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Session 1- Invited paper

**THE MEASUREMENT OF FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS:
THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE**

Paper presented by Statistics Canada

1 INTRODUCTION

1. The measurement of the number and characteristics of families and households is a key part of most household surveys. Although most countries classify the population into families and households, there are numerous issues involved in such classification and countries adopt different approaches. In some cases, the basic definitions or concepts may vary while in other cases, the sample frame and/or the collection mode may limit the approach taken to the classification.

2. Data on families and households are of interest from two points of view. First is the basic measurement of the number and characteristics of families and households. Second, the family and/or household characteristics may be key independent variables in studying social conditions of the population. Furthermore, trends in the family life cycle, as reflected in household and family formation and composition, give rise to new data needs to support emerging family-related policy or program issues

3. In addition to the importance of data on families and households at a national level, in recent years there has been an increasing interest in the international comparability of social statistics. Therefore it is timely to look at this issue in the case of the measurement of families and households.

4. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, issues related to the measurement of household and families will be discussed, with a focus on how they are being addressed in Canadian surveys. This will serve as background for a discussion of an approach to work towards better international comparability in this area.

5. A second part of the paper will identify a number of family topics of emerging interest. This will serve as background for a discussion of the desirability of developing a common module of questions that countries might use to collect comparable data in these areas.

2. HOUSEHOLDS

6. In Canada, households are defined on the basis of what can be called the “household dwelling” concept as opposed to the alternative “housekeeping” concept. For the Population Census a household is defined as follows:

Household refers to a person or a group of persons (other than foreign residents) who occupy the same dwelling and do not have a usual place of residence elsewhere in Canada. It may consist of a family group (census family) with or without other non-family persons, of two or more families sharing a dwelling, of a group of unrelated persons, or of one person living alone. Household members who are temporarily absent on Census Day (e.g. temporary residents elsewhere) are considered as part of their usual household. For census purposes, every person is a member of one and only one household. Unless otherwise specified, all data in household reports are for private households only.

7. Given the above definition, two issues that arise are (i) the delineation of “private households” and (ii) the association of people to a unique household.

2.1 Delineation of “Private Households”

8. In most surveys, an important distinction is made between private households and collective/institutional households (might also be referred to as “group quarters”). Although the Census covers the total population, only basic tombstone information on age, sex, marital status and mother tongue is collected for persons in collective/institutional households. Most other Statistics Canada surveys are restricted to the population in private households. This requires one to look at the boundary between the two.

9. One trend that is affecting this boundary is the increase in “seniors residences”. Historically, nursing homes that provide chronic care or long term health care to seniors have been considered as institutional dwellings and therefore fall outside the scope of most household surveys. However, in recent years there has been a trend to an increasing diversity of seniors residences where individuals (or couples) might occupy one or more rooms, as in an apartment, but also share some or all meals with other members of the residence. Some of these residences have many units while others consist of a small number of seniors (e.g. 6-10) living together in a private dwelling, with the dwelling owner and her/his family who might provide some limited types of service (e.g. meals, housekeeping).

10. At one extreme, such residences might be restricted to “independent” seniors although many involve some type of nursing or support care. A further complication is that in some residences, residents can move from one part of the facility to another depending on the type and intensity of care required.

11. This trend, and the associated classification of dwellings, is important since often the residences are relatively expensive and therefore are occupied by more affluent seniors. Hence, excluding these residents from surveys could increase the bias in the characteristics of the senior population covered by household surveys. The potential for problems can also depend on the collection methodology. In the case of an area frame, there is a need to classify dwellings and decide which ones to include. On the other hand, in the case of a random digit dialling telephone survey, the frame consists of households with a private telephone number and the prevalence of private numbers may vary across dwelling types. In Canada, the issue of the boundary between private and collective dwellings is being re-examined for the 2006 Census, in an attempt to include some of the “seniors residences” as private households. However, the operational issues associated with any modified approach are considerable.

2.2 Allocation of Individuals to Households

12. There are also a number of issues related to where to count individuals who are attached to more than one household. Examples are students away at school for the school year and temporary workers. Historically, the decision as to where to count such individuals falls back to the concept of “usual place of residence” as interpreted by the respondent. This of course leaves open the possibility of more frequent double counting or undercounting. Furthermore, while in Canada individuals are allocated to only one residence, there are increasing demands for flexibility that would allow for alternative allocations depending on the application. For example, university towns might want students counted even though the student (and/or a parent) may consider their usual place of residence to be their parent’s house.

