



Canadian Public Opinion on Families and Public Policy
Report to Southam News and NFFRE

Monday, November 23, 1998

Introduction

xxxxSoutham News and the National Foundation for Family Research and Education (NFFRE) commissioned COMPAS to undertake a survey of Canadians' perceptions of family stress, expectations for family-related action from government, assessments of the dilemmas of family breakdown, perceptions of equity in divorce courts, and other family-related themes.

xxxxInterviews were conducted October 29-30th among a representative sample of n>500 Canadians. Samples of this size are considered accurate to within 4.5 percentage points 19 times out of 20. This project was undertaken by Dr. Conrad Winn with the assistance of Denise Mac Donell (613-237-4493).

Families in Crisis and Government Responsibility

Skyrocketing Stress

xxxxCanadians believe that families with children are under a great deal of stress and government should help do something about it. This portrait of family stress and government responsibility emerges from responses to questions about the stress families are under today compared to 50 years ago and the emphasis governments should place to help alleviate these stresses. Respondents were asked:

As you may know, there's been some talk over the last few years about family life in Canada. Compared to, say, 50 years ago, is it your impression that families with children are experiencing a lot more stress than they have before, more stress, less stress, or a lot less stress? [Record but don't prompt no change]

xxxxConcern about family stress is virtually a consensus position. An overwhelming majority of respondents (92%) say that families with children today are under a lot more stress (33%) or more stress (59%) than families 50 years ago. Few say that families today were under less stress (4%) and none that they are under a lot less stress. The remaining 4% say that stress levels have not changed. One indicator of the depth of the consensus on the issue of family stress is that those who feel that stresses have increased outnumber by 23:1 those who feel that stresses have abated.

xxxxCanadians' belief that families with children today face more stress than in the past is consensual, cutting across all groups. A belief about the large amount of family stress is shared irrespective of age, level of education, region or gender.

A Demand for Government Action

xxxxThe deeply concerned public wants governments to take remedial action, especially with respect to helping families stay together. Furthermore, over the long-term the public wants governments to subject the full range of their programs and policies to the litmus test of family impact. This portrait of public expectations of government emerges from responses to the following questions:

As you know, governments deal with a variety of issues. How much emphasis should governments place on creating the financial and other conditions that may make it easier for families with children to stay together...a lot more than governments are doing (40%), somewhat more (41%), somewhat less (8%), or a lot less (6%)? [Record but don't prompt same 6%]

As you may know, governments can make it easier or harder for families to stay together through income tax laws, marriage laws, financial support for taking care of elderly parents, and in many other ways. Do you think that governments should automatically consider how their policies do affect the family lives of Canadians...very definitely (56%), very probably (14%), probably (21%), not really 4%), or not at all (4%)?

xxxxThe overwhelming majority of Canadians (81%) believe that the government should place a lot more (40%) or somewhat more emphasis (41%) on creating the financial and other conditions to help families stay together. The size of this majority is striking given that respondents were alerted at the beginning of the question that governments have to "deal with a variety of issues," not just the wellbeing of families. Altogether, those who call for a greater emphasis by government on keeping families together outnumber by a factor of more than 5:1 those who call for a lesser emphasis by government.

xxxxCanadians' desire for government action is shared by men and women alike. Meanwhile Quebecers and the young stand out somewhat from the norm. Quebecers are slightly more likely than other Canadians to say that the government should place a lot more emphasis on creating conditions to help families stay together--49% of Quebecers say the government should place "a lot more emphasis" compared to 40% of Canadians as a whole.

xxxxYoung Canadians, those under 30 years of age, are less likely than other Canadians to say that the government should place a lot more emphasis on creating conditions to help families stay together. Thus, 29% of those under 30 say that the government should place "a lot more emphasis" compared to 40% of Canadians as a whole. One might assume that younger Canadians are less likely to see a need for government responsibility as a result of the fact that they are less likely than older Canadians to be in family formations of their own.

xxxxCanadians' desire for action to ease the stress on family life is paralleled by Canadians' desire for government to provide ongoing assessments of all their programs and policies according to their impacts on family life. The public feels intensely about the need to evaluate programs and policy according to family impact. Thus, an extraordinary 56% believe that governments should "definitely" practice this kind of ongoing assessment. Another 14% feel that governments should "very probably" do so, 21% probably, and only 4% not really along with 4% not at all.

