

# PARENTAL LEAVE BENEFITS AND INTER-PROVINCIAL DIFFERENCES: THE CASE OF FOUR CANADIAN PROVINCES

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*Abstract.* This paper compares access to parental leave benefits in the four largest Canadian provinces –Québec, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia between 2000 and 2016, using quantitative data from the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey. We show that inequalities in the receipt of benefits mirror and reinforce the structure of income and gender inequalities. We argue that Alberta and Québec represent two regimes of parental benefits. In Alberta, the take-up of parental benefits is low, and is closely related to income and gender. Conversely, the vast majority of mothers and fathers have access to parental benefits in Québec. We argue that Alberta is closer to a liberal regime of parental benefits, while Québec is closer to a social-democratic model.

**Keywords:** Parental benefits; parental income; Quebec; Alberta; Ontario; British Columbia; inequality; gender inequalities

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing literature about social and economic inequalities in the take-up of parental leave benefits at the national level across many countries (e.g., Margolis et al. 2019; McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet 2016; Baird and O'Brien 2015; Dobrotic and Blum 2019a, 2019b; Moss et al. 2019). Less attention has been given, however, to sub-national variations in the receipt of benefits and the potential roots of those differences. Although Québec has been compared to Canada's nine other provinces (McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet 2016), the rest of the country is not homogeneous and its variations warrant more refined comparisons. This paper addresses social inequalities in the take-up of parental bene-

fits over a seventeen-year period in the four largest Canadian provinces: Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec. We argue that there are different parental leave regimes<sup>1</sup> across the Canadian provinces, each characterized by income and gender inequalities in parents' access to and receipt of paid parental benefits. These differences reflect and reproduce longstanding social inequalities rooted in welfare regime models, with Québec most closely resembling a social-democratic model, and Alberta leading the liberal regime, followed by British Columbia and Ontario. Alberta provides the least support to new parents, with the lowest proportion of both mothers and fathers receiving benefits.

In a range of public policy domains, including family policy, Canada's provincial governments are able to choose their own, often divergent paths. Whereas parental benefits are provided through the Employment Insurance (EI) program across Canada, in 2006, Québec implemented the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP)—a more accessible and generous parental benefit program. In light of the existence of these two benefit programs, we ask: how access to and take up of government-sponsored parental benefits varies across the four largest Canadian provinces? Is it possible to identify different regimes of parental-leave beyond the two-program divide? Who, in terms of gender and income, are the most and least likely to receive benefits? To address these questions, we look at the interactions of parental leave programs under EI and QPIP with labour markets, social inequalities, and the take-up of benefits.

We use survey data from the national Employment Insurance Coverage Survey (EICS) and administrative data from Québec's Conseil de gestion de l'assurance parentale (CGAP), to argue that inequalities in the receipt of benefits reflect and reinforce income and gender inequalities experienced in the four largest Canadian provinces. Following the work of van den Berg et al. (2017), we assess the extent to which Canada's largest provinces have grown apart in their approaches to parental benefits, conceptualizing the national Canadian context as heterogeneous (Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2013) to highlight provincial disparities in the receipt of paid benefits.

Within Canada, for example, Québec is understood to be the outlier in terms of how it offers and delivers paid benefits to new parents (McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet 2016; Doucet et al. 2009; Mathieu, McKay and Doucet 2017; Robson 2017). The research that informs this paper emphasises Québec's "exceptionalism" (Raïq et al. 2012; Raïq and van den Berg 2014; van den Berg et al. 2017). According to Esping-Ander-

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1. We define parental leave regime as the way the state, through the architecture of its parental leave and benefit programs, create, maintain, and exacerbate income and gender inequalities within and between families.

sen's (1990, 1999) well known typology, with regards to the provision of parental benefits, Québec is the province that most closely mirrors the egalitarian social democratic model of the Nordic countries; in fact, Québec has been referred to as a "paradise for families" (Godbout and St-Cerny 2008). Likewise, this paper shows that Alberta is distinct in being the most "liberal" of the four largest Canadian provinces.

We begin with a brief description of the two parental benefits programs in Canada. Then, emphasizing Québec's unique path, we locate ourselves theoretically within the current literature on the existence of intra-national variations in welfare distribution and on feminist and cultural approaches to work and care policies. Next, we present our analysis of the EICS data and the CGAP administrative data to demonstrate inequalities in the take-up of parental leave in the country, confirming previous findings that in comparison to the other three provinces, a higher proportion of parents in Québec receive parental benefits. We expand the literature with our analysis of Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia. Our final section discusses the implications of our findings and suggests new avenues for future research on parental benefits.

## PARENTAL LEAVE IN CANADA

The decentralized, asymmetrical character of the Canadian federal state, with thirteen provincial and territorial governments, results in jurisdictional divisions and intra-regime policy variations. Canadian provincial governments are more alike than different, yet a high level of inter-provincial variability exists for a number of issues of interest to policy analysts (Imbeau et al. 2000; van den Berg et al. 2017). Imbeau et al. (2000) remind us that comparing provincial public policies enables quasi-experimental research designs because there are fewer variables to control for than in an international federal policy comparison. Thus, Canada offers a unique opportunity to comparatively assess who, in terms of social class, gender, and place of residence, receive parental benefits. The existence of two distinct parental benefits programs means that the Canadian and Québec governments have different approaches to supporting the caring capacities of new parents.

