



The Family Mosaic



Executive Summary
Family Mosaic Project:
A Longitudinal Study of Lone-parent
and Two-parent Families

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Executive Summary

Family Mosaic Project

Over the last generation, fertility rates have dropped below replacement level, the percentage of children born into single-parent families has increased substantially, divorce rates have multiplied ten-fold, and women's labour-force participation rates have quadrupled (Dechman, 1995). The magnitude and speed of these changes have left us without a clear picture of what today's families really look like. Family life is both varied and dynamic. There are one and two-parent families; single and dual-earner families; blended, nuclear, and extended families. Families can be two-parent today and one-parent tomorrow; single-earner today and dual-earner tomorrow.

The Family Mosaic Project (FMP) provides policymakers, practitioners, and the public with information about the ever-changing realities of life in both one and two-parent families as children grow from infancy to adulthood. This project started over twenty years ago with a sample of 716 mothers who gave birth to their first child in a Nova Scotia hospital in 1978. The original sample was stratified on the basis of marital status. Half of the mothers were married when their first child was born and half were single when their first child was born. By drawing two comparable samples of married and single mothers, it is possible to give statistically-reliable estimates of outcomes for both family types. Weighting the data to compensate for the over-representation of single mothers also makes it possible to provide information on families in general.

Data collections for this project were conducted when the children were approximately 6 weeks, 9 months, 18 months, 10 years, and 20 years of age. The 6-week, 9-month, and 18-month data collections consisted of personal interviews with the mothers. The 10-year data collection consisted of personal interviews with mothers and psychological assessments of a sample of 223 of the children. The 20-year data collection consisted of telephone interviews with both the mothers and their sons or daughters who were, by then, young adults. Seventy percent (N = 500) of the mothers who started the project in 1978 were still involved in the 1999 data collection.

Eighty-six percent (N = 428) of the sons/daughters of these mothers also participated in the 1999 data collection.

Overall, the lives of the mothers and young people involved in the FMP elucidate the intricacies of processes of social and economic inclusion/exclusion. While some children come into the world with fewer advantages than others, there are no foregone conclusions. The various reports developed from the FMP help us understand how characteristics of family and community intertwine to either enhance or restrict the options available to youth.

Difficulties in the school system provide one of the earliest and most reliable predictors of future experiences of social and economic exclusion. While most of the mothers involved in the FMP pursued some type of upgrading, technical, vocational, or university training during the time they were raising their children, those who had started parenting with comparatively low levels of education never caught up with those who had completed at least secondary school. Furthermore, this educational disadvantage tended to filter into other domains of life and to be transmitted to their children.

There were particularly pervasive and prolonged difficulties among the small group of mothers who had left the school system at a very early stage. Overall, the lives of mothers who started parenting in 1978 with grade 9 or less were distinctly different than the lives of mothers who had completed even grade 10 or 11.

- ◆ 38 percent of mothers who started parenting with grade 9 or less were not employed for 15 out of the 20 years covered by the FMP, as compared to 19 percent of mothers who started parenting with grade 10 or 11, and 10 percent of mothers who started parenting with grade 12 or more.
- ◆ 75 percent of mothers with grade 9 or less, 55 percent of mothers with grade 10 or 11, and 30 percent of mothers with grade 12 or more were lone-parents at some time while they were raising their children.
- ◆ 62 percent of mothers with grade 9 or less, 28 percent of mothers with grade 10 or 11, and 18 percent of mothers with grade 12 or more were

living below the poverty line during at least one of the FMP data collections.

- ◆ 34 percent of mothers with grade 9 or less, 5 percent of mothers with grade 10 or 11, and 2 percent of mothers with grade 12 or more had experienced extended poverty.
- ◆ 70 percent of mothers with grade 9 or less, 36 percent of mothers with grade 10 or 11, and 13 percent of mothers with grade 12 or more had required social assistance at some time while they were raising their children.
- ◆ 28 percent of mothers with grade 9 or less, 8 percent of mothers with grade 10 or 11, and 5 percent of mothers with grade 12 or more were not involved in community groups or volunteer activities.
- ◆ 57 percent of mothers who had started parenting with grade 9 or less, 36 percent of mothers who had started parenting with grade 10 or 11, and 18 percent of mothers who had started parenting with grade 12 or more were still smoking on a regular basis at the time of the 20-year data collection.
- ◆ mothers who had started parenting with grade 9 or less had visited the doctor an average of 83 times in the final ten years of the FMP, in comparison to 55 times for mothers who had started parenting with grade 10 or 11, and 50 times for mothers who had started parenting with grade 12 or more.