xxxxA strong consensus favours the ongoing evaluation of programs and policies in terms of family impact, albeit with a few modest variations:

- Men are slightly more enthusiastic than women about assessing government policies in terms of family impact-- 60% of men say that government should "very definitely" implement family impact analysis compared to 53% of women with this view
- Quebecers are slightly less likely than others to say that the government should very definitely consider how their policies affect Canadian families - 41% vs. 56% for Canadians as a whole
- Younger Canadians, that is those under 30, are also slightly less likely than others to say that the government should very definitely consider how their policies affect Canadian families - 43% vs. 56% among Canadians as a whole, and
- The better educated are slightly more enthusiastic about the proposal than the less educated--59% of university graduates feel that government should "very definitely" follow this policy route compared to 51% of high school graduation.

Specific Stresses--Divorce, Jobs and Parents Working Too Hard

xxxxFamilies face a variety of stresses ranging from burdensome taxation to unstable jobs and insufficient societal respect for the tasks of parenting. Topping the stress list is divorce and family breakdown. This portrait of Canadians' views of the sources of family stress emerges from responses to the following battery of questions:

I'm going to read you a short list of possible stresses on families. Please tell me if each stress is much more serious, somewhat more serious, somewhat less, or much less serious than, say, a generation ago. Don't prompt but record dnk or same/unchanged.

[rotate]

Divorce and family breakdown

Parents working too hard or too many hours in a day

Insecure or unstable job conditions

Taxes being too high for parents with children

Not enough respect in society for the effort that parents put into bringing up children

xxxxStrong majorities believe that each one of the above family stresses is at least "somewhat more serious" than a generation ago, if not "much more serious." In descending order of seriousness are the following sources of familial stress:

- Divorce and family breakdown - 69% much more serious, 20% somewhat more, 3% same, 6% somewhat less, 2% much less
- Insecure or unstable job conditions - 66% much more serious, 28% somewhat more, 2% same, 3% somewhat less, 1% much less
- Parents working too hard or too many hours in a day - 57% much more serious, 33% somewhat more, 4% same, 4% somewhat less, 1% much less
- Taxes being too high for parents with children - 52% much more serious, 38% somewhat more, 3% same, 6% somewhat less, 1% much less
- Not enough respect for efforts parents put into raising children - 39% much more serious, 39% somewhat more, 4% same, 13% somewhat less, 5% much less serious

xxxxSome regional and cohort differences emerge to reflect some authentic differences of experience. Residents of Quebec, where divorce rates happen to be higher than the norm, are slightly more apt to see family life in crisis-78% of Quebecers saying that divorce and family breakdown are much more serious than before compared to 69% of Canadians as a whole with this viewpoint. The youngest cohort (respondents under 30), who are themselves in the midst of establishing occupational roots, are most concerned about job instability as a source of family stress-74% saying that this is much more serious than in the past compared 66% among Canadians as a whole. The cohorts in the middle family years, people in their 30's and 40's, are slightly more apt to see long working hours as a much more serious stress-60% and 64%, respectively, compared to 52% with this view among respondents under 30 and 51% among respondents in their 50's. Finally, the oldest cohort (over 60), who have had the most opportunity to observe the evolution in cultural and family values over the years, are the most apt to see inadequate respect for parenting as a much more serious stress-47% with this view compared to 39% among all respondents and 28% among respondents under 30 years of age.

The Challenges of Single Parent Households

Serious Economic and Parenting Problems

xxxxCanadians believe that single parent households are facing even greater challenges than families as a whole. This portrait of concern emerges from responses to the following question:

As you may know, there's been some talk over the last few years about the effect of divided families and single parenthood on child poverty. There's also been talk about the economic, social, and psychological challenges faced by single parents bringing up children on their own. Would you say the challenges faced by single parent households are far more serious, more serious, somewhat more serious, or not more serious than the challenges experienced by two-person households?

xxxxAlmost half of respondents (47%) say that the challenges facing single parent households are far more serious than the challenges experienced by two-person households. The remaining half say that the challenges faced by single parent households are more serious (25%), somewhat more serious (23%) or not more serious (5%) than two-person households. Canadians' concern about the special stresses encountered by single parent households is reflected in the fact that those who believe that single parent stresses are "far more serious" outnumber 10:1 those who say that the stresses facing single parent families are not more serious than the challenges experienced by two-parent households.

xxxxThe only departure from this Canada-wide consensus is Quebecers' even more intense feeling that the challenges experienced by single parent households are far more serious - 56% compared to 47% of Canadians as a whole.

xxxxCanadians take the view that single parent households are beset by a wide variety

of stresses, among which financial and economic challenges top the list. The actual question and response distribution below:

There's been talk about some specific challenges faced by single parent homes, for example [rotate the list of challenges] their financial and economic challenges.

