Migration and urbanization trends and family wellbeing in Canada: A focus on disability and Indigenous issues

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The Vanier Institute of the Family

- A national, independent, charitable organization committed to sharing knowledge of families in Canada in all their diversities
- Positioned at the centre of networks of researchers, educators, policy makers, and organizations with an interest in families
- Strengthens the national understanding of families by making research evidence more accessible
- Established in 1965
The importance of a family lens

- Thinking about *families*, rather than *individuals*, is essential if we wish to position families as the focus of policy discussions
- Lays the groundwork for evaluating culture and practices of policy makers, and recognizes policy strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in understanding
- Useful in identifying *unintended influences on families* of policies designed with individuals in mind
Family Diversities Framework

FAMILY STRUCTURE
- How people are linked to form families
  - Parenting structures
  - “Non-kin” structures
  - Generational structures

FAMILY WORK
- The distribution of paid and unpaid work within families
  - High-risk work
  - Work defined by periods of absence
  - Precarious or marginalized work
  - Care work

FAMILY IDENTITY
- Lenses through which families are viewed
  - Race/ethnicity
  - Religion
  - Citizenship
  - Sex and gender

Family wellbeing is the desired outcome for all family types
Family Identity

- Families with disability and Indigenous families experience exclusion
- Priority employment equity groups
- Families with disability
  - Family member(s) limited in daily activities due to a long-term condition or health problem
  - Applies to physical and mental health, sensory, or cognitive disabilities
- Indigenous families
  - First Nations, Inuit, and Métis; > 50 Nations and 50 Indigenous languages
  - Distinct from one another with unique languages, histories, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices.
  - Definitions of family often diverge from dominant policy model
Migration and urbanization in North America

- Experiences in Canada and the U.S. differ due to unique political, economic, socio-cultural, and historical circumstances

- Family reconciliation and economic needs
  - Family reunification as the “bedrock” of US immigration
    - Wider range of family members, but capped according to category of relationship and country of origin
  - Canada has more economic immigration
    - Narrower range of relations but numbers are not capped

- Both countries highly urbanized but different urban governance models
  - Canadian cities not as complex governmentally - dominated by central cities
  - US cities more complex with fragmented metro areas - affects access to programs and services
Immigration policies can unite or fragment families

Four immigrant classes:
- **Family sponsorship** class prioritizes specific relationships
- **Economic immigrant, refugees, and “other” immigrant** classes have a more restrictive set of family members
- Policy priorities may be implicitly designed for specific types of diversities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Structure</th>
<th>Family Work</th>
<th>Family Identity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents, either married or common-law, with children</td>
<td>Families who fill employment needs designated by government</td>
<td>Families who are part of identity groups that are not valued</td>
</tr>
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Percentage of Permanent Residents admitted to Canada by Immigration Class, 2020

- Economic: 57%
- Family sponsorship: 27%
- Refugees: 14%
- Other: 2%

Families with Disability

- **Canada has not had a history of welcoming immigrants with disabilities**, but immigration law does not preclude people with disabilities and their families from applying.

- **Excessive demands clause** - may be deemed inadmissible on health grounds:
  - Anticipated health or social service costs expected to exceed those of average Canadians over five years.
  - Or, if demand on health or social services would increase waiting times that could negatively affect the health of Canadian citizens or permanent residents.

- Aims to protect overuse of Canada’s publicly funded social and health care systems, BUT it treats **financial costs as a burden of disability**, rather than as an investment in full participation, inclusion, and positive contributions to Canadian society.

- Family wellbeing - **negative physical and mental health implications** for older family members left behind.
Immigrants to Canada by Period of Immigration and Presence of Disability

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) 2017, linked to the 2016 Census of Population
Indigenous families

- First Nations peoples granted citizenship in 1960
- After WWII, Indigenous families were encouraged to leave reserves and assimilate into the dominant culture.
- “Despite the geography of their birth, to be considered citizens, Aboriginal Canadians had to ‘immigrate’ from peripheral reserves to mainstream Canadian communities in a manner metaphorically similar to the journey taken by the refugees who left Europe’s DP camps and immigrants who fled its impoverished regions.”

(Bohaker & Iacovetta, 2009, p. 66)

- Indigenous families have been subject to forced migration and relocation to urban areas and other remote regions
- Framed by government for
  - Administrative usefulness
  - Development
- Implications for family wellbeing
  - Disconnection from land and family, erosion of intergenerational cultural influences, greater risk of depressive symptoms and less effective parenting
In 2021, 83.4% of households were in urban areas.

In Canada, rural areas have a population of less than 1,000 residents and a population density of less than 400 people/km².

Almost equal numbers moving from rural to urban as urban to rural.

Growth of downtown populations.

Between 2016 and 2019, 9 in 10 new immigrants settled in large urban centres (pop. 100,000 or more).

**Urbanization**

**Family Structure**
By-laws in large cities that allow garden suites on residential locations make it easier for multigenerational families to reside in the same location.

**Family Work**
Cities have more employment opportunities, but long commutes may affect how families apportion their work.

**Family Identity**
Same-gender, non-binary or transgender couples more likely to live in large urban centres, especially in the downtown core where they may feel more welcome.
Families, disability, and urbanization

- Urban areas have better access to health care and other related supports, which can improve the wellbeing of families
  - Family physicians, specialists, and emergency departments
  - Community and social support services available for families such as respite care, supportive housing, specialized transportation, and service coordination and arrangement

- Consider challenges of city living such as affordability and its impact on a family’s material wellbeing

- Official statistics not kept for families with disability having to relocate or do without needed services
  - Information gap when considering policies to help ease the transition and ensure continuous, high-quality supports and services
Indigenous families and urbanization

- More than half of Indigenous people live in urban areas
- High mobility, moving into and out of urban spaces according to family circumstances and presence of other family and community members
- Poverty levels high for urban Indigenous families
- Experiences of persistent racism, significantly greater risk of human rights violations
  - Some change related to Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and Idle No More movement
- Media representations entrenched in “victim” and “survivor” narratives
  - Could feature Indigenous families that are thriving and experiencing high levels of family wellbeing
Good policy from a family diversity perspective

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<td>How do we know the impact of migration and urbanization if we set policy without flexibility in the definition of family?</td>
<td>How do we support families that relocate to Canada or to an urban centre for better job opportunities?</td>
<td>How do we ensure that experiences of specific identity groups are not overlooked?</td>
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<td>Assess the impact of imposing a dominant family model.</td>
<td>Assist with earlier recognition of international qualifications for immigrants and ensure equal educational opportunities for Indigenous people.</td>
<td>Disaggregate national data whenever possible to monitor stability and change in outcomes of families’ material, relational, and subjective wellbeing.</td>
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<td>Allow families to remain intact for better relational wellbeing.</td>
<td>Improved access to employment insurance special benefits to support families during major life transitions for better material wellbeing.</td>
<td>Advance programs and services to address systemic barriers and inequality.</td>
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Thank you

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