There were obviously differences between the lives of mothers with grade 10 or 11 education and those with university degrees. However, these differences could be considered inequalities, with the experiences of those at the very bottom of the educational ladder being more characteristic of exclusion.

The labour market provides a clear example of the distinction between inequality and exclusion. Whereas some members of the labour force are more advantaged than others in terms of steady employment, higher incomes, and more employment benefits, there is another segment of the

population that is neither employed nor unemployed, but essentially outside the market. The labour force participation and earnings of mothers generally vary with respect to their years of schooling, but those who start parenting with grade 9 or less are much more likely to experience prolonged poverty and to require public income assistance. While those participating in the labour market could be considered to be experiencing relative inequalities, those outside the labour market could be considered to be excluded. It is such exclusion, and particularly prolonged exclusion, that is likely to create the most detrimental consequences. Hence, those who remain outside the labour market for extended periods of time are often referred to as discouraged workers because they eventually give up looking for work. It is also well known that the longer the duration of such exclusion the more difficult it is to overcome. This does not mean that all mothers with grade 9 or less education experience exclusion, nor that those with higher levels of education are immune, but rather that difficulties in the school system are probably one of the earliest and most reliable indicators of the beginning stages of the processes of economic and social exclusion.

In keeping with much other research, the FMP demonstrates that today's young people are much more likely to make it through grade 12 than their mothers were 20 years ago. However, with this increased educational attainment has come increased demands for higher credentials. While the mothers in the FMP who had grade 10 or 11 typically had some type of technical or vocational training and could obtain fairly regular employment, this is not the case today. In the 'new economy', grade 12 may not even be enough to obtain the type of steady work that could have been secured with grade 10 or 11 twenty years ago. While the proportion of youth completing high school has risen, the comparative disadvantage of those who have not made it through has become more pronounced. We might expect that with the monumental rise in grade 12 completion, there would no longer be any youth who leave the school system with only grade 9 or less. This, however, is not the case. Approximately 1 in 3 of today's early school leavers have nothing more than a grade 9.

Even though the youth involved in the FMP have only reached their early twenties, those who left the school system are already exhibiting distinctly different life patterns than those who completed grade 12.

- ◆ 27 percent of early school leavers in comparison to 2 percent of grade 12 completers have spent at least half of their time since leaving school neither involved in educational nor employment pursuits.
- ◆ 25 percent of early school leavers and 2 percent of grade 12 completers have a dependent child.
- ◆ 28 percent of early school leavers and 3 percent of grade 12 completers have personally required social assistance at some time.
- ◆ 65 percent of early school leavers and 19 percent of grade 12 completers are smokers.
- ◆ early school leavers also report lower levels of self esteem and life satisfaction, perceive themselves as having less control over their lives, and generally report somewhat lower subjective assessments of their health.

While educational attainment is recognized in our society primarily as a marker of human capital, the pervasiveness of its effects would suggest there is much more at stake than knowledge acquisition. The longitudinal nature of the FMP data set makes it possible to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the lives of early school leavers have differed from the lives of those who have completed grade 12, from their birth to their early twenties.

Much of the literature assessing outcomes for children and youth focuses on what are considered to be "risk" factors. That is, those children who experience these circumstances are at increased risk of dropping out of school, being unemployed and experiencing other difficulties throughout their lives. Such risk factors typically focus on areas such as family structure, residential stability, and socio-economic status. Consistent with other research, the FMP demonstrates that each of these conditions does affect the probability of early school leaving.

