

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**van den Berg, Axel, Charles Plante, Hicham Raïq, Christine Proulx and Samuel Faustmann.** *Combating Poverty: Quebec's Pursuit of a Distinctive Welfare State*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, pp. 213, \$37.50. Hardcover (9781487501563).

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**T**he debate on welfare state variation often concentrates on countries in their entirety. *Combating Poverty: Quebec's Pursuit of a Distinctive Welfare State* departs from this approach by providing an insightful comparison between Canadian provinces since the 1980s, with an emphasis on the 2002-2012 period. The authors investigate whether and to what extent the four largest Canadian provinces (Ontario, Québec, British Columbia and Alberta) have pursued different policy approaches to respond to family and labour market changes, and the substantive outcomes of these policies. Within this analysis, the authors underline how Québec's social and employment policy choices have affected poverty outcomes in that province.

Due to the decentralized nature of Canada's federalism, Canadian social policy scholarship emphasizes provincial differences (Rice and Prince, 2013). Within this literature, Québec has been singled out for its diverging political economy and welfare programmes (Haddow, 2015). Research has also compared the province's policies with those found in the social democratic welfare regime commonly found in Scandinavia (Paquin, 2016). Van den Berg et al. contribute to this literature by comparing policies and outcomes between provinces as well as other welfare states. They argue Québec is indeed different from its provincial counterparts, leading to lower poverty outcomes for certain target groups.

Since the book only examines Ontario, Québec, British Columbia and Alberta, it does not provide an exhaustive cross-Canadian comparison. However, it does give the reader a richly detailed explanation and analysis of each of the cases. In a second set of comparisons, van den Berg et al. test Québec's poverty outcomes against other welfare states including the United States, France, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland. Here, the authors do not compare policies. Instead, they

better situate provincial poverty outcomes by broadening the scope of analysis to outcomes in other welfare state regimes.

The analysis begins with a comprehensive overview of the social and employment policies adopted in the respective provinces. Chapter one situates the provinces within the context of Canadian federal politics in these issue areas and charts provincial spending differences. In so doing, the authors convincingly argue Québec's expenditures, especially for family support and family reconciliation policy (particularly since the mid 1990s), set it apart from the other provinces. These variations become the foundation of their argument that Québec's attention to families has led to a reduction of poverty levels for these target groups.

Chapters two through four analyze policy outcomes, with a particular eye to examining poverty rates using provincial LIM thresholds: setting the poverty rate to households with half of the median provincial disposable income. Although the differences between gross poverty rates for the four provinces remain modest, the authors argue it is necessary to subdivide the population and analyze different types of poverty for a clear understanding of the outcomes. They accomplish this by analyzing the level and duration of poverty as well as poverty rates according to household type. This approach allows *Combating Poverty* to provide a fine-grained analysis of poverty levels in Canada.

By subdividing the population, van den Berg et al. demonstrate marked differences between the provinces, and the use of provincial thresholds provides a more accurate picture of poverty within each case. Further, this approach allows the researchers to demonstrate that families with children in Québec are at a lower risk of poverty and acute poverty than the other provinces. By examining different types of households, the authors are also able to demonstrate Québec's family poverty rates—especially for two-parent households—are comparable to social democratic welfare states such as Denmark.

In the final substantive chapters of the book, the authors attempt to determine the relationship between Québec's policies and poverty outcomes. To do so, they scrutinize labour market participation and standardize populations. By standardizing populations, as they do in Chapter 6, the authors analyze whether a province's population is more or less prone to poverty. For instance, by having more or less single parents or different levels of labour market participation. This provides a more robust understanding of the differences in outcomes between provinces.

However, the argument linking activation policies to poverty outcomes in Chapter five is less convincing. Although van den Berg et al.

point out long-term trends and their possible implications, the analyses in the book do not allow the researchers to determine whether *policies* are indeed driving poverty rates. The authors assess poverty rates for various subgroups according to labour market participation. They do not, however, determine if changes in labour market participation are related to activation policies or to *other* factors, such as changes in the employment situation. Existing research on Québec's family policies lends weight to their argument. For instance, multiple analyses have argued that daycare policies have led to an increase in female participation in the labour market (for example, Fortin et al. 2012). Nevertheless, to truly ascertain the link between labour market participation and activation would require in-depth statistical analysis, which the book does not engage with, unfortunately. Furthermore, the effects of activation policies are subject to contentious debate and meta-analyses of activation provide mixed results (Card et al. 2010). As the authors themselves recognize, they are unable to determine causality. Here, the research could benefit from an overarching theoretical framework to provide a more in-depth investigation of policy effects.

Scholars of Canadian social and employment policy will find much of interest here. Each chapter builds on the previous, creating a strong argument that Canadian social and employment policy is marked by significant variation which produces different poverty outcomes. Chapter one's comparison of provincial social and employment policies is particularly impressive as the authors thoroughly catalogue these policies. The description of programs in the four largest Canadian provinces and the explanation of poverty indicators in Chapter two provides a strong introduction for those new to the subject.

The decision to analyze different household types also allows the authors to highlight Québec's conflicting social and employment policy outcomes which leads to weak outcomes for households without children, especially single adults. This lends support to existing literature on the subject that Québec prioritizes households with young families, but does little for childless households (Noël 2015). Finally, the comparison with other welfare state types accentuates the importance of social policy variation in Canada and reinforces the argument that provinces should be investigated individually.

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