



Supporting Working Canadian Families: The Role of Employment Insurance Special Benefits

by

Michael J. Prince

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ISBN 1-55382-398-2

Published by:

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Introduction

Over the years, Employment Insurance (EI) has evolved greatly with respect to whom it serves, how and why. As part of an ongoing assessment of its policies and programming, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) is examining how EI may need to adjust to better align with the Canadian labour market and society. Accordingly, this paper examines the role of EI special benefits. Its purpose is to reflect in broad terms on the EI policy objective to encourage long-term labour market attachment by providing temporary income support during absences from work due to life and family events.¹

More specifically, the paper examines five EI benefit types: the Family Supplement, Sickness, Parental, Maternity and Compassionate Care. In 2006-07, these programs paid \$3.8 billion in benefits, accounting for about 31 percent of all EI income benefits. For these five benefit types, women account for 72 percent of all claims. These benefits specifically address family life situations for working Canadians: childbirth, adoption, early child care, low-income families² with children and caring for gravely ill family members. Furthermore, the EI Sickness benefit also addresses a work-life issue of a personal nature – an individual illness or injury – though often with family implications.

In terms of focus, the paper makes a distinction between ‘work-family’ and ‘work-life’ issues. The wider concept of work-life includes work-family matters and more: the issues of time outside of work for community activities, civic engagement, volunteerism and self-development. While these work-life activities are important to human and social development, the primary aim of this paper on EI policy is to examine the interface between paid work in the labour force and certain family life responsibilities. The analysis uses a review of federal government documents and academic literature, including EI administrative as well as social survey data on program utilization and public opinion. The materials consulted are in the References.

A core theme of this analysis is that EI special benefits operate at the intersection of labour market policy, income security policy and family policy. The image of citizen here is the worker-parent-caregiver, a triad of roles crucial to the viability of the economy and sustainability of society. EI special benefits therefore have important implications for each of these policy domains. These policy elements form part of the larger social contract of public policy and state-market-family relations [Lind 2007; Kochan and Shulman 2007; Hartmann, Hegewisch and Lovell 2007].

Another theme in the paper is that the current economic downturn exacerbates issues surrounding increased insecurity, urbanization, poverty and polarization of the workforce due to nonstandard employment.

Still another theme is that EI benefits facilitate greater balance between work and life spheres. *EI special benefits are far from being simply “passive” income benefits; rather, they are “active” labour market measures in a number of respects.* These benefits help sustain long-

term labour market participation by providing temporary income support during absences from work due to life and family events (e.g., illness and childbirth), further supported by complementary job protection for workers through federal and provincial labour code provisions.

The rest of the paper is in four main parts. The first part provides a short introductory overview of program design information for EI special benefits. The second presents my own views on the fundamental social objectives and roles of EI in relation to long-term labour force attachment. The third part, the bulk of the paper, identifies and discusses key social and economic trends that will shape the Canadian labour market and society over the medium term. The fourth part offers potential improvements to the EI program as well as limitations, and identifies some knowledge gaps and research needs. Appendix 1 presents a chronology of the main developments in family-related benefits in EI policy from 1941 to 2006 and Appendix 2 presents information on EI benefit claims by gender.

Brief Overview of EI Special Benefit Programs

Family concerns have been a design feature in Canadian unemployment and employment insurance from the outset. From 1941 to 1975, the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program contained a Dependency Rate which provided higher regular weekly benefits to those claimants with dependants as compared to claimants without children. This differential in benefits of about 17 percent existed even though contributions were determined solely by wage levels and were the same for all workers whether or not they had children.³ It represented “a very restricted recognition of the extra dependency obligations of married men” which a wartime parliamentary report recommended be increased in order to bring it to a “desirable minimum” standard [Marsh 1943: 99-100].⁴

Box 1: Milestones of EI Family-Oriented Benefits	
1940-75	Dependency Rate
1971	Maternity Benefits
1971	Sickness Benefits
1984	Adoption Benefits
1988	Paternity Benefits
1989	Parental Benefits (replacing adoption and paternity benefits)
1996	Family Supplement
2004	Compassionate Care Benefits

Note: See Appendix 1 for a detailed chronology.

Eligibility for EI does not depend on family characteristics or other income available to the claimant. However, the Dependency Rate and its contemporary successor, the Family Supplement, represent an explicit acknowledgment that for determining the amount of EI regular benefits, presence of children and level of family income are taken into account.

Since the early 1970s, the history of UI/EI policy has been a growing recognition of family as a relevant context for consideration in the labour supply choices, constraints and opportunities of workers (see Box 1).

The most recent addition to this suite of family-oriented income programs in EI, the Compassionate Care benefit, exemplifies this policy responsiveness over time to work-family life interactions. While a modest program in terms of expenditures and duration of benefits, and limited in the scope of the care circumstances (to someone gravely ill and at significant risk of death within six months), the program addresses financial, emotional and practical forms of caregiving. Eligible family relationships for which the benefit may apply go well beyond the “nuclear unit” of parents and children to encompass a diverse network of extended family and kinship relations.

Broadly speaking, the policy objectives of EI are as follows:

- providing temporary income replacement and support to eligible working Canadians experiencing temporary unemployment
- maintaining work incentives and strong labour force attachment
- operating EI in a fiscally responsible manner
- assisting those more in need, low-income families with children
- supporting working families in balancing employment and family responsibilities, especially in relation to children.

Being social insurance-based, all the EI income benefits provide a level of protection for different and overlapping groups of workers in relation to previous earnings and labour force attachment in the recent past. Shelley Phipps describes the various goals of EI maternity and parental benefits this way:

- enhancing the income security of families with newborn (or newly adopted) children
- protecting the physical health of mother and newborn child
- promoting gender equity by enabling greater responsibility and involvement by biological and adoptive father for child care
- facilitating work-life balance by allowing working parents more time to spend at home with their newly born or adopted children [2006: 2].

Compassionate Care benefits are payable to a maximum of six weeks to claimants who provide care to a gravely ill or dying family member. The Family Supplement offers a top-up to regular benefits for families with a combined net annual income of \$25,921 or less, and that qualify for the Canada Child Tax Benefit. Maternity benefits are payable to biological mothers to a

maximum of 15 weeks for work missed as result of pregnancy and childbirth. Parental benefits are payable to both biological and adoptive parents to a maximum of 35 weeks for the purpose of caring for a newborn or adopted child. Sickness benefits are payable to a maximum of 15 weeks to claimants who are too ill, injured or sick to work. All EI payments – regular, fishing and special – are treated as taxable income.