Canada has a complex tripartite parental leave system (Pulkingham and van der Gaag 2004) characterized by 1) fourteen federal/provincial/territorial jurisdictions (ten provinces, three territories, and a federal labour code) governed by employment standard acts that establish job-protected unpaid leave after the birth or adoption of a child in Canada's ten provinces and three territories, 2) two distinct parental leave

benefit programs (since 2006), QPIP and the federal EI program, and 3) employer-sponsored wage-compensation benefits to top up government programs. On the first point, as raised in our previous work (McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet 2016), access to job-protected unpaid parental leave across the fourteen jurisdictions varies. To qualify for unpaid, job-protected maternity/paternity or parental leave, an employee must complete a specific period of continuous employment in the year prior to taking leave. Québec and British Columbia (along with New Brunswick) are exceptions to this rule, with no length of service required. In Alberta, parents must work for the same employer for the shortest duration—a minimum of ninety days—to be eligible. Ontario has the longest duration, with thirteen weeks of service for the same employer.<sup>2</sup>

Until recently, in Alberta, qualifying conditions for leave entitlement were the most onerous, causing a situation where the parental leave benefit was available, but unpaid legal entitlement to leave was not (van der Gaag 2003). Before January 2018, a parent was required to have one full year of continuous employment with the same employer to be eligible for unpaid leave.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, some parents employed for a full year or more prior to birth or adoption were ineligible for leave entitlement because they started a new job within that time period.<sup>4</sup> For example, an expectant parent in Alberta, working twenty hours a week, would qualify to receive paid benefits under EI after thirty weeks (six hundred hours), but would need to work fifty-two consecutive weeks (one thousand hours) in order to be legally entitled to job protection. In contrast, an expectant parent in Québec, working at the minimum wage (\$13.10 an hour in 2020) would only need to work 153 hours to qualify for both leave and benefits. That represents a little less than eight weeks for someone working twenty hours per week.

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2. An employee does not have to *actively* work in the thirteen-week period preceding the start of the parental leave. For example, the employee could be on layoff, vacation, sick leave, or pregnancy leave for all or part of the thirteen-week qualifying period and still be entitled to parental leave. The Employment Standards Act only requires the employee to have been *employed* by the same employer for thirteen weeks before he or she may commence a parental leave.
  3. Employees with less than ninety days of employment could still be granted leave, but their employers were not required under employment standards legislation to provide unpaid, job-protected leave.
  4. As well as in Nova Scotia, Yukon and Nunavut.

Table 1: Parental leave and benefits in Canada

Parental leave eligibility requirements under sub-national employment legislation				
	Alberta	British Columbia	Ontario	Quebec (after QPIP)
Duration of employment with the same employer	52 consecutive weeks prior to January 2018; 90 days with the same employer since January 2018	None	13 weeks of continuous employment	None

When, in 1971, the federal government decided to offer fifteen weeks of maternity leave to working women across the country, the benefits were made available through the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program. Maternity benefits claimants had to face a two-week waiting period, as was the case with many other kinds of insurance. Access to the UI system was designed around the typical characteristics of male labour force participation (Cohen and Pulkingham 2009; Porter 2003). In fact, debates about the maternity leave program revealed a concern that some women would enter the labour force once pregnant in order to obtain benefits (Phipps 2006; Porter 2003). To guard against this possibility, maternity benefit claimants had to demonstrate a “major attachment” to the labour force by working twenty weeks of insured employment during the previous fifty-two weeks, compared to the eight weeks required by those applying for regular benefits claimants.

The federal government has periodically expanded the parental leave benefit program, primarily by extending the duration of leaves, expanding eligibility criteria, and reducing the waiting-period for benefits. In 1990, the parental benefit program introduced ten weeks of paid parental leave that could be shared by qualifying parents, including adoptive parents. For many families, paid parental leave was welcomed as an extension of the existing maternity leave. Both parents had to serve the two-week waiting period; replacement rates for maternity and parental benefits matched those for regular UI benefits. While they were initially set at 60 percent in 1990, replacement rates for regular and special benefits were reduced to 57 percent in 1993 and to 55 percent in 1994. That year, claimants with low earnings (less than 50 percent of the maximum insurable earnings) and those supporting dependants became eligible for a special “dependency rate” of 60 percent (McKeen and Porter 2003).

Following the replacement of UI by the Employment Insurance (EI) program in 1997, a change in the eligibility criteria from weeks worked to hours worked made it more difficult for parents to qualify for ben-

efits. Although the new legislation covered part-time work, the number of hours required to qualify increased: under the UI program, it had been necessary to have worked for three hundred hours (fifteen hours per week for twenty weeks), but under EI, seven hundred working hours (the equivalent of thirty-five hours a week for twenty weeks) were required. The replacement rate for claimants stayed at 55 percent of past earnings, with a cap set at \$413 per week (McKeen and Porter 2003).

In 2001, parental benefits were extended from ten weeks to thirty-five weeks, increasing the total paid maternity and parental leave time from six months to fifty weeks. The first fifteen of these were considered maternity benefits, which only the birth mother was entitled to take; the remaining thirty-five weeks of parental benefits could be taken by either parent or shared between them, and also available to adoptive and same-sex couples. Rather than offering fathers paid paternity benefits, as an incentive for parents to split the extended parental benefits entitlement, the federal government eliminated the two-week waiting period formerly imposed on both claimants; only one parent—typically the mother—had to serve the waiting period. This represented a reduction in the cost to a father hoping to take just a few weeks of benefits. Eligibility for maternity and parental benefit was also reduced from seven hundred to six hundred hours in 2001. However, as Battle and Torjman (2002) argue, this initiative did not address the problems of those who failed to qualify for benefits because it did not change the policy architecture of parental and maternal leave. In 2017, the waiting period was reduced from two weeks to one week. A more significant change in 2018 allowed parents in Canada's nine provinces to spread out the same benefit levels over a longer period of time (i.e., sixty-one weeks, but only at 33 percent of earnings, up to the maximum or a benefit payment ceiling of \$328 per week). Finally, in 2018, the government proposed a “use-it-or-loose-it” parental sharing benefit of five to eight weeks, available when both parents qualify and agree to share parental benefits (Government of Canada 2019).

