

WORKING PAPER:
**POLITICS OR PROGRESS FOR CANADIAN CHILDREN: HAS A POLICY FOCUS ON
CHILD POVERTY IMPROVED CHILD DEVELOPMENT?**

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ABSTRACT: Canada's child poverty rate has been nearly halved in the past 15 years: from over 18 percent in 1996 to approximately 8 percent in 2010. While not accomplishing the 1989 parliamentary goal to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000, this reduction is a direct result of increased policy attention to children— and family income in particular. A major motivation for a policy focus on income comes from research showing that poverty affects child development with early disparities leading to life-long inequalities. But this large body of research also shows income is not an isolated factor in understanding what disadvantages children. A social policy focus on child poverty has proven politically expedient, but has the reduction in Canadian child poverty been met with an improvement in child and family outcomes? This paper explores these questions using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), a Statistics Canada survey of approximately 20,000 Canadian children from birth to age 25 between 1996 and 2008. The paper compares changes in federal and provincial policy and poverty rates to measures of children's developmental outcomes and family well-being. Using these outcomes rather than child poverty, the paper assesses whether child policy over the past 15 years has in fact made real improvements in the lives and development of children in Canada.

Intro / Context

In the last 15 years, child and family policy has been a rare area of expansion in social policy at the federal level in Canada. From the National Children's Agenda agreement between the provinces and the federal government in 1999, to the introduction of the Universal Child Care Benefit in 2006, federal spending on Canadian children has increased substantially since the mid-1990s. The majority of this federal spending has taken the form of increased tax-credits and transfers to families with children, with a heavy targeting to those with the lowest-incomes. The immediate effects have been easily measured: the most commonly used measure of child poverty shows a halving of the child poverty rate from a high of 18.4 percent in 1996 to 8.2 percent in 2010 (Statistics Canada 2013).

At the same time, Canada continues to be chastised by international comparisons showing it lags behind its peers in providing for its children. A recent UNICEF report card on child well-being placed Canada 17th out of 29 rich countries (UNICEF Canada 2013).

Expenditure comparisons by the OECD continue to show Canada spends below average on a range of supports for children and families (OECD 2011). A Fall 2012 hearing of the UN

Committee on the Rights of the Child raised serious concerns about Canada's poor performance and lack of commitment to fulfilling many of the rights guaranteed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified in Canada, including those related to justice and violence against children (UNCRC 2012). This contrast, between the success of halving child poverty and the continued failure to fulfill the needs and rights of children, raises serious questions about Canada's child policy strategy: has reducing child poverty meant an improvement in child and family outcomes? Beyond mobilizing the political support needed to incite action, has a policy focused on family income yielded real results for Canadian children? These questions are approached in this paper.

We would never imagine using only a poverty count to assess how well policy has served the entire adult population. Alongside the poverty count, we might consider employment rates, measures of inequality, health status, crime and safety, quality of life and more. However, to monitor the well-being of nearly 10 million Canadians under the age of 18, the Canadian government almost exclusively relies on child poverty rate: that is, the percentage of children living in low-income families. The implicit assumption behind the focus on child poverty is that a family's low-income status (poor/not poor) is paramount to child well-being. In this paper, I assess the validity of that assumption by looking at changes over time both in various poverty measures and child and family outcomes. To look at outcome measures I use microdata from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), a nationally representative survey of Canadian children consisting of eight cycles of data collected from 1994-2008. From this multidimensional perspective it becomes clear that the poverty rate tells only one aspect of the story of how Canadian families and children are doing.

I begin by providing the context of development in Canadian child and family policy during the period of reference, 1994-2008.¹ I then look at the changes in Statistics Canada low-income rates using data from the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID). I discuss the difficulty with poverty measurement in Canada and why which measure you choose matters. Moving to the NLSCY data, I present 14-year trends in outcomes for children under the age of five, including: motor and social development, school readiness, child hunger, and emotional disorders. Family level outcomes, including family functioning and positive parenting are also analyzed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications for further evaluation of the effectiveness of Canada's child and family policy.

Child and family policy in Canada

Supporting families and their children has always been a core responsibility of the Canadian welfare state. More specifically, there has always been a strong emphasis on sharing the costs of raising children. Policies to support family income were first enacted early in welfare state development with the introduction of the family allowance in 1944: the first universal social program in Canada. The allowance changed configurations a few times over the years, including transformation in the 1970s to become the first refundable tax credit, progressive with income level. Child *poverty*, as distinct from general income support for families, was first formally set out as a high-profile national public policy priority in 1989, when, coinciding with the UN Convention on the Right's of the Child (which Canada ratified in 1992), the House of Commons unanimously passed a resolution to seek the elimination of child poverty by 2000 (Albanese 2010). Since that resolution, social activists, politicians, and

¹ This paper focuses on policy developments at the federal level, however, it bears noting that while provincial governments have made more headway in non-income child policy, income remains their major focus, as evidenced by the Ontario Poverty Reduction strategy which has child poverty rate as its only measure.

the public have focused the national discourse specifically on child poverty (Campaign 2000 2011).