In your judgement, are the challenges for single parents far more serious (54%), more serious (40%), less serious (6%), or far less serious (1%) than the challenges facing two-person households?

How about the challenges having a parent around to supervise the child's activities and keep the child out of trouble?

Are the challenges for single parents far more serious (46%), more serious (48%), less serious (5%), or far less serious (1%) than the challenges facing two-parent families?

and their challenges monitoring the child's school work

Are the challenges for single parents far more serious (28%), more serious (59%), less serious (11%), or far less serious (2%) than the challenges facing two-parent families?

and their challenges giving the child a sense of a stable home life

Are the challenges for single parents far more serious (41%), more serious (50%), less serious (7%), or far less serious (1%) than the challenges facing two-parent families?

xxxxAlthough all Canadians agree that the stresses besetting single parent households are more serious than the stresses facing two-person households, some demographic variations do occur. For example,

- Quebecers are slightly more inclined than Canadians as a whole to see any individual stress facing single parents as far more serious--that financial and economic challenges are far more serious for single parent households (63% vs. 54% for Canadians as a whole), the challenges of monitoring the child's school work are far more serious for single parent households (36% vs. 28% among Canadians as a whole), and the challenges of giving the child a sense of a stable home life are far more serious for single parent households (51% vs. 41% among Canadians as a whole);
- Men are slightly more likely than women to see some single parent stresses as far more serious than in the case of two parent families--that the challenges of monitoring a child's school work are far more serious for single parent households than for two-person households (32% vs. 24%), and that the challenges of giving the child a sense of a stable home life are far more serious for single parent households (45% vs. 37%)
- Highly educated Canadians are more likely than less educated to say that the financial and economic challenges facing single parent households are far more serious than for two-person households (57% and 60% among those with some university and university grads respectively, vs. 46% and 49% among those with less than highschool and a highschool education respectively)
- Younger Canadians are slightly less likely than older Canadians to think that the challenges of having a parent around to supervise the child are far more serious for single parent households (40% and 44% for those under 30 and in their 30's respectively, vs. 51% and 47% among those in their 40's and 50 and older respectively).

Divided Families and the Psychological Health of Children

xxxxCanadians agree that the emotional upset of children from divided families is serious. Canadians also feel a moderate concern for their success in the workforce and their potential for run-ins with the law. This portrait of concern emerges from the responses to the following question:

It has been suggested that children from single parent or divided families face some disadvantages, for example [rotate list]

There's a greater chance that they will be less successful in school and the workforce How serious a problem is this in your view...extremely, very, somewhat, not really, or not at all?

Also the children of divided families can be emotionally upset.

There's a greater chance that children from divided and dysfunctional families will have run-ins with the law.

xxxxMost Canadians (56%) feel that the problem of children from divided families being emotionally upset is at a least a very serious (33%), if not an extremely serious problem (23%). Canadians also agree that the other consequences of divided families are virtually as worthy of concern. Thus, 52% view as serious (20% extremely serious, 32%

very serious) the prospects of children from divided and dysfunctional families experiencing more run-ins with the law. There is lesser, albeit palpable, concern about the diminished economic prospects of children from divided families. Thus, a large plurality view as serious (16% extremely serious, 27% very serious) the dilemmas of reduced success at school and in the workforce for the products of divided families.

xxxxMen and women agree to an extraordinary degree on these issues while a hint of regional differences comes to the surface. Thus, Westerners are slightly less likely than other Canadians to think that the problem of children from divided families being less successful in school and the workforce is an extremely serious problem (11% vs. 16% among Canadians as a whole). For their part, Ontarians are slightly more likely than other Canadians to view the problem of children from divided families being emotionally upset as an extremely serious problem (26% vs. 23% among Canadians as a whole).

xxxxIntriguingly, the less educated are slightly more apt than other Canadians to view the problem of children from divided families being emotionally upset as extremely serious (32% vs. 23% among Canadians as a whole). The empathy of the less educated may conceivably arise from the fact that they may have more opportunity to observe the emotional fallout from divorce in situations where divided families lack the financial security to help cushion the emotional blows.