In Québec, a new family policy was introduced in 1997, promising longer, more accessible, and better paid parental leave; it was implemented a little less than a decade later, in 2006. Whereas all regular EI benefits and EI special benefits (such as sickness benefits, compassionate care leave, and benefits for parents of critically ill children) remained available to Québec residents, in 2006, the province became responsible for its own parental leave program through QPIP.<sup>5</sup> The original two week waiting period for obtaining benefits was not incorporated in the design,

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5. In 2005, the Canada-Québec Agreement on the Parental Insurance Plan was signed to give Québec the means to implement its own plan as of January 1, 2006. The Agreement stipulated that the premiums Québec citizens paid into

and eligibility criteria were less stringent. Parental benefits were made available to any parent earning at least \$2,000 during the previous tax year. Basing eligibility on flat-rate earnings rather than on the number of hours worked enabled parents not covered by EI to qualify for QPIP benefits. As a result, non-standard workers, such as part-time employees, contract workers, many students, and the self-employed, were newly entitled to receive benefits. The Québécois parental leave program was also more flexible and more generous. Since 2006, new parents have had a choice between receiving a smaller percentage of their usual income for a period of almost one year (the basic plan) or a higher income for a shorter leave time (the special plan). Each plan includes a “use it or lose it” individual-entitlement paternity leave of three to five weeks. In 2020, the annually adjusted maximum insurable income in Québec was \$78,500, meaning that Québécois parents could receive up to \$1,103 per week compared to \$573 (with an annual ceiling of \$54,200) in the other provinces.

Although parental benefits are more accessible and generous in Québec, the Canadian and Québécois leave benefit programs share the precondition of labour force attachment. In each program, leaves are a form of social security that covers a limited group of potential participants. They are contributory wage replacement social insurance schemes funded not through general revenue, but through a separate pool of funds.<sup>6</sup> As a result, inequalities in the labour market are translated into inequalities in the receipt of paid parental benefits, though, as we argue below, the extent of these inequalities is also contingent on gender and place of residence.

## THEORY

Our theoretical frame is informed by two sets of literatures. The first is the comparative literature that documents the existence and persistence of different types of social policy organization in Western countries. The

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the federal employment insurance plan would be reduced as of the date that QPIP come into effect.

6. Employers are required to deduct employment insurance premiums (often called a payroll tax) from employees' insurable earnings up to a yearly maximum and to contribute 1.4 times the employee amount. Insurable employment includes all employment under a contract of service where there is an employer-employee relationship. Québec employers and employees must pay both EI and QPIP contributions but receive an EI premium reduction in recognition of Québec offering maternity, parental, adoption, and paternity benefits to their residents under QPIP.

second is feminist and critical social policy approaches to work and care policies.

In his seminal work, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) identified three welfare regimes: 1) the “liberal” regime of Anglo-Saxon countries, with high levels of class inequality, 2) the “conservative” regime of the European countries, with quite generous policies that are, however, designed to support the male-breadwinner family, and 3) the “social democratic” regime of the Nordic countries, where social policies are the most generous. Although Canada has sometimes been treated as a homogeneous system, as have other Anglo-Saxon countries (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999; O’Connor et al. 1999), research has revealed sub-national variations in the nature and extent of social and economic policies (Haddow 2015; Mahon and Brennan 2013; Mahon et al. 2016); consequently, there is a call to refine Esping-Andersen’s framework in order to address how the typology plays out at a “more granulated level” (Baird and O’Brien 2015:199).

We draw attention to well documented intra-regime variations between Québec and the rest of Canadian provinces and among the country’s provinces. For example, in the early 2000s, Bernard and St-Arnaud (2004) evaluated the extent of provincial public policy differences using international standards to locate the provinces against a group of advanced countries. They concluded that while Québec, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia were similar to each other and to Canada, in general, in terms of welfare regimes, modest but significant differences existed between the provinces. Alberta resembled the ultra-liberal United States, whereas Québec leaned in the direction of the Nordic countries, and to some extent, social democracy.

Other researchers have adopted the same comparative lenses, examining social inequality within the four largest Canadian provinces. Observers have argued that, while Québec’s social policies are more generous than those of the other Canadian provinces, what really sets the province apart is its greater emphasis on poverty-combating policies aimed specifically at families with children (Proulx et al. 2011; van den Berg et al. 2017). Bernard and Raïq (2011) and Raïq et al. (2012) showed that although Québec has been affected by the same socio-economic trends as the other provinces, its pursuit of a separate social agenda has enabled it to follow a different trajectory with respect to poverty reduction. In the early 1990s, Québec’s single-parent family poverty rate was the same as the Canadian average; since then, however, the rates in the three other provinces have increased, while Québec’s has continued to decline (Raïq and Plante 2013). Raïq and Plante (2013) also found that in Québec and Alberta, very few families experience extensive periods of poverty. They



argued that this indicates different paths for exiting poverty in these provinces; families can rely on state intervention to overcome poverty in Québec, and on numerous, often well-paid employment opportunities in Alberta.<sup>7</sup> This statement did not, however, anticipate the economic recession in Alberta that began in 2014.

