



Members of the Canadian Families project, l-r: Dr. Eric Sager, Dr. Lisa Dillon, graduate student Ian Buck and Dr. Peter Baskerville

Tracking the elusive 'traditional family'

By Leah Pence and Monique Jacobs

The nostalgic ideal of the "traditional family" — one with two parents where children are afforded plentiful time with both — is a myth, according to findings from the Canadian Families Project, a five-year interdisciplinary research project based at UVic.

Yet many public policy decisions on issues related to day care, education, labour, health and other areas of public concern are often based on notions of the family, family roles and values.

"Those who say that a 'traditional family' is disappearing are saying that at some point in the past a certain family type was normal or typical," says project director and UVic history chair Eric Sager. "Families varied in size and composition a century ago: there were no single family types."

Project researchers used the data from the 1901 Canada census to garner a better understanding of what families were like a century ago. They found many similarities between today's families and those of a hundred years ago — single parenting, marriage breakdowns and separations, and

limited leisure time were as much a part of family life then as they are now.

The proportion of single-parent families today is only slightly higher than at the turn of the century. The difference, however, is that in the early twentieth century, death, abandonment and itinerant work were the major causes for single-parent situations.

Many assume that in the past children spent more time at home with their mothers, but project researchers have found that that is a myth. Women at the turn of the century had very little idle time, as chores and other work were more time consuming. Women also constituted a large part of the work force a hundred years ago. In 1901, self-employed women made up 30 per cent of working women — a higher percentage than in 1996.

"The supposed 'crisis' in the family has been with us for a long time," says Sager. "In every generation for more than a century a vocal minority has predicted the death of the family. So far, every rumour of its death has been premature."

Writing in 1878, Protestant minister John Laing expressed concerns that sound as valid today as they did then: "We may expect to see a further disintegration until the family shall disappear.... In all things civil and sacred the tendency of the age is towards individualism... [and this is] silently undermining the divine institution of the family."

Despite constant concerns about the survival of the family, Sager remains hopeful about its future. With collective support such as welfare, medicare and other social programs, strong families will prevail. "If history teaches us a simple lesson about families in modern times, it is this: families and households are variable and flexible but durable," says Sager. "The family is always changing, but change is not the same as crisis."



SPARK

Leah Pence and Monique Jacobs wrote this as participants in the SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge), funded by UVic, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

facts from the EDGE

- The Canadian Families Project team includes 13 professors at five Canadian universities. UVic participants include Drs. Peter Baskerville, Lynne Marks, Ian MacPherson (History), Annalee Golz (History and Women's Studies) and Larry McCann (Geography) along with project director Eric Sager.
- The Canadian Families Project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and provides extensive training opportunities for more than 30 undergraduate and graduate students.
- The CFP is now involved with a larger team on the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure Project. The project is applying for funds to create national samples of all original census information for Canada from 1911 to 1951. These databases would then be integrated with Statistics Canada's public use samples of late twentieth-century censuses.

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• Founded in 1965, the Vanier Institute of the Family seeks to build public understanding of family issues and encourages a "family perspective" among policy makers.
www.vifamily.ca

• Statistics Canada's Web site presents a wealth of family-related information from recent censuses.
www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/People/famili.htm

• The British Columbia Council for Families works to strengthen, encourage and support families through information, education, research and advocacy. www.bccf.bc.ca/

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