The Dilemmas in Divorce Courts

Fathers and Children Ignored in the Courts

xxxxMen and women agree by huge margins that the needs of children and fathers get short shrift in divorce courts. On balance Canadians believe that the needs of mothers in divorce courts are being met though men are more sanguine on this score than women.

xxxxThe preceding portrait emerges from responses to the following question battery:

When married couples with children seek a divorce in divorce courts, do you think the needs of [rotate]
mothers receive too much attention (29%), about the right amount (42), or too little (30)
The needs of fathers... too much attention (9), about the right amount (29), or too little (62)
The needs of the children... too much attention (5), about the right amount (25), or too little (70)

xxxxCanadians are most sanguine about the needs of mothers being met and least sanguine about the needs of children being met. A failure by the courts to meet the needs of fathers is a close second in terms of public concern. That Canadians are deeply concerned about courts' failures in respect of children and fathers is reflected in two ways:

- Canadians are more than twice as likely to say that the needs of children and fathers are getting too little attention as in the case of the needs of mothers-70% in the case of children's needs and 62% in the case of fathers' needs vs. 30% in the case of the needs of mothers
- Canadians are almost 7 times more likely to say that fathers get too little as opposed to too much attention and 14 times more likely to say that children get too little as opposed to too much attention whereas people are evenly divided as to whether the needs of mothers get too much or too little attention.

xxxxMen and women are in complete agreement with respect to children, virtual agreement with respect to fathers, and substantial agreement with respect to mothers. In the case of children's needs, 69% of men and 71% of women say that these needs get too little attention.

xxxxModest differences emerge in the judgements of men and women about how well the needs of fathers and mothers are being met. Men are very slightly more inclined than women to say that fathers' needs get too little attention-68% vs. 56%--whereas women are more inclined to the view that men's needs are getting about the right amount of attention-34% vs. 23%.

xxxxA greater divergence emerges with respect to perceptions of mothers' needs. Women are somewhat more inclined to say that mothers' needs get too little attention-36% vs. 24%. -and somewhat less inclined to say that mothers' needs get too much attention-23% vs. 37%.

xxxxAge is essentially irrelevant to perceptions of how well courts meet the needs of fathers and children. But age plays a pivotal role in Canadians' views about how well the needs of mothers are met. It is almost as if the oldest and youngest cohorts were polarised with the youngest cohort (those under 30 years of age) twice as likely to believe that the needs of mothers get too much as opposed to too little attention (41% vs. 19%) whereas the oldest cohort is twice as likely to believe that the needs of mothers get too little as opposed to too much attention (42% vs. 17%). It is as if the oldest cohort formed its views during the heyday of the feminist movement, when a consensual concern about the rights and needs of women began to flower, whereas the youngest cohort appears to be responding to what it may perceive as courts running roughshod over the needs of divorcing fathers.

xxxxIntriguingly, the least educated (those with less than a high school education) are most sensitive to courts' failures to meet the needs of mothers. In this stratum, 45% say that the needs of mothers receive too little attention compared to 30% among the public as a whole. We have no way of knowing whether the least educated feel this way as a result of observing the particular consequences of family break-up in their sub-culture or whether the least educated are simply the latest stratum to absorb the intellectual currents of the 1960's era feminist movement.

xxxxCanadians' views on these issues vary depending on the region in which they live. Thus, Quebecers are more likely than other Canadians to say that the needs of mothers receive too little attention - 41% vs. 30% among Canadians as a whole - and Westerners are more likely than other Canadians to say that the needs of fathers receive too little attention - 73% vs. 62% among Canadians as a whole.