- ◆ children who live in a lone-parent family at some time are 5 times more likely to leave school before completing grade 12 than are children who live continuously in a two-parent family, (25 versus 5 percent)

- ◆ children who live below the poverty line at some time are twice as likely to leave the school system as are children who do not live in poverty (23 versus 9 percent),
- ◆ children whose families receive social assistance at some time are 3 times more likely to leave the school system than are children whose families never receive social assistance (30 versus 7 percent),
- ◆ children whose mothers had not completed grade 12 before they were born are twice as likely to leave the school system as are children whose mothers had completed grade 12 (18 versus 8 percent),
- ◆ children who change their place of residence are 15 times as likely to leave the school system as are children who never change their place of residence (15 versus 1 percent).

One of the difficulties with presenting findings in this manner is that it leads to negative stereotyping. There are few of us who would dispute that if we were choosing we would prefer to have a higher rather than a lower level of education, more rather than less money, and a more rather than less stable family life. Consequently, it should not be surprising that those who are living under what we would consider more challenging circumstances experience more of the negatives and fewer of the positives in life. This does not, however, translate into the assumption that children in such households are destined for failure. Under any one of the conditions considered to be "risk" factors, the majority of children are successful. For example, three quarters of children who live in a lone-parent family make it through grade 12. This sends quite a different message than that implied in negative stereotyping. Despite challenging circumstances, families continue to struggle to support their children in the best way they can.

A second difficulty with such broad "at risk" designations is that most children experience one or more of these characteristics at some time while they are growing up. For example, approximately 40 percent of children now live in a lone-parent family at some time while they are growing up and 80 percent have changed their place of residence at least once.

Children who do not make it through the school system today typically have experienced not just one but multiple social and economic conditions at the extreme end of the spectrum. The homes of almost all early school leavers fit at least one of the factors listed below and half fit five or more:

- ▶ mother with grade 9 or less education when first child was born,
- ▶ mother who was under 19 years of age when child was born,
- ▶ family lived in unacceptable accommodations at some time,
- ▶ moved 5 or more times,
- ▶ lived in poverty at some time,
- ▶ required social assistance at some time,
- ▶ experienced at least 2 or more changes in their family, for example, divorce, remarriage,
- ▶ the youth lived in a lone-parent family for at least half of their life.

What does this tell us about trying to target 'at risk' children? First, the broad definition of 'at risk' would now include the majority of children. Second, many children move in and out of what are considered to be 'at risk' designations throughout the course of their lives. Third, a more accurate definition of 'at risk' that involves prolonged disadvantage can only be identified 'after the fact' when it is too late to intervene.

Rather than seeking to identify and address the problems of individual children, it would be more effective to concentrate on the underlying dynamics of disadvantage. Children are born with certain characteristics and into certain family environments that are then shaped and reshaped through interactions within their social context. Successive interactions change both the attitudes and behaviours of the child and the attitudes and behaviours of others with whom the interaction occurs, such as parents, peers, and teachers. This process sets in motion a series of events that can either enhance or restrict future life choices. Such interactions are not only restricted to direct relationships with the child but also occur amongst influential adults in the child's life. For example, teachers' perceptions and behaviours toward a child can affect parents' perceptions and behaviours toward the child and vice versa setting in motion either a positive or negative spiral. In the case of negative assessments, the potential for exclusion can expand from one sphere, such as the school, to another sphere, such as the

family. The more pervasive such exclusion becomes, the more damaging are the consequences and the more difficult to reverse.

What do we know about the broader social conditions that surround early school leaving? The homes of virtually all early school leavers were characterized by at least one of the following characteristics and half fit three or more:

- ▶ mother reporting little or no support for child rearing,
- ▶ mother not involved in community activities,
- ▶ mother believing son/daughter was not fairly treated at school,
- ▶ mother not feeling comfortable discussing concerns with teachers,
- ▶ youth not involved in extracurricular activities at school,
- ▶ youth not involved in community activities,
- ▶ mother considering youth to be a difficult teen,
- ▶ youth leaving home before 18 years of age.