In short, researchers and policy experts tend to agree that by veering away from Anglo-Saxon welfare state regimes and committing to better redistributive programs, Québec is more similar to the Nordic countries than to other Canadian provinces (Mahon et al. 2016; Paquin 2016). In the words of van den Berg et al. (2017:5):

Québec has made a major turn toward a more generous kind of welfare state, one that is beginning to resemble the much-admired Nordic social democratic models. Meanwhile, the other provinces have followed the general trend towards neoliberal cutbacks characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon liberal market regimes, with ultra-laissez-faire Alberta taking the lead.

The second body of literature consists of feminist and critical social policy approaches to work and care policies, specifically how policy designs, including subsidized childcare services and paid parental leave benefits, structure and, indeed, can exacerbate gender and class inequalities in mothers' employment opportunities and wages (e.g., Gornick and Meyers 2003; Misra et al. 2007; Misra et al. 2011). We build on previous work that documents social inequalities in the receipt of parental benefits in countries in the Global North. Ample attention has been given to gender equality issues in parental leave take-up (e.g., Almqvist and Duvander 2014; O'Brien and Wall 2017; Rehel 2014; Wall 2014), to the ways that policy design matters in gendering care work and paid work in the first year of an infant's life (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Moss and Deven 2015), and to the connections between fathers' leave taking (especially when supported by generous wage replacement rates) and gender equality, both in the home and in the workplace (e.g., Duvander et al. 2019; Haas and Hwang 2019). Class issues have also received increasing attention with a growing body of international work highlighting how mothers' and fathers' access to and take up of leave benefits reflect and deepen class divides in terms of who actually *benefits from leave benefits*, leading researchers to describe this as a distinction between "parental-leave-rich" and "parental-leave poor" households (McKay, Mathieu,

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7. Alberta, however, is the province with the highest rate of single-parent families in-and-out of poverty. In other words, families are at high risk of experiencing poverty, a situation they are nevertheless able to escape relatively quickly compared to families in Ontario and in British Columbia.

and Doucet 2016 citing O'Brien 2009: 191). Our previous research has demonstrated the persistence of patterns of inequality in Canada based on programs and income, with parents living in Québec having better access to paid parental benefits (McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet 2016; Mathieu, McKay, and Doucet 2017). Here, we further develop this analysis and critique of class and gender inequalities in eligibility and take-up of parental benefits in Canada.

## METHODOLOGY

Our methodology quantifies the extent to which families are using Canada's parental leave benefit programs, comparing EI in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, and QPIP in Québec. Following the work of van den Berg et al. (2017), we chose these four provinces pragmatically; they are the most populous, which means that comparative data are available and reliable. These four provinces also span the entire range of political orientations and traditions in the country, with British Columbia and Ontario falling more or less in the political middle ground of two provinces moving in opposite directions: liberal Alberta and interventionist Québec (van den Berg et al. 2017:15).

We sought to measure the take-up of parental leave benefits in terms of class and gender in these provinces. First, we used comparative provincial data from the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey (EICS), an annual national survey conducted by Statistics Canada on behalf of Employment and Social Development Canada, which manages the EI program. The EICS is the main data source that has been used to provide estimates of parental leave in Canada (see, for instance, Lacroix et al. 2017; Patnaik 2019; Robson 2017; Tian 2013). Its strengths for studying parental benefits are that the data include some sociodemographic characteristics, such as income for both EI and QPIP claimants, and that the survey has been repeated numerous times (Hou et al. 2017).<sup>8</sup> We chose to use this survey due to its timely availability, data consistency, and reliability.<sup>9</sup>

The EICS is designed to shed light on the EI program's coverage, with a focus on who does and does not have access to EI regular benefits for unemployment as well as special benefits, including maternity and parental benefits. The survey is administered four times a year to a sub-

8. The limitation of the EICS is that the survey is cross-sectional and therefore does not contain a longer history of work and family structure (Hou et al. 2017).

9. Margolis et al. (2019) use administrative data to examine the effect of the introduction of QPIP on the use and sharing of parental benefits in Canada.

sample of Labour Force Survey respondents and asks about their employment situation during the reference week in the month prior to being interviewed. The total sample size is, on average, eleven thousand respondents, composed of unemployed individuals and others who, given their recent status in the labour market, could potentially be eligible for EI. The survey includes Canadians with and without insurable employment and excludes residents of Canada's three territories and Indigenous people living on First Nation reserves. Women with a child less than one year old were asked additional questions about maternity and parental leave, including questions about their spouse's use of paid parental/paternity leave. Weights were applied to ensure comparability.

We identified three variables of interest in the EICS for the period between 2000 and 2017 (the most recent year available at the time of writing) and examined each variable by province of residence. The variables pertain to 1) the take-up of maternity benefits, 2) the take-up of maternity benefits by income, and 3) the take-up of or the intention to take-up paternity/parental benefits. The small sample size for each province<sup>10</sup> forced us to make two decisions: first, we report data on the take-up of maternity and paternity/parental benefits for pooled years (2000–2005, 2006–2011, and 2012–2017) to increase the number of cases in the study. Second, for the same reason, we use large income categories for the study of benefits take-up: households with a family income of either above or below \$60,000.