Non-Custodial Relationships Are Vital, and Government Should Do More to Protect These Relationships

xxxxA painful and increasingly newsworthy issue is the ongoing presence and rights of non-custodial parents in divorce and family breakup. Canadians agree overwhelmingly that it is very important for the children to maintain a relationship with the parent in whose home they do not live. The actual question and responses below:

How important is it for children from divorced parents to maintain an ongoing relationship with the non-custodial parent, that is the parent in whose home they do not live...

very importantxxxxxxx80%
somewhatxxxxxxx17%
not reallyxxxxxxx2%
or not at all?xxxxxxx 1%

xxxxPerhaps because their generation has experienced particularly high rates of family breakup, Canadians in the youngest cohort, people under 30 years of age, are particularly sensitive about the need for continuity of relationship with the non-custodial parent. Thus, 86% of the youngest cohort believe that it is very important to maintain an ongoing relationship with the non-custodial parent compared to 80% among the public as a whole.

xxxxGiven Canadians' desire for children to maintain ongoing relationships with their non-custodial parents, one might expect the public to also favour government action to protect the access rights and obligations of non-custodial parents. Indeed, that is precisely how the public feels. This portrait of public opinion on the matter emerges from responses to the following question:

As we near the end of the interview, I'm going to read you a list of things governments can do to make it easier for families to stay together or, if the parents are divorced, make it easier for them to do a good job of parenting the children. Please tell me if each should become a very high priority, a high priority, a priority, somewhat of a priority, or no priority at all?

if the parents are divorced or separated, making it more difficult for the caregiver to prevent the children from seeing their other parent

xxxxAlmost two-thirds of Canadians (65%) agree that the government should make it a priority (17%), if not a high priority (23%) or a very high priority (25%) to make it difficult for the caregiver to prevent the children from seeing their other parent. Barely a fifth (23%) believe that this should be no priority at all while 13% feel that it should be somewhat of a priority.

xxxxThe desire for government action to protect the access rights of non-custodial parents is consensual, cutting across all demographic groups. The sole exception is a pattern of especially intense concern among Quebecers-as many as 32% of

Quebecers say that the government should make this a very high priority compared to 25% among Canadians as a whole.

Protecting Matrimony-Support for Thwarting Break-ups Involving Children and Strong Support for Compulsory Marriage Preparation Courses

xxxxCanadians want governments to take a more active role in helping families stay together, especially where children are involved. A large majority of the public would like to see marriage preparation courses made compulsory as a way of transmitting the marital skills necessary for keeping families intact. Considerable interest also emerges for making divorce more difficult to achieve where children are involved. This portrait emerges from responses to the following questions:

As we near the end of the interview, I'm going to read you a list of things governments can do to make it easier for families to stay together or, if the parents are divorced, make it easier for them to do a good job of parenting the children. Please tell me if each should become a very high priority, a high priority, a priority, somewhat of a priority, or no priority at all?

requiring couples to take a marriage preparation course before their wedding
making it somewhat more difficult to get divorced where children are involved

xxxxThe greater enthusiasm is expressed for compulsory marriage preparation courses. Barely a fifth (21%) say that this idea should receive no priority consideration. More than three-fifths (61%) of Canadians believe that creating a mandatory marriage preparation course before the wedding should be at least a priority (16%), if not a high priority (21%) or a very high priority (24%) for the government. The remaining 18% take a middling ground, advocating that making the course mandatory should be somewhat of a government priority.

xxxxCanadians are less enthusiastic but nonetheless largely supportive of making divorce more difficult where children are involved. Under a third (31%) say that this idea should receive no priority consideration. Meanwhile, half of Canadians (50%) believe that making it more difficult for parents with children to obtain a divorce should be at least a priority (17%), if not a high priority (18%) or a very high priority (15%) of the government.

zxxxxMen and women differ somewhat on these issues with women more inclined to support mandatory course preparation and men more inclined to support making divorce more difficult where children are involved. Women are more likely than men to think that the government should make a mandatory marriage preparation course a "very high priority" (28% vs. 20%). Men are more likely than women to favour the government making it a high priority for divorce to become more difficult to achieve for couples with children (20% vs. 11%).

xxxxReflecting perhaps their greater exposure to family breakdown, Quebecers are especially supportive of making divorce more difficult in the event of children. Thus, 27% of Quebecers want government to make this a very high priority compared to 15% with this view among Canadians as a whole.

xxxxEnthusiasm for these preventive measures appears to rise with age. Thus, 65% of the oldest cohort (60 years+) believe that governments should make it a very high or high priority to introduce mandatory marriage preparation courses compared to 37% with this view among respondents under 30 years of age. In a similar vein, 49% of the oldest cohort believe that governments should make it a very high or high priority to place roadblocks in the way of divorces involving children compared to 21% with this view among people under the age of 30.

xxxxEducational background emerges as a factor in opinions on some of these issues. Thus, the least educated, those with less than a high school education, are more likely than others to favour the government making it a high priority to implement mandatory marriage preparation courses (33% vs. 24% among Canadians as a whole).