13. Another case of attachment to multiple households includes couples with multiple residences. In some cases, one member of the couple might live primarily in one residence while the other occupies another residence, generally in another city¹. However, it also includes couples who together occupy a different dwelling at different times of the year. Traditionally this problem arose with “summer residences”. However, increasingly multiple residences are used throughout the year, for example by individuals who might split their work time between two or more places. In these cases, the determination of usual residence may fall back to where the individual spends most of their time.

14. Another example of attachment to multiple households occurs when children split their time between two households due to shared custody arrangements. Again various classification rules can be used (e.g. where most time is spent, or if equal time, where the last night was spent) to allocate the children to only one household.

¹ Even if the household classification of this individual can be worked out, the definition of the family remains an issue (see below).

2.3 Characteristics of Households

15. Often one wants to look at households by characteristics that are in fact characteristics of an individual (e.g. age, ethnicity, race, immigrant status). In this case, one approach is to identify a reference person in the household and ascribe the characteristics of that individual to the household. In Canada, the reference person for this purpose is the household maintainer who is identified for other reasons. The household maintainer is defined as:

the person or persons in the household who pay the rent, or the mortgage, or the taxes, or the electricity, etc., for the dwelling. If no person in the household is responsible for such payments, Person 1 is considered to be the only household maintainer.

16. Note that this definition allows for multiple household maintainers. In the 2001 Census, just over one third of households had multiple maintainers. If there are multiple household maintainers, the maintainer listed first on the questionnaire might be arbitrarily used.

17. More complicated approaches to assigning household characteristics involve looking at the characteristics of multiple household members and then deciding on the household characteristic.

3. FAMILIES

3.1 Definition of Family

18. The definition of family generally is restricted to individuals living in the same household. Statistics Canada delineates two main types of families. First is the so-called “census family” (i.e. nuclear family) defined for the 2001 Census as:

a married couple (with or without children of either or both spouses), a couple living common-law (with or without children of either or both partners) or a lone parent of any marital status, with at least one child living in the same dwelling. A couple living common-law may be of opposite or same sex. “Children” in a census family include grandchildren living with their grandparent(s) but with no parents present.

19. For the 2001 Census, the definition of census family was changed and this new definition is now used in most household surveys. Previously, the designation of “children” was restricted to “single never-married children”. However with the increasing prevalence of common-law unions and more young adults staying/returning to the family home, this became problematic. Hence, the restriction that a child be never married was dropped. The definition was also expanded to include grandchildren living with their grandparent(s) but with no parent(s) present. At the time the definition was revised, there was much discussion of whether to have an age restriction on the children in census families (e.g. less than 25). In the end it was decided not to have an age restriction although it was emphasised that for dissemination

purposes, it would be desirable to differentiate families on the basis of the ages of children, perhaps using the age of youngest child.

20. For the 2001 Census, the definition of family was also expanded to include same-sex common-law unions. In the 2001 Census counted 34,200 same-sex couples (0.5% of all couples). Although it is theoretically possible to identify same sex couples using questions on sex and household relationship, it was decided to be explicit and add the category “same-sex partner” to the relationship question. For the next Census in 2006, with the legalization of same-sex marriages, the definition will be further broadened to include same sex marriages.

21. As discussed in the earlier section on household definitions, there is an issue at the family level of how to treat intact couples living in different households or children who have multiple residences.

22. A second family concept used in Canada is that of an “economic family”. This is defined as:

a group of two or more persons who live in the same dwelling and are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption.

The economic family concept is used for much of the analysis of income data.

3.2 Types of Families

23. As can be seen above, the definition of a family in Canada includes both married and common-law partners. It is, however, desirable wherever possible to differentiate between families involving the two types of unions as there is increasing evidence that they may behave very differently. For example, in Canada the separation rate for children born into a common law union is substantially greater than for children born to married couples.