As a way to document Québec's exceptionalism, we also use administrative data compiled by the Conseil de gestion de l'assurance parentale (CGAP), which manages the QPIP and ensures that benefits are paid to new parents. Each year, the CGAP compiles data relevant to the payment of benefits, such as income, gender, and plan preferences. The data presented below were compiled between 2006 and 2017; they pertain to the take-up of benefits by mothers and fathers and the share of parental benefits between partners.

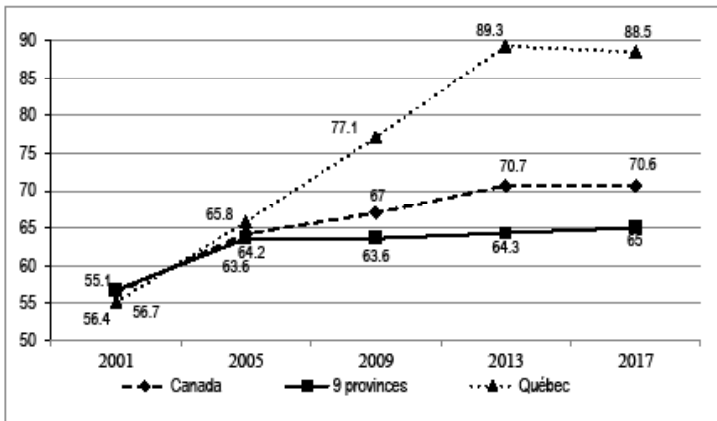
## FINDINGS

Robson (2017) reports that the increase in the percentage of new mothers receiving benefits between 2000 and 2005 in Canada (outside Québec) was probably due to changes in Canadian women's labour force participation. After 2006, national statistics, which are inflated by Québec's

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10. Although the EICS includes a sample of around 11,000 people per year, its sample of new mothers is relatively small (about 1,000), which makes it difficult to study smaller population groups (Hou et al. 2017).

rate of receipt, obscure the geographical unevenness of mothers' take-up of maternity and parental benefits. Although Canadian and Québécois mothers received proportionally similar benefits in the early 2000s, this trend diverged after the implementation of QPIP. The proportion of women in Québec receiving benefits increased by 33.4 percent, from 55.1 percent in 2001 to 88.5 percent in 2017, while in the other provinces, the increase was only 8.3 percent, from 56.7 percent to 65 percent. In 2017, there was a gap of 23.5 percentage points between mothers in receipt of benefits in Québec and in the nine other Canadian provinces (Figure 1).



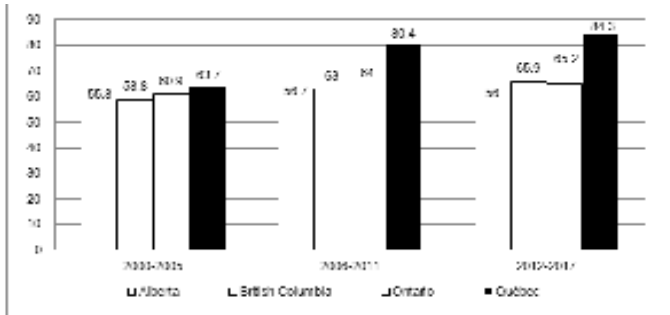
**Figure 1.** Proportion of mothers receiving maternity and/or parental benefits in Canada, Québec, and the nine other provinces, 2001–2017.

**Source:** Statistics Canada HCS 2002, 2005, 2009, 2013 and 2017, custom tabulation.

**Note:** The data includes self-employed workers. In Québec, self-employed workers became eligible in 2006, and in the RDC, in 2011.

Figure 2 compares the proportion of mothers receiving maternity and/or parental benefits in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec during three time periods: before the implementation of QPIP (2000–2005), immediately afterwards (2006–2011), and later on (2012–2017). As in figure 1, figure 2 shows that a similar proportion of mothers received benefits in all four provinces before the implementation of QPIP. The change after QPIP was introduced is especially obvious when Québec is compared with Alberta, the province with the lowest proportion of mothers receiving maternity benefits during all three periods. For instance, the

difference between the take-up of maternity benefits in Alberta and Québec is only 7.9 percent before 2006 (63.7 percent versus 55.8 percent), but this gap increases to 28.3 percent between 2012 and 2017 (84.3 percent versus 56 percent). The difference in the proportion of women receiving maternity benefits in Ontario and British Columbia, compared to Québec, also widens, although less acutely.



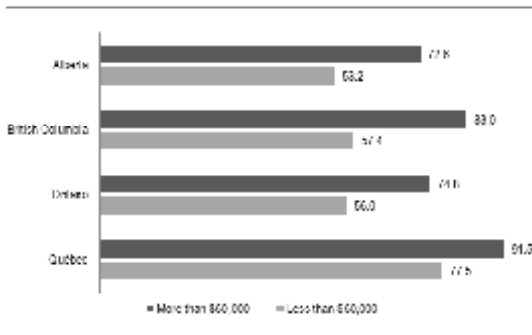
**Figure 2. Proportion of mothers receiving maternity and parental benefits in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec, 2000–2005, 2006–2011, 2012–2017.**