Protect the Rights of Custodial Parents to Alimony

xxxxCanadians believe that it should be a high priority of the government to make it more difficult for alimony payers to get away without carrying out their obligations. This portrait emerges from responses to the following battery item:

As we near the end of the interview, I'm going to read you a list of things governments can do to make it easier for families to stay together or, if the parents are divorced, make it easier for them to do a good job of parenting the children. Please tell me if each should become a very high priority, a high priority, a priority, somewhat of a priority, or no priority at all?

if the parents are divorced or separated, making it more difficult for the higher income earner to get away without paying alimony

xxxxAlmost three-quarters of Canadians (73%) agree that the government should make it at least a high priority (33%) if not a very high priority (40%) to make it more difficult for the higher income earner in a divorce to get away with not paying alimony.

This nation-wide consensus cuts across region, but enthusiasm for government action varies according to gender, age, and education:

- Women are slightly more likely than men to say that the government should make it a very high priority to make it more difficult for higher income earners to get away with not paying alimony - 44% vs. 37%
- Older Canadians, those in their 40's and 50's, are more likely than younger Canadians to feel that the government should make it a very high priority to make it more difficult for higher income earners to get away with not paying alimony - 46% and 51% among those in their 40's and 50's respectively, vs. 38% and 36% among those under 30 and in their 30's respectively
- The higher educated, those with some university/college and university grads, are slightly more likely than the less educated to think that the government should make it a very high priority to make it more difficult for higher income earners to get away with not paying alimony - 48% and 43% among those with some university/college and university grads respectively, vs. 36% and 32% among those with less than high school and high school grads respectively.

Cut Tax Burden on Families

xxxxBy an overwhelming margin, Canadians want governments to slash the tax burden on families. They call for more favourable tax treatment of families supporting the elderly, joint tax returns, and especially adequate cuts in family tax burdens to allow one parent to stay home with the children. This portrait of the public's deep concern about family tax loads emerges from responses to the three elements of a battery presented below:

As we near the end of the interview, I'm going to read you a list of things governments can do to make it easier for families to stay together or, if the parents are divorced, make it easier for them to do a good job of parenting the children. Please tell me if each should become a very high priority, a high priority, a priority, somewhat of a priority, or no priority at all? [rotate]

changing the tax law to make it easier for parents with young children to afford to have one parent at home (42% a very high priority, 23% a high priority, 17% a priority, 13% somewhat of a priority, and 5% no priority at all).

Allowing couples with children to pay lower taxes by filing joint income tax returns (27% a very high priority, 31% a high priority, 21% a priority, 13% somewhat of a priority, and 7% no priority at all).

Changing the tax law to make it easier for families to take in and care for elderly parents (24% a very priority, 34% a high priority 23% a priority, 14% somewhat of a priority, and 5% no priority at all).

xxxxCanadians agree that all of the above tax law amendments should be priorities of government; most feel that they should be high priorities. Above all, the public wants tax law to change to make it easier for families to afford to have one spouse at home.

xxxxSome age differences emerge as an apparent reflection of the adage that "where I sit is where I stand." The youngest cohort, those under 30 years of age, seems less interested in tax incentives to take care of elderly family members than the cohort (people in their 40s) most likely to have to consider doing so-29% of the youngest cohort feel that this should be a very high priority compared to 41% among Canadians in their forties. Perhaps the youngest cohort has yet to encounter the challenges of caring for the elderly.

xxxxFor their part, the oldest cohort, those over 60 years of age, is less likely than others to want governments to make it a very high priority to change tax laws to make it easier for one parent to stay at home-29% vs. 41% among Canadians under 30 years of age. Members of the youngest cohort have to contemplate the potential stresses on them of having families with two parents in the workforce. Meanwhile, members of the oldest cohort do not have to contemplate becoming parents but do have to consider the financial capacities of governments committed to providing the elderly with a wide range of expensive health and other support programs.