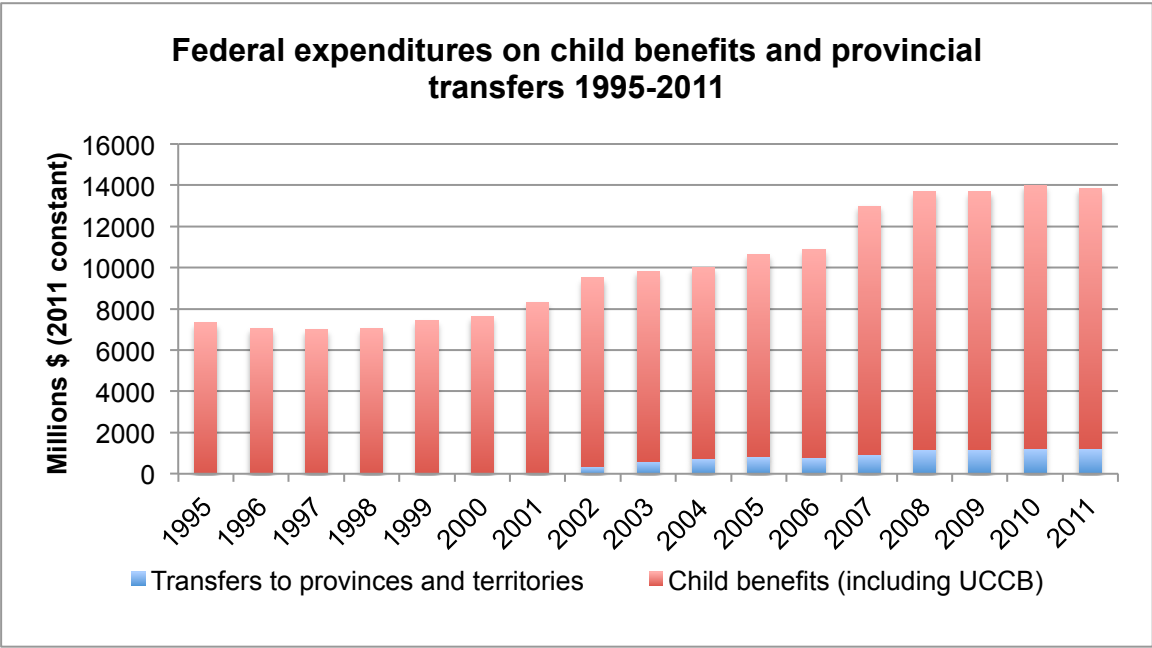
Whether understood as a moral obligation with children as the deserving poor, an economically efficient social investment in the citizens of tomorrow, or an issue of human rights fulfillment, tackling child poverty is a rare social policy issue on which people with diverse political ideologies and partisan goals find ground for consensus. Child poverty, as measured by family income, thus easily became the dominant child policy paradigm through the 1990s. Adopting Hall's (1993) definition, a 'policy paradigm' provides "a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing" (p 279). As I have argued elsewhere, poverty became problematized as the key child policy issue, which in turn confined the scope of legitimate policy solutions to income-based interventions (McEwen 2011). This focus on child poverty, supported by a variety of perspectives, on the role of government for children has been politically expedient. Like the all-party resolution of 1989, reducing child poverty is a cause all political orientations, to varying degrees, have rallied behind.

As a campaign, the child poverty focus has also been successful in affecting results. Federal expenditure on child benefits has nearly doubled in real terms since the mid-1990s, from \$7.2 billion in 1995 to approximately \$12.7 billion in 2011, in 2011 dollars (Government of Canada 2012). From the late 1980s to early-2000s, the federal child benefit as a proportion of all income in low-income households has more than doubled (Mendelson 2005). In 2009 family tax and benefit policies (provincial and federal) brought the national child poverty rate down by 14 percent, as compared to pre-tax and benefit adjustments, thus moving

approximately 777,000 children above the most commonly used low income cut-offs (Campaign 2000 2011). Looking over time, family income via child benefits has been the main area of expansion of federal spending on children (Government of Canada 1995-2011). Figure 1 depicts the increase in child benefit expenditures since 1995 and increases in federal transfers to provinces earmarked for children since their introduction in 2001.

Tax and cash benefits constitute the majority of federal government expenditures on children. In 2011, child benefits accounted for 5 cents of every dollar spent by the federal government, or \$12.6 billion (Department of Finance 2012b). Currently federal child benefits include: the Canadian Child Tax Benefit (CTB), a progressive income-tested monthly benefit; the National Child Benefit Supplement, which increases CTB for low-income families; the Child Disability Credit, which increases CTB for families with disabled children; and, the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), a universal cash payment of \$100 per month per child under the age of 6. With the exception of the UCCB, a ‘child’ is defined as a dependent under the age of 18.

Figure 1. Federal expenditures on child benefits and provincial transfers 1995-2011



Data source: (Government of Canada 1995-2011)

Relative to benefits and tax credits, federal expenditures on services and programs for children (including via transfers to provinces and territories) are minor; 96 percent of the \$14 billion spent at the federal level on children in 2011 was delivered via benefits and tax expenditures. (Department of Finance 2009, 2012a; Government of Canada 1995-2011). While the federal government has increased family income via family and child benefits since 1944, federal transfers to the provinces and territories specifically agreed upon for programmatic spending on children (with the exception of CAP funding for social assistance) only began in 2001 after the federal-provincial negotiation of the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Agreement on Early Childhood Development (ECDA) in 2000. This was followed by the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) in 2003, which was renewed and expanded in 2005. The federal government cancelled its MFA commitment in 2006 when the Conservative Party came to power but thus far has continued to transfer funds earmarked for child and family policy to the provinces through unilateral budgetary commitments. In 2011 \$1.2 billion was transferred to provinces and territories on a per-capita basis and earmarked for child services and programs. A further \$116 million was spent on the only federally administered programs specifically targeting child development: Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP), and Aboriginal Head Start.