**Source:** Statistics Canada, HCSS 2000–2017.

### *Income*

Differentiated take-up of parental benefits between the four provinces is also obvious across social classes. Indeed, a similar structure of inequality can be observed when examining who, in terms of income, has access to benefits, with Québec and Alberta occupying opposite ends of the spectrum. Figure 3 shows the proportion of mothers in two household income categories who received benefits in 2017. Although Québec had the highest proportion of mothers who received benefits in both categories, and Alberta had the lowest, living in a household with an income above \$60,000 had a positive effect on the take-up of parental benefits across Canada. The effect is strongest in British Columbia, where there was a 25.6 percent difference in mothers' take-up of benefits between households with an income below and above \$60,000. The effect was weakest in Québec, where the difference was only 14 percent. Québec mothers in households with an income above \$60,000 were the most “parental-leave rich” parents (McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet 2016): 91.5 percent received benefits in 2016. Conversely, the most “parental-leave poor” parents (McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet 2016) lived in Alberta,

where only 53.2 percent of mothers living in a household with an income below \$60,000 received benefits in 2016. With regard to the take-up of parental benefits, it was better to be poor in Québec than to be rich in Alberta or Ontario as a higher proportion of mothers in lower-income households received benefits in Québec (77.5 percent) than mothers in higher-income households in Alberta (72.6 percent) or in Ontario (74.8 percent).<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 3. Percentage of mothers who received maternity and/or parental benefits by household income, for the four largest Canadian provinces in 2016.\***  
Source: Statistics Canada EPCS 2016, custom tabulation.

\* We report data for 2016 instead of 2017. Since the early 2000s, Alberta has consistently been the province with the lowest take-up rate among poorer households. A different picture emerges in 2017, when poorer households in Ontario and British Columbia seem to have a lower proportion of parents receiving benefits. It is difficult to assess whether this observation will hold true in the future.

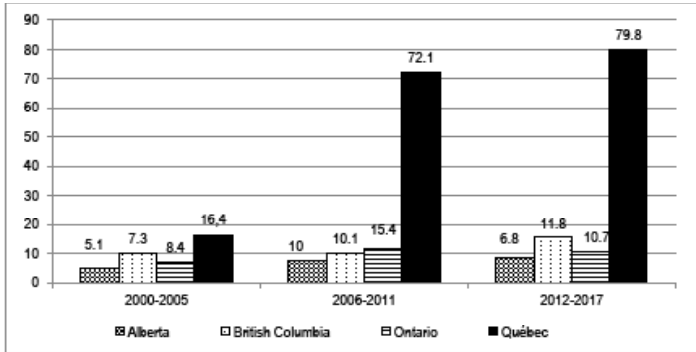
### *Gender*

Figure 4 illustrates fathers' take-up of parental/paternity benefits in the four largest Canadian provinces, using the same three time periods: 2000–2005, 2006–2011, and 2012–2017.<sup>12</sup> As expected, there are im-

11. Obviously, these numbers do not reflect the cost of living in each province: an income of \$60,000 goes further in Québec than in Alberta or in Ontario. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the richest households (earning \$60,000 and higher) in Alberta have less access to parental benefits than in Québec.

12. This variable must be examined cautiously as it refers to the proportion of mothers who stated that their partner claimed or intended to claim benefits and not the proportion of these fathers who actually did claim parental/paternity benefits.

portant differences between the proportion of fathers receiving parental benefits in Québec compared to the other provinces, especially after 2016. In Québec, the take-up of parental/paternity leaves increased from 16.4 percent before the implementation of QPIP (2000–2005), to roughly 80 percent of fathers between 2012 and 2017.



**Figure 4. Proportion of fathers who received parental benefits, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec, 2000–2005, 2006–2011 and 2012–2017.**

**Source: Statistics Canada HICS custom tabulation.**

The administrative data compiled by the CGAP confirm that Québec fathers are increasingly more likely to take paternity leave than are fathers in other provinces (Mayer and LeBourdais 2019); in 2017, both parents were recipients in 68.8 percent of families that received QPIP benefits (CGAP, special compilation, not shown). However, the proportion of fathers receiving benefits in the province was also higher prior to the introduction of QPIP, suggesting some cultural differences between Québec and Canada’s other nine provinces. Between 2000 and 2005, 16.4 percent of fathers in Québec received parental benefits, while only 5.1 percent of fathers did in Alberta, 6.8 percent in Ontario, and 10 percent in British Columbia.

Contrary to previous research (Mayer and LeBourdais 2019), we found that the availability of paternity leave in Québec has had a slowly increasing spillover effect whereby the use of paternity leave positively affects the take-up of parental benefits. Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of fathers on QPIP who received parental benefits: it shows whether fathers only received paternity benefits or also used part of the parental leave benefits, which can either be shared by partners or used completely by just one parent. In 2006, only 14,107 fathers received parental benefits; this number represents 30.7 percent of all fathers receiving QPIP

benefits (46,008), which include both paternity and parental benefits. Put differently, among fathers who received QPIP benefits in 2006, 69.3 percent only took paternity leave (for a maximum three or five weeks, depending the type of plan they chose). In 2017, the proportion of fathers using parental leave following their paternity leave increased to 37 percent (of the 58,905 fathers receiving benefits), which might indicate that the proportion of mothers who qualified to receive benefits (for instance, stay-at-home mothers) was declining or that more mothers were choosing not to take-up parental benefits. It might also mean, as we suspect is the case here, that an increasing proportion of couples are choosing to share parental benefits.