The qualifying period for EI special benefits is 600 insured hours in the last 52 weeks (or since the start of the last claim). A two-week waiting period applies to all of these benefits, just like regular benefits. The basic benefit rate for the special benefits, again like regular benefits, is 55 percent of average insurable earnings up to a yearly maximum amount.

The Family Supplement is the exception in that beneficiaries can receive up to 80 percent of their insured earnings, but no more than the overall regular benefit weekly maximum. As a top-up benefit available to EI claimants with children, the Family Supplement applies to all types of benefits: regular, fishing and special. In this paper, the Family Supplement is examined in conjunction with the other special benefits (Maternity, Parental, Sickness or Compassionate Care).

Box 2 outlines several possible program interactions among the EI regular and special benefits as well as with the Canada Pension Plan Disability program.

Box 2: EI program interactions

If eligible, an EI claimant may receive:

Compassionate Care (or other special benefits) and Regular EI benefits to a maximum of 50 weeks

Maternity and Parental benefits up to a combined maximum of 50 weeks

Sickness, Maternity and Parental benefits to a combined maximum of 65 weeks under certain circumstances

Compassionate Care, Maternity, Parental and Sickness benefits up to a combined maximum of 71 weeks

EI Sickness benefits at the same time with (or separately from) Canada Pension Plan Disability benefits

A snapshot of these programs in terms of claims, average duration of benefits, average weekly benefits and total payments for 2006-07 is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
EI Special Program Summary Information for 2006-07

Program	New Claims	Maximum Duration (weeks)	Average Duration (weeks)	Average Weekly Benefit \$	Total Payments (millions\$)
Compassionate Care	5,676	6	4.7	330	9.1
Family Supplement	137,630	Varies	Varies	43*	151.1
Maternity**	162,790	15	14.6	326	772.9
Parental:** - Biological	181,870	35	28.9	337	1,963.0
- Adoptive	2,310		27.0		
Sickness	311,890	15	9.5	304	916.2

* This amount represents a top-up for low-income family claimants.

** In January 2006, the Québec Parental Insurance Plan replaced EI maternity and parental benefits in that province.

Fundamental Rationales and Roles of EI

In their analysis of EI, de Raaf, Motte and Vincent observe that: “Enrichment of parental benefits and the more recent modifications to include a compassionate leave for those who need to take time off work to care for a gravely ill parent reflect a new type of contractual arrangement between the government and insured workers” [2004: 52]. Under this arrangement, “the government is extending EI coverage to temporary work interruptions that occur due to personal reasons, as long as the individual remains committed to returning to work after receiving benefits. This new “contract” between the government and workers makes the EI program more integral to families’ life decisions ... throughout their working lives” [de Raaf, Motte and Vincent 2004: 52].

Lind offers a useful definition of social contract that deals with “agreed-upon social arrangements that provide basic security and access to basic necessities for individuals in

modern industrial societies. Every modern society has a version of the social contract ... in the form of health care systems, retirement schemes, unemployment insurance or benefits, and educational assistance programs, in addition to broader policies that shape and regulate the structure of the economy, government, and civil society” [2007: 1].

One part of that broad social contract relates specifically to the world of work. The boundaries of this aspect of the social contract include the policies, institutions and practices governing work and employment relationships as well as public beliefs, expectations and social values [Kochan and Shulman 2007].

Thus, the social contract in EI policy effectively represents the continual negotiation of the terms and relationships, the responsibilities and rights, between employees and employers; between paid work and unpaid family caregiving work; between men and women as parents and workers; and among families, governments and labour markets [Cheal and Kampen 2000; Duxbury, Higgins and Schroeder 2009; HRSDC 2005; Fox 2001; Jenson 2004; Kershaw 2005; Townson and Hayes 2007].

The traditional *raison d'être* for unemployment insurance programs worldwide include three core ideas: macroeconomic stabilization (at national, sectoral and/or regional levels), income security for working individuals (covering some or most of the workforce), and labour force attachment (including incentives to work and return to work). It is important to take note of the fact that the special benefits in Canada's EI system are consistent with these motivations and ideas. Indeed, women predominate as recipients of EI special benefits (see Appendix 2) in their own right as individual workers in the labour force rather than as dependent spouses.

In addition, the introduction of special benefits over the past four decades points to another set of ideas and rationales for EI in today's world of families and labour markets. These newer grounds include: work-family balance (between employment commitments and family obligations in caring for children and other relations); gender equity in both paid work and unpaid work; and income stability for working families (not only for dual-earner families but also for alleviating the rate of poverty, especially for families at lower levels of earnings). As part of the National Children's Agenda, one of the reasons behind reforms to the EI Parental program in 2000 was to promote early childhood development [HRSDC 2005: 91-92].

The primary objective of EI is “providing temporary income support to those experiencing labour market transitions” [HRSDC 2006: i]. These transitions relate to risks of unemployment (as articulated by the traditional ideas and regular benefits) as well as to risks of contingencies associated with employment (as articulated by the newer ideas and special benefits). In both sets of circumstances, eligible workers experience a loss of earnings for which this social insurance program finances, administers and delivers temporary income support.

Under the former Unemployment Insurance (UI) and now Employment Insurance (EI), many people see and experience regular income benefits as providing a *one-way ticket* or bridge to a new job for insured Canadians who involuntarily lose their jobs [HRSDC 2007]. This has

long been a key role for the program. Concurrently, EI special income and leave benefits operate, for most claimants, as a *round-trip ticket* to their existing job, securing re-entry to their place of employment following an illness, the birth or adoption of a child, or the need to care for a gravely ill or dying relative. With most parents working, including those of young children, public policies are required to offer income support and enable time away from paid employment for essential care work, as well as to give recognition of extended networks of families and kin relationship for useful supports and expected obligations [Charles, Davies and Harris 2008].

Survey evidence in Canada shows, for example, that “most women combine employment and parenthood within months of giving birth, confirming the strong labour force attachment of women today” [Marshall 1999: 23]. In the role as round-trip tickets to work, EI Maternity and Parental benefits are enhancing the continuity of mothers’ labour market careers [Baker and Milligan 2005; Phipps 2000; ten Cate 2003], along with assisting in managing work-family life balance and smoothing the flow of income received by working families with children. For employees, these special benefits help to protect future earnings and career opportunities; for employers, they help retain qualified, valuable and experienced employees [HRSDC 2005].