The history of federal-provincial negotiation through the late 1990s and comparison to other fields of social policy (notably health care and post-secondary education) indicate that the federal focus on tax credits and benefits for families rather than programmatic spending was not necessarily a given based on jurisdictional powers. Had the Liberal party maintained power and continued the agreement for funding provincial child care in 2006, the balance between programmatic and benefits expenditures would look quite different.

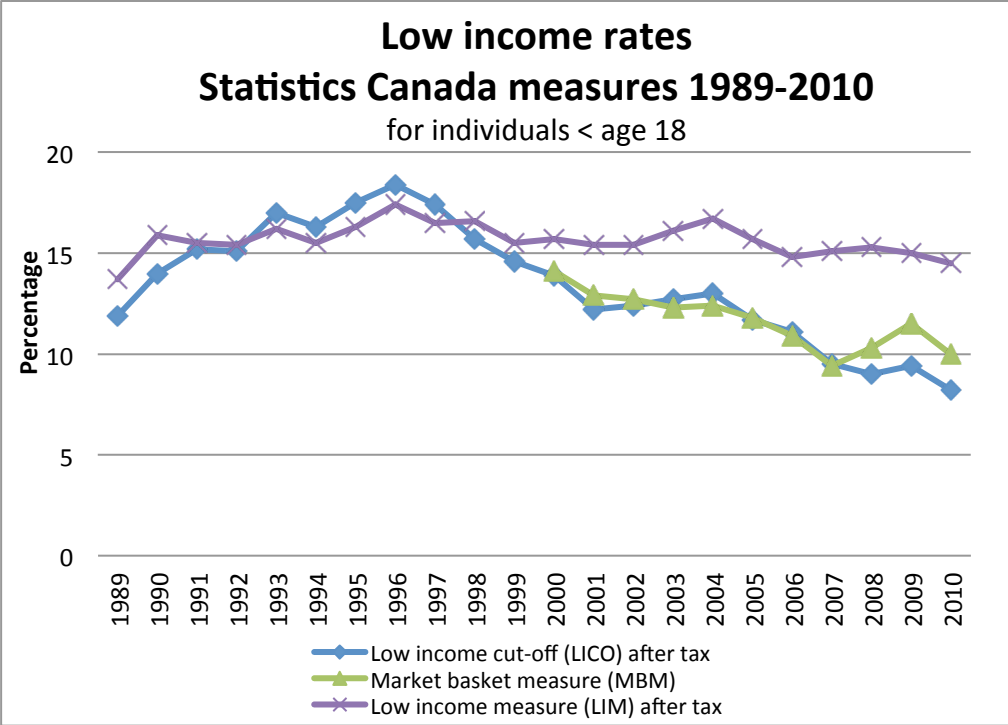
Child poverty

As already stated, the substantial increase in targeted tax credits and benefits for families over the 1990s and early 2000s has had a significant effect on the incomes of low-income families with children, playing a large role in lifting families above poverty thresholds. However, determining the child poverty rate in Canada is more fraught with debate than in many other countries. Canada does not have an official measure of poverty, and there is no official count of how many Canadians have low incomes, or are 'poor'. Rather, Statistics Canada provides three measures of low income, which the organization explicitly states are not measures of poverty or official low-income measures (Statistics Canada 2012). Depending on whether you use the Low Income Cut Offs (LICO), the Market Basket Measure (MBM), or the Low Income Measure (LIM), the percentage of children in low income in 2010 (the latest year for which data is available) is either at 8.2 percent, 10 percent or 14.5 percent. Furthermore, at different points in recent history these measures have had very different relationships to one another. Figure 2 shows the three measures since 1989, the year in which the House of Commons passed its resolution to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000. One can see a trend upward in child poverty rate during the early 1990s, and, looking at the the LICO and LIM, a clear downward trend from 1996 onward. However, using the LIM, we see much less movement. By the year 2000 the rate had returned to the 1989 rate of approximately 12 percent, but no progress could be argued in reaching the parliamentary goal.

But what exactly do these low-income measures tell us about the changing conditions of children in Canada, and why do they differ? Understanding the relative merits of the measures and moving past simple benchmarking is crucial to assessing what types of changes have occurred in family incomes over a period of increasing policy attention. Behind a measure

is a conceptualization of poverty or low income and operationalization of that concept. Poverty is often understood as a lack of fulfillment of basic needs or relative position in terms of resources in society. Low income plays a crucial role in poverty, but definitions of poverty can use very different measures of what constitutes low income (Alcock 2006; Lister 2010). While not providing a complete analysis of the Statistics Canada measures, the following overview allows us to better analyze the results of child benefit expansions.