24. With the relatively high rates of separation or divorce in Canada and subsequent union formation, there is also an increasing demand to identify step families. In Canada, the general approach to family formation involves specifying the relationship of all persons in a household to one reference person. Historically, there was no distinction made between natural born children and step-children and so it was not possible to identify step families. However, in more recent years, most household surveys have expanded the approach to delineating families by using a matrix approach that collects information on the relationship of each household member to all other household members. The matrix is a fairly complex approach and is more difficult to implement with some collection methodologies. For example, it is more complicated in a census collection environment with self-reported questionnaires than in a computer-assisted interviewer administered questionnaire environment. For this reason, it has not been used in the Census of Population although it has been implemented in many other household surveys. Some countries have implemented a modified version of the matrix that tries to identify step children.

4. EMERGING DATA REQUIREMENTS

25. Thus far this paper has considered a number of issues related to the definition and measurement of families and households. In addition, in recent years there has been increasing interest in aspects of family life that may be related to some phenomenon of interest. For example, there is increasing demand for information on both of the persons in a married or common-law couple or more generally, on all adult family members. A second area of emerging interest is information on family history, including the childhood family situation of an individual. Finally, there is increasing interest in a broader concept of extended family that could even consist of individuals in other households. Some of the measurement challenges in these areas are briefly discussed below and it is suggested that further international work in these areas might be considered.

4.1 Information on Multiple Family Members

26. The majority of information collected in most household surveys is for one selected household person, generally an adult. Although basic information on household composition may be available, increasingly there is interest in the characteristics of more than one household member. For example questions related to family outcomes or other aspects of family functioning (e.g. time use) are better understood if there is information on the characteristics of all family members. One might therefore ask if there is there a set of basic questions that would be desirable to include in such a survey. Examples might be information on occupation, education, race/ethnicity, labour force status, or work patterns of couples. In considering collecting such information, attention must be given to issues of proxy reporting.

4.2 Family History

27. In addition to the basic demographic characteristics of household members, more detailed family history information that includes both marriage/cohabitation status and ages of children may be important independent variables for looking at social conditions of individuals and their families. In the absence of registers, detailed family histories are generally collected retrospectively by asking survey respondents the dates of various events of interest, including marriage/cohabitation, separation/divorce and childbirth. In Canada this approach has been used in conducting a family cycle of the General Social Survey in 1990, 1995, and 2000 and it will be again used in the 2006 cycle. Detailed family histories were also an integral part of the series of Family and Fertility Surveys coordinated by the United Nations in the early 1990s.

28. Although detailed family histories provide valuable information, they are time consuming to collect. The question being raised is whether it is possible to develop a short module of questions that provides useful indicators of family history that could be used in surveys other than those that focus specifically on the family.

29. Some possible indicators of family history might be :

- Total number of children ever born

- Age at birth of first child
- Age at birth of last child
- Date of current marriage/union
- Children from previous unions
- Place of residence of children from other union
- Frequency of seeing children not living
- Number of unions that resulted in children

30. There might also be interest in the family situation of the individual (or couple) when growing up. For example, who did respondent live with (both parents, single parent), at what age did the respondent leave home, etc.

31. Here the challenge is to come up with a useful but minimal set of key questions that might be included in a survey.

4.3 Family Networks

32. Interest in issues such as social capital or caregiving have raised the need for information on family networks or perhaps a broader network including both family and friends. Although there are extensive modules of questions for measuring networks, the question is whether a small module might be developed to provide some key information on these networks. Such a module might include the following information:

- Number of living children
- Distance from children
- Contact with children
- Who would you turn to for support (in various situations)
- To whom do you provide support

The presence of children, including children outside the household and those from previous unions, would be an important component of family networks, particularly for financial considerations.

Summary and Discussion

33. The first part of this paper presented a number of issues related to the measurement of families and households. The second part of the paper identified a number of broad family-related areas that are of emerging interest. Although both of these areas would benefit from increased international cooperation, it is suggested that in the short-term, international collaboration focus on the development of a module of questions in some emerging area of interest. Several possible areas related to families and households are suggested. However, these are intended as examples in order to generate discussion. There may be other family and household related areas of broader interest. In fact, although families and households were

chosen as a possible area of focus, other areas might be of more interest and there should be further discussion of the topics of particular interest.

34. Once a broad area of interest is defined, there should be further discussion around the following questions:

- What aspects of the topic to focus on?
- Why this focus? How could such data be used, particularly from the perspective of international comparability?
- What are the key dimensions that should be measured? Is it possible to prioritize dimensions of interest so as to accommodate space/time constraints in various surveys?