In the contemporary setting, the family and the labour market are not wholly separate domains, fully disconnected from each other in roles, resources, values or effects. They are, instead, closely linked and unavoidably interdependent: “Workers are family members and family members are workers. Canada relies on families to carry the responsibility for caregiving and nurturing their children, their elderly and other dependants. We also expect people of working age to work and earn their own living. Supporting them in meeting all those responsibilities is a positive sum game” [Duxbury and Higgins 2001: 70].

Box 3: Core Rationales for Employment Insurance
<p>Traditional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Macroeconomic stabilization • Income replacement for working individuals • Labour force attachment <p>Contemporary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work-family balance • Childhood development • Gender equity/equality • Income stability for working families

In summary, EI benefits manifest a complementary arrangement of traditional and modern rationales for social provision (Box 3). Together, these rationales inform a package of benefits that combine labour market, income replacement and family policy considerations.

Socioeconomic Trends over the Medium Term: Implications for Employment Insurance Policy

HRSDC officials, think tanks and academics alike recognize the importance of asking how well suited EI is to the needs of and major trends in Canada's labour force and working families. To better understand EI-related issues and directions, we need to consider trends and circumstances in Canadian society and the economy over the next five to 10 years. In this section, therefore, I examine four major forces of change, each with a bundle of possible challenges and opportunities for EI policy. These trends are:

- the state of the Canadian economy and labour market
- Canada's aging population and workforce
- family forms and family life situations
- public attitudes and perceptions of the EI benefits.

To begin, some general remarks about forecasting and thinking about socioeconomic trends are in order. While informed by research and statistics, what I can say is admittedly speculative given that the phenomena are subject to change – at times, quite rapidly and unexpectedly. Each main trend described is, in reality, a diverse mixture of elements, containing trends and countertrends. For example, the aging of Canada's workforce is likely to mean skill shortages are a serious issue in some sectors of the economy but, due to varied skill requirements, not so in other sectors. The trends are interactive in ways that we do not fully understand or appreciate, even after the passage of time and conducting of research. Trends are moving parts of a larger structure of economic and social activities interacting, reacting and shifting through time.⁵ These characteristics make it difficult to “sum” the trends, although there comes a point when we need to consider trends together for what they might all mean for policy development priorities.

The Canadian economy: from recession to recovery

In making forecasts about the medium term outlook for the economy and EI policy, it is essential to think about effects of the current economic recession and subsequent recovery. From 1993 to 2008, Canada had steady growth in employment and a declining annual average rate of unemployment. In 2007, the national rate of unemployment reached a 30-year low of 6.0 percent. Before the current economic recession, about 1.9 million new jobs were forecast for the period between 2006 and 2015, compared with 2.9 million in the previous 10-year period between 1996 and 2005.

During 2008, an economic slowdown became increasingly apparent. From October 2008 through March 2009, the Canadian labour force lost 357,000 jobs almost completely in full-time employment; largely in the manufacturing and construction sectors; mainly among core-age adults (25 to 54 years of age); and predominantly men (about two-thirds of the jobs lost).⁶ If this trend continues, then workers living in an urban area will be more likely to claim EI benefits over the

coming five years than workers in a rural area, given the main location of sectors hit hardest by the current economic downturn and subsequent adjustments.

In addition to layoffs and rising unemployment, an economic recession brings reduced work hours for many; diminished incomes due to job loss or reduced work time, yet increased hours and overtime for others; and increased underemployment and involuntary part-time employment – in short, downward pressures on household incomes and net wealth. In recent years, it is estimated that about 29 percent of part-time workers in Canada are working part-time involuntarily [Kapsalis and Tourigny 2008: 27]. Many writers suggest a greater polarization of the Canadian labour force into “good jobs,” “bad jobs” and no jobs at all. Through the recession, restructuring of workplaces and eventual recovery of the economy, there is likely to be increased job insecurity, decreased morale and heightened anxiety and stress, each of which has implications for work-family life balance [Duxbury and Higgins 2001, Sauvé 2009].

Depending on the depth, nature and duration of the current economic recession, the long-term unemployment rate (those persons without paid work for more than a year) will in all probability increase as a share of total unemployment, perhaps returning to a proportion last seen in the early- to mid-1990s. Of course, people with little or no insured work in the previous 52 weeks are ineligible for EI benefits. As the unemployment rate for the total labour force rises, the incidence of involuntary part-time work among all part-time workers could also rise [Kapsalis and Tourigny 2008: 30] – another trend with implications for eligibility and payment amounts of EI benefits.

What is the medium-term outlook for poverty in Canada? Among other structural factors, the evidence is clear that economic recessions create and sustain poverty [Battle 1994]. If the recessions of 1981-82 and 1990-91 are any guide, the risk of poverty for men and women will rise again. The incidence of poverty for working age Canadians will increase from recent rates, producing an expansion in the number and percentage of low-income families with children. In analyzing Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics data from 1999 to 2005, Kapsalis and Tourigny find that low pay is a more serious issue than non-standard employment for poverty: “Low-pay workers not only have low incomes and are more likely to live in a low-income family, but they also have lower employer benefit coverage than the typical non-standard worker” [2008: 49]. In other words, being a low-wage worker earning less than \$10 per hour is a stronger predictor than being a non-standard worker of not having dental, medical or pension plans. This same study found that non-standard workers are three times more likely to live in a low-income family than are standard workers (13 percent vs. 4 percent); self-employed workers are four times more likely to live in low-income families [Kapsalis and Tourigny 2008: 21].

The world of work in recent decades has gone from paper clips to computer chips and now, for many Canadians, to pink slips. These metaphoric shifts indicate new forms of work organization as well as changing forms of job security and economic insecurity. In times of economic downturns and uncertainty, public and private sector organizations look to non-standard employment as a means of reducing labour costs and enhancing flexibility in staffing options.³

Non-standard employment typically refers to jobs that are part-time, temporary, casual or free-lance, seasonal, contract, on-call or contingent. Whether called the alternative, secondary or peripheral labour force, most of these jobs are associated, on average, with lower weekly earnings, lower pension coverage, lower disability and health benefits, little or no job security, and relatively few opportunities for promotions in workplace organizations [Kapsalis and Tourigny 2008; Kashefi 2007]. Persons in non-standard employment are also less likely to have employer-based disability insurance, medical and sickness benefits. “Women are more likely to be non-standard workers (41 percent) than men (30 percent);” and – although women account for just under half of the total workforce (48 percent) they account for more than half of non-standard work (56 percent)” [Kapsalis and Tourigny 2008: 19].

