Québec published in 2011 indicates that parents of children living in unfavorable material and social conditions are more likely than those living in favorable conditions to mention their desire to stay home with their child as the main reason for not using non-parental care (42.7% vs 34.3%). Those data are compatible with qualitative research that has found that low-income parents resented efforts to encourage them to send their child to a Centre de la petite enfance (the non-profit child care centres often presented as public child care centres), as they felt that they were in a better position to take care of their children.

The second cause is the lower availability of child care spaces in low-income areas. Here again, parents of children living in unfavorable material and social conditions are more likely to indicate difficulties in finding a child care space to explain why they are not relying on non-

parental care (16.1% vs 7.1% for those living in favorable conditions). A 2011 study from the Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal confirms that the number of subsidized spaces is indeed lower in low-income areas of the city.

The third cause is the fact that low-income workers are more likely to work atypical hours, which makes it more difficult for those workers, especially single parents, to make suitable arrangements for the care of their children. In fact, the ISQ study mentioned earlier found that low-income families were significantly more likely to report difficulties organizing child care as a result of unanticipated situations (11.4% of families earning less than \$20,000, 12.3% of those earning between \$20,000 and \$30,000, and 4.3% for those earning more than \$140,000).

As I have argued elsewhere, problems of access to subsidized child care services by children from low-income families is currently the greatest failure of Quebec's child care system. It must be recognized though that the development of a universal child care system is an extremely long and arduous task. It took Sweden more than three decades to achieve this objective. However, the Quebec government's recent decisions to favor the for-profit sector in the expansion of spaces and to reduce investments in the higher quality not-for-profit sector are likely to exacerbate current inequities. In addition, while the government has announced its intention to increase fees (that will now be based on family income), there is no indication that it intends to use some of those resources to tackle the task of improving access to child care services in low-income neighborhoods.

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