Figure 2. Low income rates, Statistics Canada measures 1989-2010 (age<18)



Source: CANSIM table 202-0802 (Statistics Canada 2013)

Low Income Cut-Offs (LICOs)

The LICOs are the most commonly used poverty lines within Canada, and the oldest uniquely Canadian measure, introduced in 1968. LICOs are calculated both before and after-tax. The after-tax LICOs are more often used, giving a level of income, after tax and transfers

(including child benefits) that a household needs to be above low-income. The conceptualization of low income operationalized in the LICO is “the income thresholds below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family” (Statistics Canada 2012). The LICO therefore is both a relative poverty measure and yet confined in its consideration of what constitutes core needs. The cut offs are essentially based on a statistical prediction based on survey data. Statistics Canada uses survey data to assess the average expenditure on food, shelter and clothing, adjusting for family size, rural or urban residence, and region of Canada (out of five regions). The last use of survey data to ‘base’ the LICOs was in 1992, where the average expenditure on food, shelter and clothing was 43 percent of total income. Twenty percentage points above this average expenditure is where the LICO is set, or 63 percent. It is important to note that Statistics Canada does not compute these averages annually, or even regularly, and has only been increased by inflation (the Consumer Price Index) for the past 20 years. The LICO does not include expenditure on what many might see as basic needs, including transportation, health and personal care items, household supplies, and utilities such as telephone or internet. For 2010, the after tax LICO for a family of four in a city the size of Toronto was \$35,469; for the same family in a rural area it was \$23,202 (Statistics Canada 2012). Using the LICO measurement we see the greatest degree of change in the child poverty rate over the past two decades. This is also the measure chosen by the Canadian federal government when reporting child poverty rates (Government of Canada 2009).

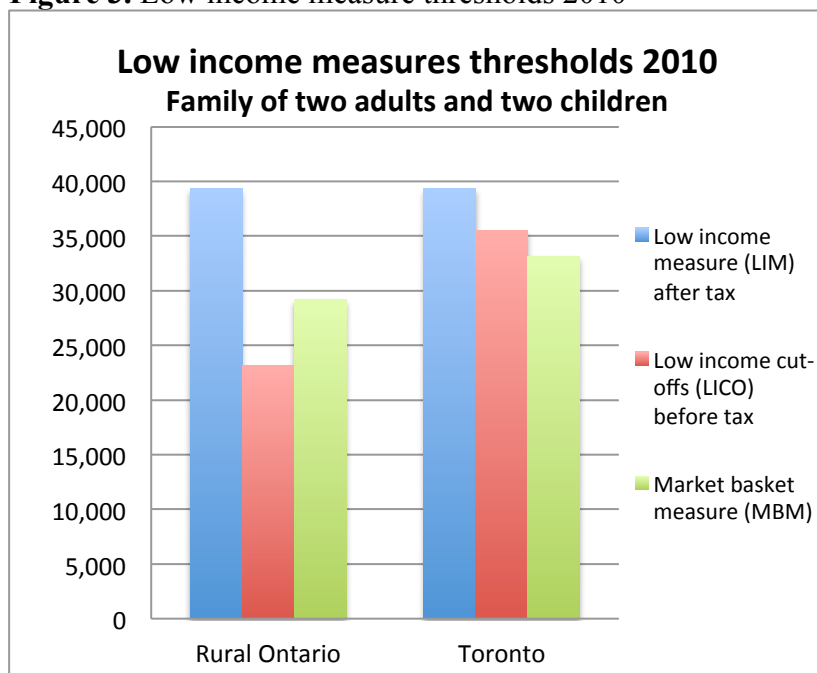
The Market-Basket Measure (MBM)

The MBM is an absolute measure of low-income, based on a fixed basket of goods and services, which are taken to represent a modest basic standard of living in Canada. One is in 'low income' using the MBM if their disposable income is below the local cost of a predetermined set of goods. The MBM is adjusted for different provinces and Census Metropolitan Areas. The MBM was developed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada with Statistics Canada in the late 1990s and introduced in 2000. Also based on survey data, the "market-basket" includes: a nutritious diet, clothing and footwear, shelter, transportation, and other necessary goods such as personal care items and household supplies. Unlike the LICOs, which use survey data to determine average expenditures on basic for Canadians, the MBM has arbitrary pricing for some basket goods. For instance, in areas without public transportation, the annual transportation costs are set at 1/5 of the price of a five-year-old Ford Focus, along with mandatory ownership costs, very basic upkeep, and 1500 litres of gas. Despite being the most recent measure introduced (at the request of provincial governments), the MBM has seen little traction as a headline indicator in either the policy or research community. In 2010, for a family of four in Toronto, the MBM low-income line was \$33,177, whereas in rural Ontario it was \$29,221 (Statistics Canada 2012). From its introduction in 2000 until 2007, the MBM child poverty rate closely tracked the LICO, though has remained at a slightly higher rate since then. This difference may capture the increasing cost of the basket of goods (particularly food) outpacing inflation, which is the pace of change in goods pricing the LICO rate adjusts for.

Low Income Measure (LIM)

The most commonly used measure for international comparison is the Low Income Measure (LIM). The LIM is a purely relative measure of low-income. At 50 percent of the median income, adjusted for household size, the LIM is a “moving target” that grows at a rate different than inflation. As median income rises, so does this low-income line. Because it is not based on survey data, it does not have to be ‘based’ in any year and adjusted by inflation. A percentage of the median is the poverty line most used internationally, in part because it is internationally comparable, adjusting for the standards of living in different jurisdictions. The EU uses a 60 percent of median income for an “at-risk-of-poverty” measure, and the OECD uses the 50 percent of median measure for poverty. The LIM in 2010 for a family of four was \$39,400 (Statistics Canada 2012). Using the LIM, the child poverty rate looks higher than when using the other two measures, and relatively stable over the course of the reference period, hovering around 15 percent.