For several years, non-standard work has constituted about one-third of all employment in Canada [Kapsalis and Tourigny 2008]. Looking ahead, will the proportion of standard jobs and non-standard jobs created in the next five to 10 years be the same as those created in the last decade, at a time of economic prosperity? Or will more jobs become of the non-standard variety? In addition, perhaps the share of the self-employed as a proportion of all employment will rise, nonetheless modestly, over the medium term. Even if the relative share of standard jobs in the Canadian labour force does not decline significantly in the medium term, a hollowing out of standard jobs could happen with the erosion or removal of employee benefits, such as life insurance and pension plans.

As is the case now, some workers in non-standard employment will have insufficient hours to qualify for these and other EI benefits. Understandably, “EI coverage may become a more pressing issue as an increasing number of Canadians are in non-standard work” [de Raaf, Motte and Vincent 2004: 46]. If non-standard employment does expand, such workers “are less likely than others to qualify for job-protected leave (a provincial jurisdiction) or EI benefits, or to receive any benefits from their employers” [Phipps 2006: 20]. In addition, a rise in non-standard employment tends to increase the reliance on EI Sickness benefits [HRDC 2003] and, it would seem, to increase the number of recipients of the Family Supplement.

There are implications of an increase in non-standard employment for women who become mothers. We know that the incidence of involuntary part-time work is higher among lone mothers at 45 percent, than for other part-time workers at 29 percent [Kapsalis and Tourigny 2008: 5]. We also know that women in self-employed, part-time and non-unionized work – which tends to correlate with lower employment earnings – are more likely than others to return to work within one month after child birth, are less likely to receive EI Maternity and Parental Leave benefits and are less likely to receive a financial top-up from their employers while they are on maternity/parental leave [Marshall 2006, 2003, 1999; Townson and Hayes 2007].

At the same time, however, claims for EI sickness benefits may increase because fewer workers will have an employer plan providing sickness benefits. In addition, applications for the Compassionate Care benefit may rise because more workers will not be provided sufficient coverage for such leave by their employer and they cannot afford to lose their earnings for a six-week period.

A related question is whether a trend toward more non-standard employment in coming years means that unemployed persons and part-time workers will become a relatively greater source for care for ill and dying family members compared to either full-time employed people taking compassionate leave or the family resorting to the use of professional care facilities.

Canada's aging population: a greying workforce and shifting intergenerational responsibilities

With declining and low fertility levels, the baby boomers advancing in years and increasing life expectancy, Canada's population is aging. With that, Canada's workforce is "greying" too. Employment represented by workers aged 55 and over is the fastest rising category; their share of total employment has grown steadily over the last decade and will continue to do so over the next five to 10 years. Population projections by Statistics Canada estimate that, in the next decade, senior citizens aged 65 and over will outnumber children and youth [2005]. This increase might result in a shift in the age profile of EI beneficiaries over the next five years, with more persons in their 50s becoming claimants.

A large Canadian survey conducted in 2001 on work, family and lifestyle found that 28 percent of employed Canadians working at least 10 hours per week have responsibilities for the care of elderly dependants while almost twice as many employed Canadians (54 percent) have child care responsibilities [Duxbury, Higgins and Schroeder 2009]. As the baby boom generation ages, the proportion of working Canadians with eldercare responsibilities will increase as might the share of working Canadian families with responsibilities for both child care and eldercare. These families, called the "sandwich generation," face demands at work and at home across generations [Williams 2004]. The associated risks of caregiver strain can include physical, emotional and financial costs for the employees; for employers, risks include higher absenteeism and lower job satisfaction among workers and, for Canadian society more generally, increased use of the health care system [Beaujot 2000; Beaujot and Andersen 2007; Duxbury, Higgins and Schroeder 2009].

Age is an important predictor of illness and disability. With population aging and thus an aging workforce come an increased incidence of various medical issues and health conditions, such as cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease, arthritis and rheumatism. Sickness, absenteeism and long-term work absences due to impairments rise significantly with age [Marshall 2006].

We might expect a steady increase in claims for EI sickness benefits (and, for that matter, Canada Pension Plan Disability benefits and provincial workers' compensation benefits) along with claims for income protection under disability insurance and extended medical insurance plans sponsored by employers. These latter benefits are mainly available to employees with permanent jobs and those working in unionized settings.

Likewise, with an aging population, we can reasonably assume that claims for Compassionate Care benefits will continue to increase as working adults respond to the care needs of a gravely ill or dying family member. EI tracking surveys conducted since 2004 consistently find that most Canadians (between 70 and 80 percent) say they are likely to apply for the Compassionate Care benefit in the future if the circumstances arose. In addition, recent tracking surveys reveal that almost half of Canadians are not well aware of the Sickness benefits available through the EI program. This is liable to change as the incidence of short-term illnesses and longer absences from work take place due to chronic health conditions and episodic disabilities.

Depending on the extent of the non-standardization of work in Canada's labour force, the relative importance of sources of income support for short-term work absences due to illness and or injury may shift from employer-based insurance plans and continuing to receive regular pay [HRSDC 2008], toward EI sickness benefits and other public programs such as Workers' Compensation or social assistance at the provincial level. The current economic recession may well accelerate this shift from employer-based plans to EI and other public programs.

Family life situations: multiple forms and challenges

In 1971-72, when maternity benefits were first introduced into the then-UI program, most families had one earner, typically the father. Women were more likely to have their first child while in their early 20s and only about a third of women with young children worked in the Canadian labour force. If women did work outside the home in the paid workforce, their earnings were a small fraction of the household's total income.

Today, most families with young children have two earners, women are more likely to have their first child in their late 20s or early 30s, and a sizable majority of women with young children participate in the labour force. While women's earnings still lag behind men's, women's earnings as a share of overall household budgets have grown in significance over recent decades to 25 percent in 2002. Today, one in four mothers with young children has a university degree, compared to only one in 20 in the early 1970s [Phipps 2006].

Another trend worth noting is the growing share of families with children that are lone-parent households, rising from seven percent in the early 1970s to about 18 percent today. Associated with this increase is the relatively high poverty rate among lone-parent families, especially single-mother families with children under age 18 [McDaniel 2007]. Morissette and Ostrovsky find that family earnings instability is highest among lone mothers, particularly young lone mothers [2007]. They also find that social assistance and EI are important programs for reducing the income instability of lone mothers.

What is a "family" has changed or diversified tremendously in actual forms, social acceptance and, to a degree, in public policy and laws [Fox 2009]. Common law unions have grown in popularity relative to marriage in recent decades as have "created" and "voluntary"

families that comprise various networks of people, often long-term friends who as “fictive kin” and provide assorted kinds of support and caregiving [McDaniel 2007: 305].