A Micro-Case - School Breakfasts

Mixed Feelings About the Plusses and Minuses of in Loco Parentis

xxxxSchool boards in Canada have been debating whether or not to provide breakfasts for children in school. Some have embraced programs of school breakfasts as the only effective way of ensuring that their less well cared for pupils are able to begin their study day without growling stomachs. Other schools boards have not implemented such programs for a variety of financial and non-financial reasons.

xxxxCanadians are deeply divided on the issue. Indeed, Canadians are so divided on the issue that they are not only in conflict with each other but many individuals themselves hold conflicted or incompatible views on the matter. In practice, large majorities agree in each instance with the

- leftwing view that school breakfasts are "the only way some children can get the nutrition to start the school day,"
- the rightwing view that school breakfast programs weaken family and parental bonds and deprive more valuable school programs of necessary resources, and also
- the ideologically centrist view that children arriving at school unfed should be treated as special cases.

xxxxThis portrait of conflicted Canadians emerges from responses to the following battery:

One issue debated in some school boards these days is school breakfasts. Please tell me whether you agree a lot, somewhat, not really, or not at all with each of the following opinions...[rotate]

Schools should provide breakfasts because this is the only way some children can get the nutrition to start the school day (45% agree a lot, 32% agree somewhat, 10% not really, 14% not at all)

Spending on breakfasts takes money away from other needs and weakens the role of many parents who are well able to give their children breakfast (31% agree a lot, 37% agree somewhat, 14% not really, 18% not at all)

Schooling authorities should treat parents who do not seem to be providing breakfasts for their children as a special case, bring in social workers, and provide breakfasts if necessary for these children but not for all (41% agree a lot, 36% agree somewhat, 11% not really, 12% not at all)

xxxxOn balance, Canadians evince less support, but only slightly less support, for the rightwing position opposing school breakfast programs. Altogether, 68% concur that such programs weaken the role of parents and deprive other school programs of resources. Meanwhile, 77% agree a lot or somewhat that this is the "only way some children can get the nutrition to start the school day." Finally, 77% would like school authorities to treat hungry pupils on a case by case basis.

xxxxSome regional and age differences emerge:

- reflecting their more individualist tendencies, westerners are slightly less likely than other Canadians to agree a lot that school breakfast programs are the only way some children can be assured of nutrition - 38% vs. 45% among Canadians as a whole
- reflecting perhaps their intense awareness of financial stringency in the health and social welfare sectors, Quebecers are slightly more likely than other Canadians to agree a lot that spending on school breakfasts takes away from other needs (38% vs. 31% among Canadians as a whole) and are slightly more likely than other Canadians to agree a lot that social workers should be brought in and breakfasts should only be provided if necessary to certain children - 64% vs. 41% among Canadians as a whole
- reflecting their particular sensitivity to financial constraints, older Canadians, those 60 and over, are slightly more likely than others to agree a lot that spending on breakfasts takes away from other needs - 40% vs. 31% among Canadians as a whole.

Conclusion

xxxxCanadians are deeply concerned about the rising level of family stress and earnestly want government action. The public wishes governments to undertake what they can to discourage family breakdown, mindful of the special stresses encountered by parents and children in single parent households. With respect to helping to keep

families intact, the public calls upon government to

- assess government programs and policies in light of their probable impact on family life
- lighten the tax load on families keeping in mind the goal of making it more possible for one parent in two-parent households to spend more time at home with the child or children
- introduce mandatory marriage preparation courses for young couples
- contemplate changing the law to make it more difficult to dissolve marriages with children.

xxxxIn the case of divided and divorced families, the public would like government action intended to

- protect the custodial parent's right to a regular flow of alimony support
- protect the non-custodial parent's right of access to the child or children, mindful of the special benefits to the child of a continuity of relationship, and
- enhance efforts to meet the needs of children and fathers in court proceedings.

xxxxCanadians are deeply divided, one against the other, as well as within their own minds on the desirability of school breakfast programs. The public expresses approximately equal levels of enthusiasm for the leftwing initiative of school board breakfast programs, for the rightwing position that breakfast programs are destructive of both parents and schooling systems, and for the centrist position that the dilemmas of hungry, poorly fed children should be treated on a case by case basis.

Methodology

xxxx504 random telephone interviews conducted nationally with Canada's general public, those 18 years of age and older. Interviewing was conducted between October 29-30, 1998. The national sample produces results which can be considered accurate to within +/-4.5 percentage points or better, 19 times out of 20. Principal Compas researchers: Dr. Conrad Winn, Chairman, and Denise Mac Donell, Research Analyst.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this website,
please email us at info@compas.ca