Figure 3. Low income measure thresholds 2010



Data Source: (Statistics Canada 2012)

The LIM measurement shows the percentage of children living in low income is in fact *higher* than it was in 1989. A very different story than the LICO measurement, the LIM gives a relative picture of poverty and distribution of income in Canada. While more families at the bottom of the income distribution may be able to spend less of their income on basic needs (LICO rate is lower) their position relative to the Canada average income has not significantly improved (LIM remains stable). In contrast to the federal government's use of the LICO, this 50 percent of median measure of child poverty was chosen by the Ontario provincial government to use in measuring progress on its poverty reduction strategy (Government of Ontario 2010).

The three Statistics Canada low income measures, operationalizing different conceptions of poverty, reveal different aspects of poverty trends in Canada. Taken together and understanding the conceptions of the multiple poverty measures temper any complacency regarding progress on child poverty. By the more absolute and unchanging of the measures, progress has been made. But if we are worried about income inequality, the relative position of an individual in terms of command over resources, the stability of the LIM provides a better indicator than either the LICO or MBM. Furthermore as we get farther away from the 1992 basing of the LICO and 2000 creation of the MBM, those measures become less reliable indicators of the ability of individuals to meet the current cost of living in Canada. There are also inherent limitations to using any of the measures to discuss the economic condition of children. All the measures are household based, and adjusted for household size. This makes the assumptions that resources are equally (or equitably) shared within the household, or in other words that all household members equally experience the household income level.

Children have no source of independent income from their family, and depend on the choices of their family to meet their resource needs. Children in different families of the same income level therefore may experience vastly different levels of material deprivation or need, than might be apparent if measurement were possible at a child level. In addition, none of the income measures consider material deprivation, subjective poverty, or assets and debts. Perhaps the most important caveat to interpreting poverty lines and corresponding poverty rates is their dichotomous nature. Children are either poor or not poor; a dollar of income over the LICO and a household is counted as not low income. Dichotomous measures are not well suited for capturing the less clearly bounded conception of poverty. The ability to assess the effects of income policies by dichotomous poverty rates is also limited: a very small cash benefit that brought those just below a poverty line across it could make a significant change in the poverty rate without making any meaningful change to the resources of those households, or the overall structure of the income distribution. Further analysis of the depth of poverty and distribution of income, particularly at the poverty line, is necessary to get a more fulsome picture of how child benefit expansion changed the distribution of income for families.²

Child outcomes

If poverty reduction was the *output* of government's child and family policy over the past 15 years, what of policy *outcomes*? Moving from poverty measures to measures of how Canadian children and families are fairing, income aside, provides a different perspective on the effectiveness of the past 20 years of government child and family policy. As the few

² The author is currently conducting this type of analysis using Statistics Canada SLID microdata, and future versions of this working paper will include this analysis.

studies mentioned in the introduction attest, the picture is less rosy than a simple look at the LICO poverty rate would indicate.

The data to monitor Canadian children's outcomes is less easily accessible than summary income statistics. To look at child and family outcomes, I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), an HRSDC-funded, Statistics Canada conducted longitudinal survey of Canadian children that ran from 1994-2008 with eight cycles of biennial data collection. The stated objective was "to develop a national database on the characteristics and life experiences of children and youth in Canada as they grow from infancy to adulthood" (Statistics Canada 1994-2008, 2010). The NLSCY covers children from birth to 25 by following an initial cohort aged 0-11 in 1994 and adding an Early Childhood Development (ECD) cohort with every cycle. It is a nationally representative sample of the ten Canadian provinces.

For this paper I use the ECD component data cross-sectionally to analyze descriptive statistics of Canadian children 0-5 biennially in the 14 years of NLSCY coverage. Data analysis was conducted using master-file microdata in the Carleton, Ottawa, Outaouais Research Data Centre. Analysis sample sizes ranged from 10,000-17,000 for the different cycles of data (due to sampling targets, not attrition). All statistics have been computed using Statistics Canada cross-sectional weights and statistics are representative of the Canadian population of children in a given year not living on reservations or institutional settings such as hospitals or group homes (Statistics Canada 1994-2008, 2010). For continuous variables, means and distributions were examined. For categorical variables, frequency estimates were computed. A number of the variables are psychometric scale scores, derived from a series of

questions. Statistics Canada conducted factor analysis to verify the scale validity. The outcomes analyzed for this paper were:

- 1) Birth weight
- 2) Gestation (premature birth)
- 3) Motor and Social Development score (ages 0-23 months)
- 4) Emotional/anxiety disorder (scale scores for ages 2/3 and 4/5)
- 5) Pearson Peabody Vocabulary Test Revised (PPVT-R), standardized score measuring 'school readiness' (ages 4 and 5)
- 6) Hunger
- 7) Family functioning score
- 8) Social Support score (family level)
- 9) Parenting – positive interaction
- 10) Parenting – hostile and effective practices

The child outcomes (1 through 6) were selected to capture the various immediate well-being outcomes, and outcomes that could effect long-term, or later developmental outcomes. The family level variables were selected to measure family conditions that could potentially be improved by the income increases indicated by lowered child poverty rates.

The vast majority of child and family outcomes in the NLSCY examined for this paper have not seen significant changes over the course of the survey or 1994-2008. Figures 4 through 9 display findings on a number of the more variable outcomes analyzed. For only two of the outcomes analyzed were notable trends evident, with the rest remaining relatively stable or minor fluctuations in either direction.