Such varied and diverse forms of family draw attention to the degree of correspondence between program definitions of family, and actual families and kinship networks in Canadian society. For EI, this diversity has obvious relevance for the Compassionate Care benefit. With most Canadian families with children now being dual-worker families, they face challenges of parenting, working in the labour force and, as noted earlier, perhaps caring for an elderly parent. Moreover, evidence shows that women in Canada still carry the bulk of responsibility for domestic work and caregiving, along with “moneywork,” the labour of managing family finances [Colavecchia 2009; Luxton 2009].

With the extension in 2000 of EI Parental Leave benefits from 10 to 35 weeks, the participation of fathers in caregiving appears to have responded. “The proportion of fathers who claimed or planned to claim paid parental benefits jumped from about 3 percent in 2000 to 10 percent by 2001. This is both a statistically and socially significant increase” [Marshall 2003: 15]. In a related analysis, Pélusse suggests that in the actual take-up of parental benefits in 2002, men accounted for seven percent as biological parents and 12 percent of claims as adoptive parents [2003]. EI administrative data show that every year since Parental benefits expanded, more men are sharing the benefit with their spouse [HRSDC 2007; 2005]. Indeed, of the five types of family-related EI benefits, Parental benefits are the only one that exhibits a notable shift in the gender distribution of claimants over the last 10 years (see Appendix 2).

What are the effects of the longer paid parental leave on working mothers’ return-to-work rate? Marshall finds the overall rate of return to work is unaffected with about 90 percent reporting a return to work within two years after childbirth, a rate similar to that in the early 1990s. Not surprisingly, with longer leave benefits now available, the most common return time lengthened from six months in 2000 to 10 months in 2001 [Marshall 2003: 16]. Where women took eight months or less for their parental leave, in almost 25 percent of those cases, husbands took some of the leave time too. As self-employed women are not entitled for the EI Parental benefit, this change in policy had no effect on them. Their median time off work for child birth or adoption remains one month.

Public attitudes and perceptions of the EI programs

Economic conditions, including the current recession and the aging of Canada’s baby boom generation, are obvious factors that influence the nature and direction of social values. Public opinion surveys offer a basis for describing and predicting trends in the social values of Canadians towards work, EI programs and family life. What do *current* public beliefs suggest for *medium-term* policy developments? Over the coming years, on issues related to EI, how might public opinion shift and in what directions? In discussing public opinion and social values, I comment on four topics: perceptions of the Canadian economy; awareness of various EI

programs; attitudes of self-employed Canadians toward EI coverage; and family life and the role of public policy, including EI, in supporting families.⁴

The latest published EI Tracking Survey done in January-February 2008 reported that a modest majority of Canadians think EI provides a bridge to a new job; that the program is somewhat or very fair; that benefit amounts are adequate; and that overall, the EI program works well needing only minor adjustments. Of course, conditions in the Canadian economy and labour market have changed noticeably from the time of that survey a year ago. No doubt, uncertainty about the state of the economy has risen since then.

In subsequent surveys, we might expect to see a decline in general public confidence in their sense of job security, their ability to find another job readily and in their being able to access EI. Attitudes about the general fairness of the program could also change in this context. At the same time, over the medium term, attitudes may well shift toward the view that benefit amounts are insufficient, and that the program requires major reforms, not just minor adjustments – in the form of benefit increases, an expansion in eligibility or a change in the two-week waiting period policy.

Recent surveys also reveal that, while the Maternity and Parental benefits are relatively well known, this is not the case for the other special benefits. For instance, tracking surveys show that two-thirds of surveyed Canadians are not very or are not at all aware of the Family Supplement as an additional EI benefit to low-income working families. Furthermore, nearly half of Canadians surveyed are unaware of the Sickness benefit, despite its long history in EI. A similar share are unaware of the Compassionate Care benefit. Not surprisingly, women are more aware than men of the availability of both these benefits. There is also likely a knowledge gap on what other fiscal instruments exist in regards to parental leave policy.

With respect to the views of self-employed Canadians on EI coverage, Departmental surveys bring to light strong interest by a clear majority of the self-employed to being eligible for at least some EI benefits in return for paying premiums more or less equivalent to those for employees. This level of interest likely will continue and may expand in future due to effects from the latest recession and from a growing awareness by some Canadians of the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) which does offer coverage for most self-employed workers in that province for certain EI related-benefits.

Of the EI special programs, self-employed Canadians express most interest in the Sickness and Compassionate Care benefits, followed by Parental benefits and an EI-type benefit for unemployment due to business failure. Naturally, there are some variations on preferences for these benefits based on such variables as age, gender and education. To give one example, self-employed women are more likely than are self-employed men to indicate a willingness to pay for access to Compassionate Care benefits (88 percent compared to 70 percent for men). Other expressed priorities by the self-employed for future federal support are retirement benefits and disability protection.

Should the Government of Canada have an explicit and comprehensive family policy? According to recent focus group and interview data, Canadians are ambivalent on the idea of an activist family policy along the lines found in many European countries. But they do tend to want some additional forms of support from the federal government along with more choice in the nature of support provided [Ipsos Reid 2007; Duxbury, Higgins and Schroeder 2009]. Further public support is critical in helping families address financial and time management stresses related to work-family life responsibilities. From focus group research: “The majority of participants felt that supports should differ by family type. In particular, they felt that any new family benefits of supports should depend on income, age/size of family; location; and vary by family circumstance (e.g., caring for a family member with a disability)” [Ipsos Reid 2007: 7]. EI tracking surveys also indicate openness by many Canadians to the idea of having choices in the nature of benefit payments, whether a higher amount over fewer weeks or a lower amount of benefits paid over a longer time period.

In terms of which policy instruments to use in advancing support to Canadian families, these focus group participants divide between those who prefer tax measures (such as non-refundable or refundable credits) and those who prefer direct expenditures or services. More agreement emerges on the need to improve parental leave benefits (longer duration and/or more flexible use) and in helping families care for aging parents. There seems to be a clear preference by Canadians, as suggested by these studies, in a greater use of information-based policy instruments providing educational materials on child rearing, financial planning and credit counselling as well as more communication about the programs available to families. On ways to better support working families, EI is viewed as one among numerous policies, with attention also given to health care issues, day care, eldercare services, homeownership, family-friendly employers, community programs and recreation [Ipsos Reid 2007: 36-37; Duxbury, Higgins and Schroeder 2009: 14].