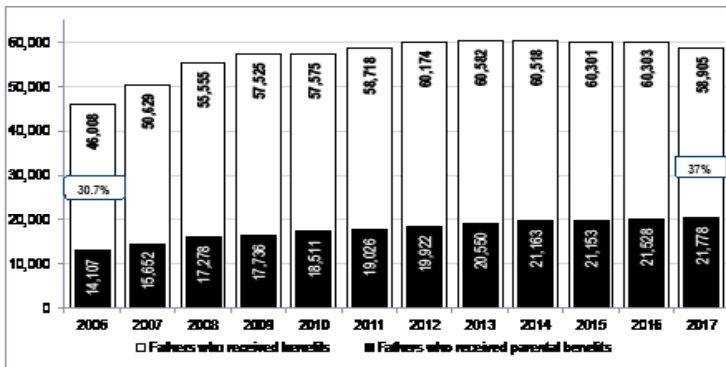


Figure 5. Percentage of fathers who received parental benefits among fathers on QPIP, 2006–2017

Source: Conseil de gestion de l'assurance parentale, special compilation, 2019.

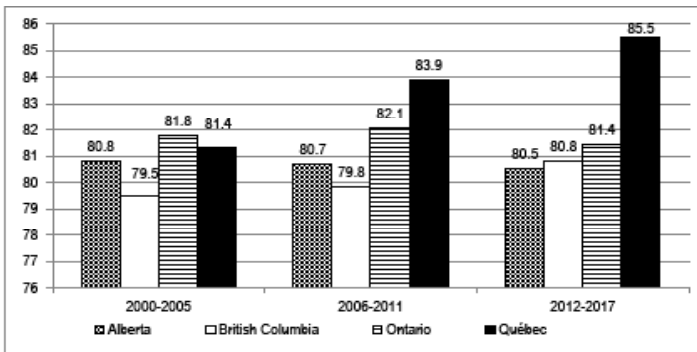
## DISCUSSION

Across Canada, access to and take-up of parental benefits are determined by three main factors. The first of these is economic activity. As described above, access to parental leave benefits in Canada is tied to labour market participation. Accordingly, parents that are not active in the labour market do not qualify to receive parental benefits. However, the correspondence between rates of economic activity among men and women aged 25–44 and the take-up of parental benefit is not straightforward in the two provinces moving in opposite directions, Alberta and Québec. Generally, high rates of economic activity among women translate into a higher proportion of women receiving parental benefits.



In Québec, the elevated take-up of maternity benefits also reflects other dynamics related to the province's generous family policy, which has included low-cost, high quality childcare since the late 1990s (Fortin et al. 2012; Mathieu 2019).

At the other end of the spectrum is Alberta. Although Albertan mothers had the lowest take-up rate for maternity benefits during the entire period under study, it was British Columbian women aged 25–44 who had the lowest economic participation rate between 2000 and 2011 (figure 6). Albertan women were only slightly less economically active than women in the other three provinces after 2012. The low take-up of maternity benefits in Alberta may indicate the possibility that a large proportion of mothers in the province withdraw from the labour market to perform caregiving activities, thus making it difficult for them to qualify for maternity benefits thereafter (Colen and Breitkreuz 2019). Despite having the highest rates of economic activity among men aged 25–44 (figure 7) throughout all three periods, Alberta is characterised by the lowest take-up of parental benefits among new fathers. Conversely, in Québec, where economic participation rates among men aged 25–44 are the lowest, over 80 percent of fathers have been taking paternity benefits since 2006 (figure 2).



**Figure 6. Labour force participation rate for women aged 25–44, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec, 2000–2005, 2006–2011 and 2012–2017.**

**Source:** Statistics Canada, table 14-10-0012-01, *Labour force characteristics by sex and detailed age group, annual*.

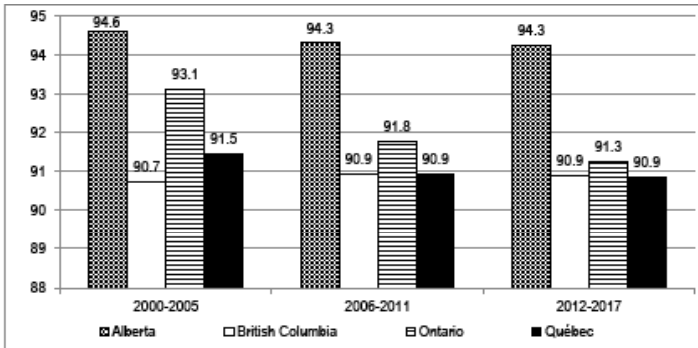


Figure 7. Labour force participation rate for men aged 25–44, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec, 2000–2005, 2006–2011 and 2012–2017.

Source: Statistics Canada, table 14-10-0018-01, *Labour force characteristics by sex and detailed age group, annual*.

A second factor influencing patterns of inequalities is the way parents access parental leave time and money: job-entitlement leave time and monetary benefits. Both are dependent upon stronger labour force attachment, privileging parents who work for the same employer for a longer period of time. Yet, there are provincial variations in eligibility for job-protected unpaid parental leave that might help explain different levels of take-up. Québec and British Columbia have no employment duration requirement, and Alberta and Ontario require ninety days to thirteen consecutive weeks worked for the same employer (prior to parental leave and benefits claims).

Since 2006, Québec has had its own parental benefit program and eligibility criteria that are easy to meet compared to the six hundred hours of insurable employment required of parents in the other provinces. Québec's \$2,000 eligibility income minimum for accessing benefits has not changed since the implementation of QPIP, making it easier to qualify, year after year, when accounting for inflation.