The first variable outcome, child hunger, trends with the decline in child poverty. The Person Most Knowledgeable (PMK) about the child was asked: “has your child ever experienced being hungry because the family had run out of food or money to buy food?” In 1994, for 0.9 percent of children the answer was yes. By 2008 only 0.4 percent had experienced hunger (see figure 4).

In contrast, the second variable outcome, the Motor and Social Development (MSD) score trended in a negative direction. The MSD score for children aged 0-23 months, measures the development level of young children through a series of 15 questions designed specifically for two-month age ranges. Questions include “has child held their head up unsupported?”, or “has child said a sentence of more than two words?” In 1994, 3.2 percent of children scored more than two standard deviations below the mean standardized MSD score. In other words, 3.2 percent of children were severely below the average expected level of development. In 2008, that figure increased to 5.7 percent of children (see figure 5).

The consistency of all other variables analyzed would suggest very little has improved over the late 1990s and early 2000s for children growing up in Canada. School readiness and emotional disorder scores remain fairly consistent. Approximately two percent of children grow up in families evaluated as highly dysfunctional on a psychometric scale, a slight decline from just below three percent at the beginning the NLSCY. Average scores on a scale of social support remain approximately 80 percent, indicating families report having a fairly high level of social support from family, friends and community. Consistent average scores on psychometric parenting scales suggest there has been little negative or positive change in how parents interact with their children.

Figure 4. Child hunger

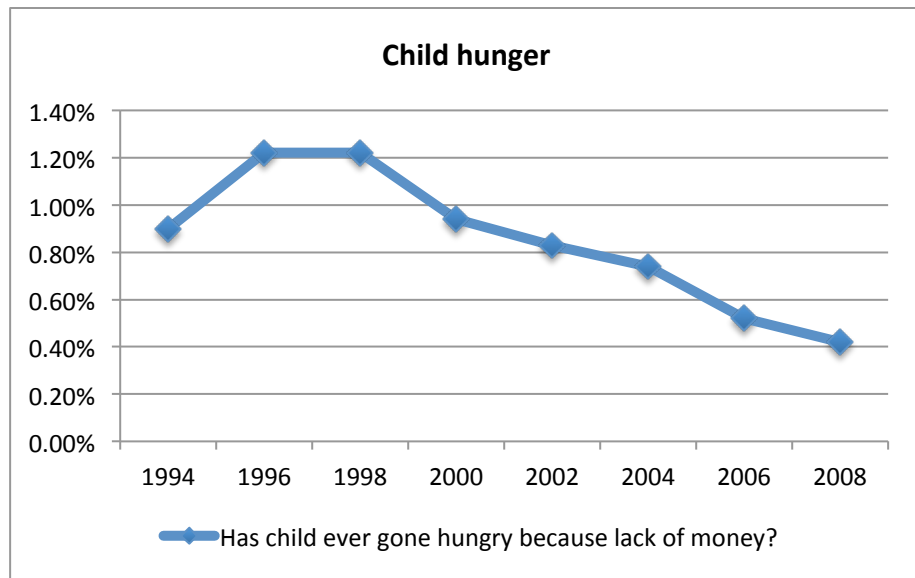


Figure 5. Motor and Social Development

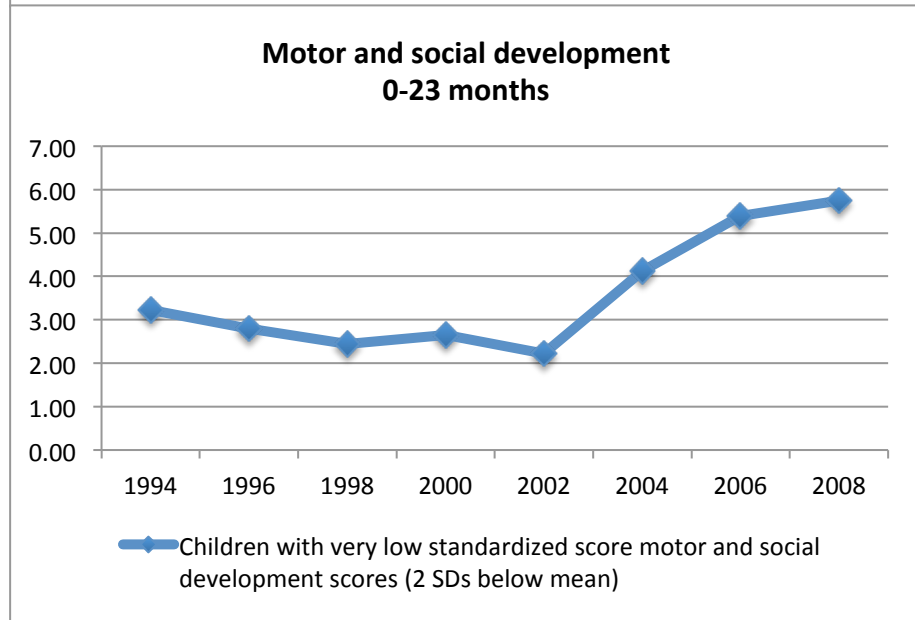
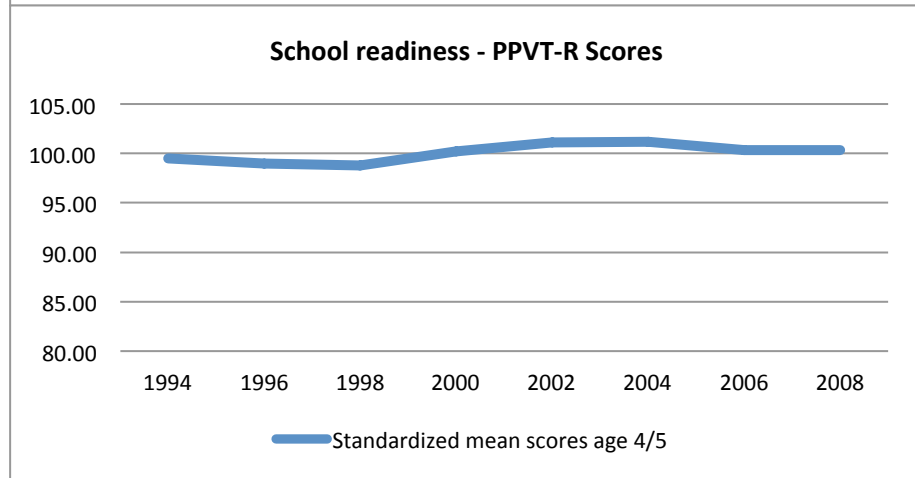