Conclusion

“Family,” observes Susan McDaniel, “continues to be a basic element in Canada’s social policy agenda” [2007: 285]. On this agenda, questions examined in this paper dealt with what constitutes a desired balance between work and family, and what is the role of EI policy in contemporary Canada in supporting this balance. This brief review of EI special programs indicates how federal social policy is related to working families in Canada. Our examination of EI and family life situations shows that the connection of EI policy and families has not remained static. Some aspects of work-family life are relatively recent policy additions to EI, such as the Compassionate Care benefit, while other components, such as Sickness and Maternity benefits, have formed part of EI since the early 1970s.

Over the seven-decade history of Unemployment Insurance/Employment Insurance in Canada, “the family” has evoked a number of changing images or positions in the program. Initially, the family was in the background of UI, assumed as a place of dependents with a full-time homemaker and the support of a male breadwinner. It evolved gradually, as a social entity

with past, present and future labour force participants and wage earners, and as a diverse range of units with certain risks and contingencies for income security to its current recognition as networks of family and kinship relationships and caregiving activities. Today, despite the tightening of eligibility and coverage of workers on family-related matters, EI is more integrated into the social fabric of working families than ever before. Adding social insurance protection for the common contingency of caregiving by working Canadians for terminally ill family members is the latest example of this long-term trend.

I have suggested that rationales for EI group chronologically into two categories (Box 3). The first category refers to classic welfare state reasons for government intervention in labour markets through UI programming. The second category refers to reasons for EI policy-making that have emerged and been articulated more regularly in recent decades in Canada and other industrialized nations. This second category does not replace the first group of reasons, but rather been influenced by and influences those earlier reasons. As a result, we have in the early stages of the 21st century a diverse, yet largely complementary, array of justifications and roles for EI policy [HRSDC 2007; 2005].

We should not be startled that EI – a major social insurance program at the intersection of the labour market, income security and family – has been influenced by fundamental cultural and economic trends in redefining the role of women, in the multiplication of legitimate forms of families and in the division labour for caregiving, parenting and working in the labour force. It seems realistic to expect that this broad pattern of socioeconomic changes and program adaptations will continue in the future. As Shelley Phipps expresses this: “Changes in Canadian society led to the need for maternity and later parental benefits, and developments in the program influenced more social and economic change. And as Canadian society and the economy change, there may be a need for more changes to the program” [2006: 3].

Three macro political and policy questions

1. Is having special benefits located in EI contradictory to the logic of EI as a social insurance policy?

This is an old and ongoing issue with respect to the special benefits in EI. The analysis I have presented here concludes that these benefits are basically compatible with the purpose and nature of EI as a social insurance program. None of these family-related benefits are intended for persons with marginal attachment to the labour force. Instead, they are intended to protect against temporary interruptions in employment for parents and other EI claimants with long-term labour force attachment.

Indeed, in today’s world of work and families, these income benefits are not really “special” or add-ons to the EI system.⁵ With dual earners the primary form of families, and gender equality of opportunity a prominent social value, these benefits are central elements within federal jurisdiction in family policy, income security and labour

market programming. These benefits address important risks centred in the economy, the worker and the family; they represent efforts at addressing some of the challenges and stresses of work-family life relations. Eligibility for these benefits falls squarely within EI's logic of paying premiums into the program and accumulating sufficient insurable hours of employment over the past year.

2. Are the EI special benefits obtaining positive outcomes?

The short answer is yes, though with some built-in limitations. For the most part, EI special benefits are meeting intended policy objectives. In terms of labour force attachment, these special benefits are providing *return tickets to employment* for parents of new children, especially for working women who are new mothers. As one would expect, and as was intended by this reform, the major extension of parental benefits in 2001 has enabled many new mothers to take more leave to be with their newborn or newly-adopted children. In addition, it has encouraged more new fathers to take leave from work to assume a larger role in the initial period of childhood development [Marshall 2003; HRSDC 2007]. Other research by Morissette and Ostrovsky shows the important role of EI benefits in stabilizing the income of families across income levels and, in particular, for lone-mother families [2007].

At the same time, however, positive impacts of these benefits are limited by the fact that the self-employed, by policy design under EI, lack coverage, including some low-waged workers; that the long-term unemployed do not qualify; and that some young people in the workforce, before the birth or adoption of their child, may lack sufficient insurable hours to qualify for maternity and parental benefits [MacDonald 2009; Phipps 2006]. The coverage issue is a fatal flaw of EI; the majority of unemployed Canadians do not qualify for EI, the percentage falling from 82.9 percent in 1990 to 43.0 percent in 2008 [Battle 2009: 2]. In addition, the coverage and real value of the Family Supplement has been declining over the past decade, thus reducing its benefit for some low-income working families with children.⁶ With respect to the Sickness benefit, about one-third of claimants every year exhaust the maximum of 15 weeks and it is not entirely evident what happens to them in terms of income protection or instability [Prince 2008]. In light of these limitations and gaps in coverage, it would seem appropriate to undertake policy development work that explores options for enhancing support for working families.

3. Is the EI system the best policy platform for these special benefits in achieving effective and progressive outcomes for Canadian families?

This question, too, is a continuing debate, although it has taken on some new dimensions in recent years.

Since special benefits were first introduced into UI in the early 1970s, one point of view has argued that they do not belong in this program. Instead, according to this

viewpoint, special benefits should be removed from UI/EI so that it may be returned to “true” social insurance principles and the original intentions of the policy-makers for this program. Groups that articulate this position do so from the perspective of streamlining and solidifying EI, rather than from a perspective of strengthening and stabilizing these family-related income benefits.

Typically, a response to this traditional critique is to defend the location of these benefits in the EI program, even while acknowledging weaknesses of the overall program. A recent example of this is the conclusion of Phipps that “it is reasonable to keep the maternity/parental benefits system within EI, but to improve the program” [Phipps 2006: 29].

More recently, two other perspectives have arisen in EI policy reform debates in Canada. One concerns the establishment in 2006 of the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP). The QPIP covers the EI programs for maternity and parental benefits for workers in that province. What is significant, in terms of this question, is that the QPIP includes most self-employed workers who must contribute a special premium to the plan. Other notable features that distinguish the QPIP from EI include: no two-week waiting period, higher maximum earnings and higher maximum benefits than under EI, specific parental benefits designated for fathers and flexibility in the payment of benefits with the choice of a higher replacement income for a shorter period or a lower replacement rate for a longer period of payment. The QPIP therefore represents a working model of several reform options for special benefits that could be accomplished within the EI platform itself [Tremblay 2009].

