

Parental-leave rich and parental-leave poor: Inequality in Canadian labour market based leave policies ^[1]

Author: McKay, L., Mathieu, S., & Doucet, A.

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Abstract

Canada has two parental leave benefit programs for the care of a newborn or adopted child: a federal program, and, since 2006, a provincial program in Québec. Informed by a social reproduction framework, this article compares access to parental leave benefits between Québec and the rest of Canada by family income and by its two different programs. Our analysis of quantitative data reveals that maternal access to leave benefits has improved dramatically over the past decade in the province of Québec, especially for low-income households. By contrast, on average 38% of mothers in the rest of Canada are consistently excluded from maternity or parental benefits under the federal program. We argue that one key explanation for the gap in rates of access to benefits between the two programs and between families by income is difference in eligibility criteria. In Canada, parental leaves paid for by all employers and employees are unevenly supporting the social reproduction of higher earners. Our article draws attention to the need for greater public and scholarly scrutiny of social class inequality effects of parental leave policy.

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