

# Younger families have it tougher than their parents' generation: Researcher

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Young couples across the country face a much tougher battle to raise children than their parents did — and it's going to take a major change in social policy to close that gap, according to the author of a new study.

**Photograph by:** ADEK BERRY, AFP/Getty Images

Young couples across the country face a much tougher battle to raise children than their parents did — and it's going to take a major change in social policy to close that gap, according to the author of a new study.

Paul Kershaw, a researcher at the University of British Columbia, released a study Tuesday cataloguing what he says is a marked increase in the difficulty that families have today in raising a family and scraping together a living.

"Our economy has doubled in size, it produces on average an extra \$35,000 per household. But what we see is that this doesn't play out evenly across generations," Kershaw said. "But for those who follow, the household incomes for couples today is no higher today really than it was a generation ago."

Despite the increase of \$35,000 in real dollars, when the figures are adjusted for inflation, the increase is only \$3,220. According to Kershaw's study, from 1976-80 the median income for an average family

was \$65,360, in inflation-adjusted figures. Three decades later, from 2005-2009, the median income had risen to just \$68,580 — this despite women flooding the workplace.

In 1976, only 54 per cent of women were working, while in 2010 that figure had risen to 82 per cent. To go along with that, the previous generation of parents has seen housing prices double in the span that they've been homeowners, putting homes out of the reach of young couples.

This, Kershaw said, is draining not only the pocketbooks of contemporary families, but it leaves parents without any time for their children.

"It's no longer the case that if you have a kid under the age of six that you're likely to have an adult full-time at home, or that your household income is going to be decent enough with just one earner," he said.

Heather Hansen and her husband of New Westminster, B.C., are a prime example of the difficulties faced by a young family.

Hansen is a social worker and her husband an apprentice welder. Among their expenses they must pay for the mortgage on their townhouse, their son's daycare, transportation, groceries and student loans. Little money is left over when the bills are paid, but they earn too much to qualify for social assistance.

"We continue to (accrue) debt because we actually don't make enough money to live," Hansen, said. "At present, we are barely able to maintain any form of personal or social life because we can barely afford our groceries."

Kershaw said the country has fallen behind on its social programs and has allowed new families to be disadvantaged.

"We seem to have abandoned our proud tradition of building and adapting social policy," he said. "Since 1970, history books make clear we've built very little social policy. But the world around us has changed dramatically."

Kershaw says part of the problem is the new generation with children is unable to use its political capital the same way their parents do.

"It's a badge of honour to say, 'Politics aren't about me, it doesn't matter if I vote.' And so we don't. We're a third less likely to vote than our older Canadians."

He said he was disappointed by the lack of real focus on helping families in the series of provincial elections held across the country in the past month. "We had every politician make sure they said families matter and they brought their spouses and children out for photo ops to convey that they're committed to family values. But that kind of talk, and those kinds of photos are cheap."

What's needed, according to Kershaw, is a new set of policies that will cost \$22 billion across the country — less, he said, than the amount of new health-care spending from 2007 to 2010.

"We need new-mom and new-dad benefits that would allow all parents . . . to share time at home with their kids until they reach at least 18 months (old).

"Thereafter, we need to invest in \$10-per-day childcare to remedy the epidemic of unaffordable, unregulated services we have now," Kershaw said. "Those two major changes have to happen in the context of a greater commitment to flextime, in order to remedy workplace standards that make it too often the practice to ignore the family."

Christina King and her husband, Ian, parents of a 22-month-old son and a two-month-old daughter, decided to give up thought of owning a home because they are not willing to sacrifice time with their children to make the kind of money a B.C. mortgage demands.

"I'm not interested in working my butt off to pay a mortgage that we really can't afford and then totally lose out on enjoying our children and giving them the benefits of having me at home," she said.

King teaches yoga, but works around her husband's schedule so one of them is always home with the children. The family rents a house in Metchosin, west of Victoria, from Ian's parents. But Ian will soon be moving into a position as a farm manager in the same community, and a house on the farm will be part of his compensation.

"We've chosen a lifestyle over making a ton of money," King said. "We've chosen that lifestyle because it's something that we love to do, it goes with our values. It keeps us happy and not stressed, which I think makes us better parents.

"We're still able to do what we love, but we're not going to have to pay a mortgage for the rest of our lives."

Kershaw said it will require political will and engagement from the younger generation if they are to live on the same terms as their parents.

"Our debates aren't going there because we're stuck in stale debates."

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