Finally, another perspective argues for removing one or more of the special benefits from EI as part of a grand approach to family policy and gender equality. This perspective calls for extending one or more of these kinds of benefits to all families and parents, regardless of their labour force status or work history. The ambition is to support all families with young children and to facilitate more balance, not only between work and family life, but also in the gendered division of caring labour between men and women in families. Sickness, maternity, parenting/adoption and compassionate care, from this perspective, are generally experienced needs that deserve a general social policy and finance from general revenues, rather than one tied to a labour market social insurance program.

Knowledge gaps and research questions

Most of the published research on work-family life balance is in the fields of psychology, management and personnel studies, feminist analyses, or child and family studies, at times complemented by social surveys [Barrette 2008]. With respect to work-family life tensions, a main focus of research has been on examining coping strategies and in proposing reforms to do with individuals, internal family dynamics or workplace practices. Government programs and

policy instruments tend to receive less attention. In studies that do examine EI benefits and unemployment, families or households are “rarely the unit of analysis.” Consequently, we have limited data on how access to EI income benefits affects how families adjust to job losses and earnings interruptions, as in regards to consumption and labour supply decisions [de Raaf, Motte and Vincent 2004: 17]. Moreover, another issue worth closer examination comes from the observation that: “If more women are having difficulty qualifying for EI because of their pattern of employment, then their economic circumstances may be worsening as a result of exclusion from EI benefits” [Cheal and Kampen 2000: 31]. A recent study found that 39.1 percent of unemployed women received regular EI benefits in 2008 as opposed to 41.6 percent of men, and the gender gap has widened in recent years [Battle 2009: 2].

We need to understand better the numerous interactions among the EI special benefits, and between them and EI regular benefits. Taken together, how do the Sickness and Maternity benefits interact or the Compassionate Care and other benefit types? What are the effects of these combinations of benefits for labour market decisions? We know that among those who take time off work to care for an ill or dying person, for 25 percent of them their length of absence is seven weeks or more, which exceeds the six-week maximum for the Compassionate Care benefit. We know that of those who use all six weeks of the Compassionate Care benefit, about 30 percent receive another type of EI benefit, either Sickness benefits or Regular benefits. Are there are other provisions available to these workers and families? What would be the effect of extending the duration of the Compassionate Care benefit from six weeks to 12 weeks? Would it allow benefit sharing among family members and enable more family caregiving from members in the labour force? These questions point to the importance of taking a life-course approach to understand the interaction of benefits over time, through commonly experienced transitions in roles and circumstances that individuals and families go through.

In addition, how do EI income benefits interact with employment benefits and support measures provided through the EI program (through what is known as EI Part II) or with certain federal income tax measures that deal with income support, employment or the family? What is known about the experience of participants in Part II who are in receipt of Part I income benefits? What is the effect of such benefits and support measures for addressing persistent non-standard work and low-wage work? Answers to these questions are important for identifying the full nature of intended policy effects, as well as revealing any unintended consequences and unexpected synergies.

Some research suggests “that EI may reduce the need for a spouse [read, female] to seek employment, thus giving families greater flexibility in balancing their work and family responsibilities. However, further research is warranted to better understand the role that EI plays in the way households make their collective labour market decisions” [de Raaf, Motte and Vincent 2004: 19]. Such research, to be robust, would need to examine how such labour market decisions may vary by different types and sizes of families, among other variables relevant to work/family issues. A federal evaluation, for example, points out that “the consequences of adopting an older child for the new parents’ labour market behaviour may be different than the consequences of adopting an infant/toddler” [HRDC 2001: 3].

We also need to understand better the effects of EI benefits on family caregiving – i.e., the informal support by adults to other family members, relatives and “fictive kin” needing assistance. What contribution do EI benefits make to address the economic costs and employment consequences (e.g., income or job security) of caregiving? If at all, how do EI special benefits influence the quality on intra-family roles and relationships between spouses or between parent and child? What difference do Family Supplement benefits make to the well-being of children in low-income families? Little research exists on this area of work-family life dynamics [Barrette 2008]. Survey research and qualitative data from focus groups could tell us what “balancing work and family responsibilities” means for working Canadians using these benefits.

Along the same lines, to what extent are EI Compassionate Care or Parental benefits influencing the distribution of caregiving between men and women? What is the gendered division of caring, as represented in the take-up of these benefits, and is it changing over time? Longitudinal analysis of the gender composition of claimants for these benefits would shed light on this issue of work and family life.

From the start of UI in Canada in 1940, policy intentions are apparent in addressing certain family circumstances of unemployed workers and have become a recurring and expanding theme in the development of UI/EI policy since the 1970s. In our market society, the work ethic is about more than a love of labour and, in our intimate lives, family caregiving is about more than a labour of love. In the interconnected spheres of our public and private lives, EI is an important federal policy in connecting with some of the interrelated realities for many working families today.

Endnotes

1. To be sure, EI regular benefits and fishing benefits also help families balance work-family responsibilities and to manage household financial security, but these programs are not the focus of this paper. Future research could consider how regular benefits influence how families seek to reconcile work and family life [de Raaf, Motte and Vincent 2004: 17].
2. Low-income families are households with a combined net annual income of \$25,921 or less and that qualify for the Canada Child Tax Benefit. While I may refer at times in this paper to the Family Supplement as a type of benefit, it is a top-up amount available for all EI claimants who have dependent children at home and who earn less than \$25,921 in net family income, regardless if they receive regular, fishing or special benefits.
3. The Dependency Rate did recognize female-headed households and the female unemployed, but primarily reflected the thinking of the day of the male breadwinner model of Canadian families with women as mothers and homemakers in the domestic domain.
4. Other major trends, outside the scope of this small paper, include immigration and family structures, population growth and birth rates.
5. Over this five-month period, the largest decline in employment since the 1982 recession, part-time employment actually grew by 30,000 jobs and self-employment has changed relatively little. We may expect that, over the next several years, the gap in the employment rates for women and men will shrink further due

to (i) the continued long-term trend of the increasing participation rate of women in the paid labour force, and (ii) the fact that most of the jobs lost in the current recession could well be held by men, because men tend to work in more cyclical industries such as automotive, construction and manufacturing. As of March 2009, the rate of employment among women, aged 25 and over, was 58.6 percent and for men aged 25 and over it was 67.6 percent [Statistics Canada 2009].