What resonates from the discussion above is that inequalities in access to and take up of parental benefits mirror and reinforce the structure of income inequalities experienced more broadly in each of the provinces. Parental benefit regimes are a third indicator of patterns of income and gender inequalities. In Canada, income inequalities have been increasing since the 1980s, although inconsistently (most acutely between the late 1980s and early 2000s) and depending on provincial contexts (Bernard and Raïq 2011; Heisz 2016; Scarfone et al. 2017; Sharpe and Capeluck 2012). An examination of after-tax Gini coefficients from

2000 to 2017 for the four provinces under study reveals that Québec consistently stands out as the province with the most effective income distribution policies and, consequently, the lowest Gini coefficients (Statistics Canada 2019). Gini coefficients for the other three provinces hover around the Canadian average. Gender inequalities, examined through the lens of the gender wage-gap, are also lower in Québec and higher in Alberta than the Canadian average. In Canada, the national gender pay gap based on hourly wages is 12.5 percent, meaning that women earn 12.5 percent less per hour of work than men do. In Québec however, the wage gap is lower, at 8.9 percent, followed by Ontario at 11.4 percent. British Columbia (17.2 percent) and Alberta (18.8 percent) remain at the back of the pack (Conference Board of Canada 2019).

These two examples reinforce the conclusions made by others (Paquin 2016; van den Berg et al. 2017) regarding the considerable and growing distance between Québec and the other provinces with respect to social and family policies as well as the class and gender inequality outcomes generated by these policies. The take-up of parental benefits articulates connections between paid work and unpaid care work, two areas in which both class and gender inequalities are lived and reproduced. The state, as a mediator between paid work performed in the labour market and social reproductive work performed in the household, is an active force in the ordering of social inequalities and in the edification of different parental benefit regimes. Because parental benefits are linked to labour force participation, inequalities experienced in employment are likely to be reflected in and even strengthened by the take-up of parental leave. On the one hand, in Québec, the majority of new mothers not only receive maternity benefits, but they can rely on their spouse to take time off work to perform caregiving activities, even beyond paternity leaves. On the other hand, in Alberta, only roughly 56 percent of new mothers have claimed maternity benefits since the early 2000s, possibly because the other 44 percent are unable to meet eligibility criteria. In addition, early social reproductive work has remained very “motherised” in Alberta (Mathieu 2016), as a low proportion of fathers have received parental benefits.

Parental benefit regimes become the door through which babies are introduced to inequalities, with a higher proportion of infants receiving state-supported parental care in Québec than in the other provinces. Our study thus confirms previous findings documenting Québec’s “exceptionalism” (Bernard and Raïq 2011; Raïq et al. 2012; Raïq and van den Berg 2014; van den Berg et al. 2017). With regard to parental leave benefit regimes, not only has Québec been rowing against the Canadian

current (Jenson 2002), as we show, but QPIP has also produced different outcomes in terms of *who* receive parental benefits.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is the first study to quantify inequality in access to parental benefits in four Canadian provinces, taking into account both gender and class inequalities as well as two sets of data. It raises at least three important concerns for future national and international studies of parental leave benefits. First, there is a need for more accurate data to facilitate intersectional analyses. Our research has highlighted the existence of variations in the take-up of parental benefits, even among parents who live in the same country and who must meet, in the case of the three English-speaking provinces, the same eligibility criteria to receive benefits. Currently, the data used in this research does not allow us to examine the cumulative and intersecting effects of these dimensions on the take-up of parental benefits. The available data are survey data, and analyses using more than one variable per geographical location are impossible to conduct due to the small survey sample sizes. It would thus be highly advisable for future research to use a feminist intersectional framework, which involves concurrent analyses of multiple, intersectional inequalities. Important questions to address include: How does ethnicity (including new immigrant status) intersect with social class in terms of access to parental benefits across Canadian provinces? Do Indigenous parents have better access to benefits in Québec than in the other provinces (and does this vary for Indigenous populations on reserves versus those living in urban areas)? Do LGBTQ2+ parents living in high-income households have similar access to paid leave as heterosexual parents across the country?

A second concern of our research is related to the appropriateness of units of analysis. We have examined access to parental benefits by *parents*, instead of assessing which *children* received state-funded parental care. Focusing on children would shed light on patterns of inequalities that are rarely discussed in the parental benefits literature. Even in Québec, all children are not equal before QPIP. Twins have to share parental care and QPIP does not provide a longer leave in case of a multiple birth. Also, adopted children do not have access to the same number of state-funded parental care weeks as biological children, and children of two male parents are in receipt of fewer parental benefits than children of two female parents, because maternity leave is only available to biological mothers.

Finally, our research raises questions about the potential consequences of relying exclusively on labour market-based approaches to supporting caring for children. Other countries are moving towards “mixed” systems of parental leave, which pair leaves attached to the labour market with basic parental benefits, with the latter conceived partly as social rights available to all parents (see Dobrotić and Blum 2019a, 2019b; Doucet, McKay, and Mathieu 2019). It is important to consider if and how such an approach might work within Canada’s complex parental leave system. The system will also be important to assess in a post COVID-19 context, especially because women’s employment losses were more than twice that of men’s in March 2020, just after pandemic closure measures were implemented across Canada (Statistics Canada 2020). As we have discussed, as long as access to parental benefits remains tied to labour market attachment, there is an ongoing risk of reproducing socio-economic inequalities for Canadians from birth. That is, some infants will receive state-funded maternal and paternal care (especially infants in Québec) while a significant proportion of newborns (in lower-income households in Alberta as well as in British Columbia and Ontario) will not have the same privilege.

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