Figure 6. School readiness, PPVT-R



Data source figures 4-9: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) cycles 1-8 (Statistics Canada 1994-2008, 2010)

Figure 7. Emotional /anxiety disorders

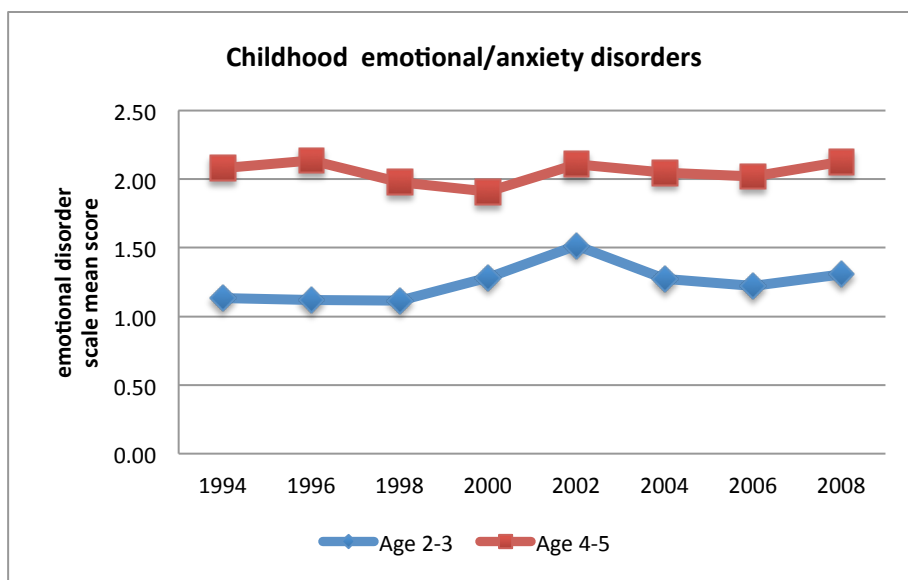


Figure 8. Children born prematurely

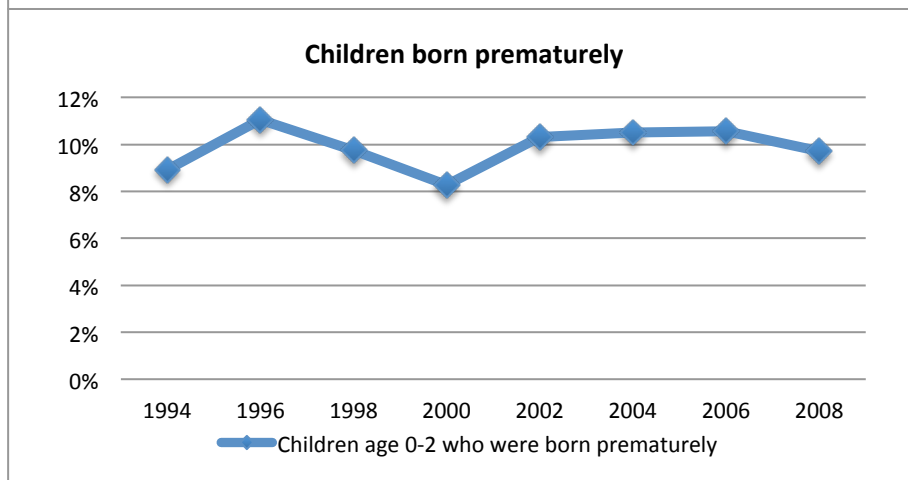
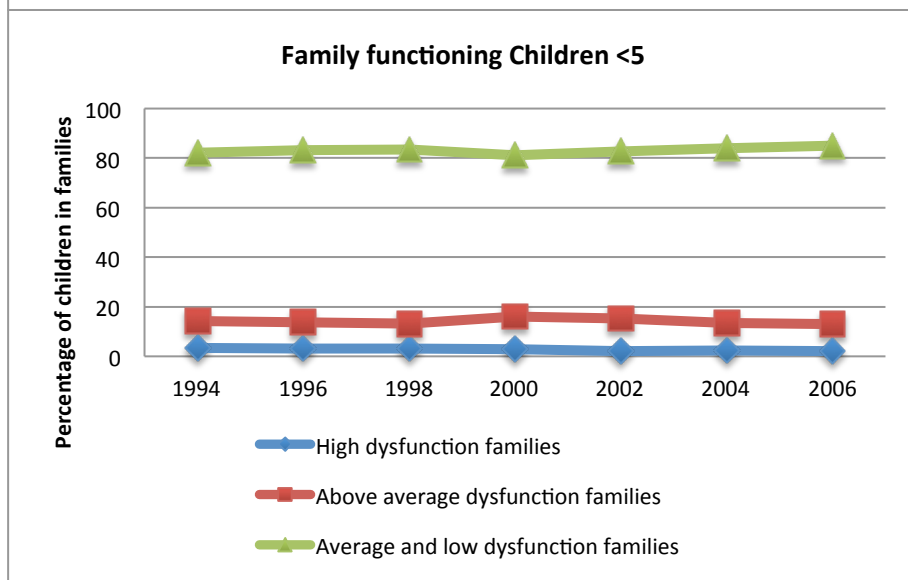


