

Parental leave study shows rich-poor divide ^[1]

Author: Press, Jordan

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EXCERPTS

New research shows Canada's parental leave program leaves out two-fifths of mothers, many of them low-income, and points to a stark divide between families that are "parental-leave-rich" and "parental-leave-poor" — just as the Liberals prepare to enhance the program.

A study of federal parental leave figures published this week finds that about 41 per cent of mothers outside of Quebec don't qualify for benefits because they don't have enough insurable hours. Among women who earned less than \$30,000, about 63 per cent did not qualify.

In Quebec, which has its own maternity and paternity leave program, less than 11 per cent didn't qualify.

Those numbers don't include mothers in Canada's three territories or in First Nations communities, which means the number of mothers who don't qualify could be even higher.

Economic divide in who qualifies

There was also an economic divide: More than 65 per cent of women earning over \$30,000 qualified for the benefit in 2013, while that number was about 37 per cent for women earning under that amount.

The results of the study, published Thursday in the *Journal of Industrial Relations*, raises questions about the Liberal plan for a revamped parental leave program, and whether the party's promise to extend leave to 18 months will just exacerbate the situation.

During the election, the Liberals promised to allow new parents to take up to 18 months of leave after a child is born and also give parents the option of spreading 12 months of benefits into chunks over the extended time period.

Labour Minister MaryAnn Mihychuk has also said she is interested in creating dedicated leave for new fathers, similar to what is in place in Quebec, and will put the idea to Canadians in yet-to-be-launched consultations.

Expanded plan would not end inequities

The lead author on the study said the government has already been warned that its plan could leave out almost half the children in the country unless it eases eligibility rules so more mothers, especially low-income earners, can qualify.

"You're going in a direction of making yourself look good by doing something for middle-class parents, but you're not addressing what is the actual problem with parental leave," said Lindsey McKay, a post-doctoral fellow and adjunct professor at Brock University's school of sociology

For now, the federal parental leave program pays out benefits for up to 15 weeks for new mothers and allows mothers and fathers to split an additional 35 weeks.

The federal program requires parents to have worked at least 600 hours in the year before they go on leave, unlike in Quebec where the threshold is \$2,000 of earnings. That difference has meant that Quebec over time has seen an increase in the number of low-income women qualifying for the benefit — boosting national numbers to give a rosier picture of parental leave in Canada.

600-hour requirement disqualifies many

The 600-hour requirement in the rest of Canada has had the opposite effect as fewer women over time have qualified for leave. The percentage of women not qualifying has gone up since the mid-1990s when the hours required stood at 300. Even though in some cases they have contributed to employment insurance for years, they may not have enough hours to qualify because they work part-time, or they are students.

Changing those requirements to be in line with Quebec's standard would allow more mothers to stay at home during the first year of their child's life, McKay said.

"The children are kind of penalized for the employment situation of the parent at the time of their birth," said McKay, who herself didn't

qualify for the benefit four years ago after giving birth to twins because she was a student.

"What it means is that we have a vast majority of people contributing to the program, but the people who are benefiting are those who are in higher income households."

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