6. Aside from these advantages for employers, non-standard work has attractions for some employees as a bridge for new entrants to the labour force to a standard job or a flexible short-term attachment for full-time students, some new mothers and some older workers [Kapsalis and Tourigny 2008].
7. For future analysis is the larger question of EI's place within a range of other fiscal policy instruments (transfers and tax measures) and other actors (employers and provincial/territorial governments) that cover workers during a leave from their employment.
8. EI special benefits are special in the sense of being for a particular or specific purpose, as described in Part I subsection 12(3) of the legislation, but they should not be thought of as exceptional or peculiar, lying outside the normal aspects of an EI system in contemporary Canada.
9. The proportion of EI beneficiaries eligible for the Family Supplement has been in decline for at least 10 years, as family incomes rose over this period while the Family Supplement threshold has remained fixed and thus steadily declining in real terms.

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APPENDIX 1

Chronology of Legislative and Regulatory Modifications to Family/Life Related Employment Insurance Programs

1941

- The Unemployment Insurance (UI) program included a higher benefit rate for claimants with dependants.

1971

- UI Sickness and Maternity benefits introduced for workers with at least 20 weeks of insured employment.
- A dependency benefit rate of 75 percent for low-income earners introduced.

1975

- The dependency benefit rate removed.

1979

- The basic benefit replacement rate lowered from 66 percent to 60 percent of insurable earnings.

1984

- Introduced 15 weeks of adoption benefits.
- Maternity benefits simplified and adjusted to conform to the *Canadian Human Rights Act*.

1989

- 10 weeks of Parental benefits available in addition to the existing Maternity benefits, payable to either men or women. These benefits replaced both Paternity benefits, introduced in 1988, and Adoption benefits, introduced in 1983.
- Special benefits (Maternity, Parental and Sickness) broadened to provide for a total of 30 weeks of combined special benefits.

1993

- The replacement rate for benefits reduced from 60 percent to 57 percent of insurable earnings.

1994

- The replacement rate reduced from 57 percent to 55 percent of insurable earnings, with the exception of low-income individuals with children, who receive a replacement rate of 60 percent of insurable earnings.

1996

- Under the revamped Employment Insurance (EI) system, eligibility based on hours of work, rather than weeks, to allow more part-time workers to become eligible for benefits.
- The Family Supplement introduced for low-income families with children..

2000

- Parental benefits expanded from 10 to 35 weeks, giving parents up to one year of combined Maternity and Parental benefits.
- The number of hours of insurable employment required to qualify for Maternity, Parental or Sickness benefits reduced from 700 to 600 hours.
- To improve flexibility, a second parent sharing parental leave no longer required to serve a second two-week waiting period, and parents could earn the greater of \$50 or 25 percent of their weekly Parental benefit without a reduction in their EI benefits.

2001

- The benefit repayment provision, initially introduced to reduce EI use by higher-income repeat claimants, adjusted to improve targeting and reflect changing economic realities, effective for the 2000 tax year. All first-time and special benefits claimants exempted from the benefit repayment provision.
- Changes made to the re-entrant provision to make it more responsive to parents returning to the labour force following an extended absence caring for young children. Parents re-entering the work force who received EI Maternity and/or Parental benefits in the four years prior to the normal two-year “look back” period can now access regular benefits with the same number of hours as other regular claimants in their region.
- Employment Insurance Fishing Regulations adjusted to allow self-employed fishers to access the enhanced maternity, parental and sickness benefits.

2002

- Parents of a newborn or newly-adopted child who is hospitalized for an extended period now have a window of up to two years, instead of one year, to claim Parental benefits.
- The maximum number of combined weeks of special benefits increased from 50 to 65 weeks. These provisions ensure full access to special benefits for biological mothers who claim Sickness benefits prior to or following Maternity or Parental benefits.

2004

- Compassionate Care benefit (for up to six weeks) introduced for Employment Insurance eligible workers who are absent from work to provide care or support to a child, parent, spouse or common-law partner who has a serious medical condition with a significant risk of death within six months. To be eligible for the new benefit, workers must have worked 600 hours or, if a self-employed fisher, \$3,760 in fishing income.

2005

- Agreement reached between the Government of Canada and the Government of Québec allowing the Government of Québec to set up a Provincial Parental Insurance Plan, effective January 2006. The Government of Canada reduces Employment Insurance premiums of workers and employers in the province so that the Government of Québec can collect premiums for its own program.

2006

- An amendment to the EI regulations modified the eligibility criteria of the Compassionate Care benefit to enable additional family members and others considered as “family” by the gravely ill individual to be eligible for the benefit for the purposes of caregiving. These additional family members are siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, in-laws, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, foster parents, guardians and wards.

APPENDIX 2

EI Benefit Claims by Gender Percentage share of new claimants, 2006-07

Program	Women	Men
Compassionate Care	75.1	24.9
Family Supplement	79.0	21.0
Maternity	100.0	—
Parental:		
Biological	80.6	19.4
Adoptive	77.0	23.0
Sickness	58.7	41.3

Source: Calculated from HRSDC (2007).

This table offers a snapshot gender analysis of the division of benefit claimants for five kinds of special EI benefit programs for one fiscal year. As noted earlier in this paper, these programs paid \$3.8 billion in benefits, accounting for about 31 percent of all EI income benefits in 2006-07. For these five benefit types, women account for 72 percent of all claims.

Looking over a longer time frame, from 1995-96 to 2006-07, shows there has no significant change in the distribution of claimants for the Family Supplement or Sickness benefits. The Maternity benefits, of course, are available only to women and the Compassionate Care benefit program only started in 2004-05, with no notable changes to date in distribution by gender.

EI Parental benefits (both for biological and adoptive parents) reveal prominent shifts in the proportion of men claiming these benefits. Over this longer period, men as a share of claimants for the adoptive Parental benefits has climbed from less than five percent in 1995-96 to 23 percent in 2006-07 while men's share as claimants for the biological Parental benefit has increased from less than five percent in 1995-96 to 19.4 percent in 2006-07. As Phipps observes about Canadian parental benefits: "Gender roles have expanded to include increased participation in paid work by mothers with young children and a greater responsibility for child care by fathers" [2006: 12].

In contrast to other public programs in which women predominate as recipients [Bryson 1992; Rice and Prince 2000], these EI benefits have a labour market orientation along with a family outlook, explicit eligibility criteria and contributory rights basis, and are offered with little or no personal stigma through a national system.

Over the long term, an increasing role by men in this parental role could influence the constitution of gender relations in parenthood [Fox 2001 and 2009], alter somewhat the “time crunch” of working families [Barrette 2008; Beaujot and Andersen 2007] and, more generally, lead to a rethinking of the rights and responsibilities of social citizenship [Kershaw 2005]. Of course, a complete gender analysis of EI must consider the Regular benefits as well as the role of employment support measures in Part II of the EI system.