

NATIONAL POST

Childcare in the age of divorce and atheism

Published August 29, 2013
By Tasha Kheiriddin

When it comes to values, Quebecers don't diverge from the rest of Canadians only on the issue of religious freedoms. They also exhibit strong differences when it comes to caring for young children.

A new study by the Institute for Marriage and Family Canada has found that residents of Quebec are the least likely, from among all polled Canadians, to prefer parental or family care to daycare. Seventy per cent of Quebecers say that children under the age of six should be at home with a parent, compared to the Canadian average of 76%. The study also found that in families where a parent cannot stay home, only 34% of Quebecers prefer a family member as a substitute caregiver, compared to 55% of parents in the rest of the country.

(At the same time, 45% of Quebecers believe that money for childcare should be given directly to parents, not to institutions. In the rest of Canada, it's 25%. This is a seemingly odd result given that Quebecers have nearly two decades of exposure to a system whereby the state directly funds daycares, which then in turn charge parents a set rate of \$7 per day for preschool care.)

When it comes to family forms, Quebec is different too. According to the 2011 census, 67% of Canadian families were headed by married couples, 17% by those living common law, and 16% by single parents. In Quebec, however, only 52% of families featured married couples, with 31% living common law and 17% single-parent.

Apart from the three Canadian territories, which have significantly higher rates of common-law and single-parent households (in Nunavut, only 39% are married, while 33% are common law and a whopping 28% single parent), all provinces other than Quebec have marriage rates in the high 60's to low 70's. The percentage of single parent households is also rather consistent, falling between 14.5% in Alberta and 17.3% in Nova Scotia. Quebec is the big outlier: When all the numbers are crunched, it has a rate of common-law union two to three times higher than the other provinces.

Quebecers' antipathy to marriage took root during the province's Quiet Revolution of the 1960's. Marriage rates began dropping while the number of common-law unions increased. The state became the agent of emancipation for francophone Quebecers, promising to protect their culture and language rights; and for many women, who viewed the Church and its edicts to have large families as repressive and retrograde.

Fifty years later, Quebecers have a government-funded daycare system, which they prefer to extended family when caring for their kids. With common-law unions on the rise in the Western world, while marriage rates fall, this makes Quebec the canary in the child-care coalmine.

What does this mean for future generations of children? If the Quebec results hold, it means more strangers caring for our kids.

As a person living in a common-law relationship where both of us brought kids into the mix, I would never expect my partner to support me

Why would common-law parents prefer outsiders over relatives? Are they less connected to their own family? Do they view the bonds of family, and extended family, as less important? The study speculates on these reasons, but doesn't reach any firm conclusions.

One of the other questions also not answered (due to their study's limited sample size, according to the Institute for Marriage and Family Canada) is whether there is a difference between blended common-law families, and those in which partners have children together.

As a person living in a common-law relationship where both of us brought kids into the mix, I would never expect my partner to support me, or pay for me to stay at home with my daughter. But if we had a child together, I admit I would feel differently. With one in 10 Canadian children now living in a stepfamily, the form of that family — common law or married — may take on greater significance.

Throughout history, blood and faith have been the twin ties uniting the family. Today, both of those are ebbing. That may cheer libertarians and atheists. But the state abhors a vacuum — and, as in Quebec, usually is all too ready to step in to the void once filled by family and church. Sadly, we are all too ready to let them.