Figure 9. Family functioning



Data source figures 4-9: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) cycles 1-8 (Statistics Canada 1994-2008, 2010)

Discussion

While the poverty and child outcomes statistics shown here are not analyzed for their causal relationship, it is clearly apparent that at the population level, significantly reduced child poverty, as measured by the government's choice indicator, the LICO, has not corresponded with a significant trend of improved child outcomes. The clearest correspondence between the poverty trend and outcomes is for child hunger, which is not surprising, as it is the analyzed outcome most dependent on financial resources. That the MSD scores see a negative trend suggests more young kids in Canada are falling behind, regardless of the child poverty rate. Overall the lack of population change in family and child outcomes is not surprising when you look at the extensive research evidence on how income effects child outcomes at the individual level. Research consistently shows that while socioeconomic status and a wide range of outcomes are correlated, increases in income alone are not particularly predictive of improved cognitive, behavioral or emotional outcomes (Blau 1999; Duncan et al. 1997; Mayer 1997; McEwen and Stewart Forthcoming). Milligan and Stabile (2009) use the NLSCY to examine at an individual level the effects of child benefit expansion on a number of outcome measures, and do find significant, through extremely small effects.

The analysis for this paper has been exclusively descriptive, looking at average or summary statistics, which require a number of caveats. To get a better picture of the changes and trends in child outcomes, more analysis of the distribution of outcomes is needed. Child benefit increases and reductions in child poverty rates have changed the nature of the *bottom* of the income distribution, not necessarily the average or higher end of the distribution. Therefore the average outcome measures may mask changes in the lower half of the outcome distribution. If reduced child poverty rates pulled in the bottom tail of the outcome distribution (a positive

change), that would be a positive difference that could occur without affecting the average outcome. It should be noted in the analysis of the MSD, which looked at the very bottom tail, this was not the case. Beyond descriptive analysis, the correlation between income and outcomes over time may reveal that despite no change in the mean, the strength of association between low-income (pre-tax and transfer) and poor outcomes has weakened. This could be interpreted as a positive policy outcome, indicating low-income is less predictive of outcome, signifying improved equality of opportunity.

As discussed earlier, more analysis is also needed on the income distribution changes, to better hypothesize what changes in the outcome statistics to predict from child benefit changes. Changes to the poverty rate and income distribution also cannot solely be interpreted in terms of policy changes, particularly as redistribution policies do not keep up with rising market income inequality (Fortin et al. 2012; Frenette et al. 2009). Looking at the counterfactual distribution, of what would the poverty rate be if benefits *had not* increased, may be a more fair comparison and evaluation of policy than year over year changes.

Conclusion

This (working) paper has taken only the first steps in bridging the evaluation of child and family policy in Canada from using a headline indicator (poverty rate) to substantive outcomes. Moving beyond the LICO, the most optimistic measure of poverty reduction, to consider the information offered by other measures reveals a less certain story of success in reducing child poverty. Moving to actual outcomes of children and families, over the course of a period of significant benefit expansion, we see little positive change other than the outcome most closely associated with financial resources. Sadly for Canadian children, the political focus on the child poverty rate has not been mirrored by significant improvements in child

outcomes. Increased transfers to Canadian families with children have no doubt improved the quality of life of families in low income. But broadening the scope of evaluation to more than income measures reminds us that income as a policy intervention has does not constitute a fulsome policy support for children. Canada cannot become complacent on serving children and families, and the focus on the child poverty rate may lead to a false sense of progress. Canada's latest report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the child began with a celebratory note about the success in reducing the child poverty rate, as measured by LICO (Government of Canada 2009). As the UNICEF report card and the response of the UN Committee of the Rights of the Child remind, there is much more to child well-being than a poverty rate, and other important policy levers besides income necessary to achieve well-being outcomes.

The political expediency of focusing on child poverty allowed for significant expansion of federal spending on children and families during the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, after the Conservative government's initial 2006 budget, which introduced the UCCB, children have been markedly absent from recent federal budgets. Finding the political will to support programmatic policy for children and families may be a difficult challenge in the current climate of austerity and under a Conservative government who favours tax-expenditures over program expansion. However, the Canadian government must expand its child policy tool-kit and evaluation perspective if it is going to successfully serve its ten million youngest citizens.

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