Generally speaking, disengagement is an extended process marked not only by problems at home but also by problems at school. Virtually all early school leavers had experienced at least one, and half had experienced 5 or more, of the following:

- ▶ having an elementary teacher indicate their behaviour was inappropriate,
- ▶ having below-average performance rating in elementary,
- ▶ repeating one or more grades,
- ▶ feeling teachers were not encouraging,
- ▶ perceiving teachers as not dealing fairly with students,
- ▶ not feeling free to express opinions in class,
- ▶ being uncomfortable asking questions if they did not understand something,
- ▶ believing teachers thought they would not do well in life,
- ▶ sometimes not feeling safe at school.

There is no one answer to early school leaving. Rather, multiple different interventions are required to accomplish the same goal for different students. Once the process of disadvantage is set in motion, it can be either accentuated or diminished through positive or negative interactions with parents, friends, neighbours, school personnel, and community leaders.

There is no typical child, typical family, nor typical life - searching for one is at best futile and at worst damaging to those who fall outside the specified 'norm'. Improvements in the quality of life of children and families will come not from instituting more rigid standards, but rather from introducing increased flexibility in schools, post-secondary institutions and workplaces that can facilitate the growth and development of all, not only those who have the fewest challenges to distract them from their studies or employment. Our efforts should focus on ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to progress toward socially and economically-desirable goals. If we fail to provide a place for people within our social and economic structures, such exclusion will not only have negative repercussions for the individuals themselves, but also devastating consequences for the larger society.

The evaluation of children's achievements in the school system provides an apt example of how a refocusing of goals can serve to diminish exclusion. Under a rigid grading system, all children are expected to accomplish predefined tasks at a predefined rate. Obviously, the success of meeting these benchmarks depends on numerous conditions related not only to the child's innate ability but also to characteristics of the school and home environment. Under such a system it is not surprising that family characteristics figure prominently in the probability of success. For example, those children who experience more challenges because they and/or their families are stressed by poverty, health problems, violence, or grief, are more likely to fall behind. Once such slippage occurs, grade retention intensifies rather than diminishes the probability of positive outcomes because the associated stigma damages the child's confidence in their ability to learn.

Not all children come to school with the same package of assets. Consequently, expecting them all to achieve at the same rate is unrealistic. The more rigid the demand for strict standards the more strain is placed on relationships among children, parents, and teachers, with each blaming the other and/or themselves for failure. Such negative communication patterns then exacerbate rather than diminish existing difficulties. Assessing and rewarding achievement based on individual progress rather than by comparison to group norms has the potential to shift goals and communication patterns toward a more positive focus on problem solving

and progress rather than blaming and failure. We bring out in children what we see in them.

While some would criticize such an approach as lowering standards, it is more likely to improve standards. Enabling each student to progress at their own rate within their own real-life circumstances enhances rather than detracts from the probability that they will eventually succeed in mastering the expected curriculum. Conversely, insisting that all students progress at the same rate sets many students up for failure, thus ultimately depleting rather than enhancing the nation's human resource capacity.

The preceding discussion of individual versus group-based progress assessment is meant to exemplify the general means by which refocusing on outcomes can serve to reduce social exclusion while at the same time improving human capital development. This does not mean that this or any other single initiative can be looked to as the one magic bullet to solve all problems.

It should be clear from the multi-faceted, interactive and cumulative nature of child development that there is no one solution to disadvantage. However, the lack of a 'one size fits all' solution does not detract from the fact that there are some policy and program reforms that are likely to move us in a positive direction and others that are likely to do the converse. Rather than depleting our energy arguing over what is the 'one' problem that deserves all our attention, we must rather recognize that addressing the core of disadvantage requires a lot of different approaches to a lot of different issues that have in common not the approach but rather the goal. The success of policies and programs must be judged on their strength in meshing with other policies and programs to provide the infrastructure necessary to support comprehensive change. Formative program evaluations that tend to abandon effective as well as ineffective components of particular initiatives should be replaced by summative evaluation techniques that facilitate continuous improvement and knowledge building. We must strive to ensure that everyone has a place within our social and economic structures. Rather than being at odds, social and economic progress are inextricably intertwined.

