

# Studies in Documents

## “I make a lot of clothes for my family”: The 1937–1939 Family Income and Expenditure Survey at the Dominion Bureau of Statistics\*

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**RÉSUMÉ** Dans cet article, l’auteure examine un groupe de documents d’archives découverts récemment – les relevés de revenu et de dépenses familiaux, 1937–1939 (*1937–1939 Family Income and Expenditure Surveys*). Créés par le Bureau fédéral de la statistique, ces relevés représentent une source d’information importante au sujet du revenu et des habitudes de consommation des Canadiens et des Canadiennes pendant les dernières années de la Dépression.

**ABSTRACT** In this article, the author discusses a previously undiscovered group of records – the 1937–1939 Family Income and Expenditure Surveys. Created by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, these surveys are a rich source of information about the income and spending habits of Canadians during the latter stage of the Depression.

The most commonly used archival records from Statistics Canada and its predecessor, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS), are the censuses of population. Yet this agency has conducted many other surveys of high interest to researchers for the information they provide about the lives of “ordinary” Canadians. One of these rich sources is the “Family Income and Expenditure Surveys” completed from 1937 to 1939.

Aiming to produce statistics about basic family living expenditures, the DBS initiated the “Family Budgetary Record for the Twelve Months Ending September 30, 1938” to study household spending over the previous year. After the completion of this initial survey, families were visited three times during 1939 to complete surveys of their “Food Purchases for One Week.” The survey, conducted in urban areas across Canada, differentiated along “racial” groups – in general, those surveyed were to be of “British” extraction, but in select areas, “French” and “Others” were also to be questioned.

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Library and Archives Canada (LAC) received these records in 2003. Because of their age, they were transferred for review, rather than routinely destroyed under the appropriate records disposition authority.<sup>1</sup> It was only when they were examined that their potential value was revealed. Contained in the five boxes were anonymized questionnaires representing the majority of the cities where the survey was undertaken.

## Background of the Survey

As Bruce Curtis observes in *The Politics of Population*, “political administration has come to depend heavily on statistical knowledge .... This knowledge has become a backdrop for social-policy formation.”<sup>2</sup> The first attempt at gathering statistics in Canada occurred during the winter of 1665–1666, when Intendant of Justice, Police, and Finance Jean Talon personally enumerated the 3215 inhabitants of New France, determining their name, age, sex, occupation, etc. The information collected allowed Talon to develop policies for the colony. When a surplus of young single men was discovered, for example, the Intendant instituted measures to encourage early marriage and large families.<sup>3</sup>

The use of statistics continued to develop over the next two hundred and fifty years.<sup>4</sup> In Canada, this was especially noteworthy in relation to data on family living expenditures. The first cost of living statistics were compiled by the Department of Labour in 1909, using information gathered from newspapers and other periodicals. The statistics covered the period from 1890 to 1909, and formed the basis for the annual publication of statistics on wholesale prices.<sup>5</sup> R.H. Coats, who became Chief Statistician at the Department of Labour in 1905 – and would become Dominion Statistician at the DBS when it was created in 1918 – was significantly involved in this effort.<sup>6</sup>

1 Archival records created by the government of Canada are transferred to LAC under records disposition authorities – or RDAs.

2 Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics and the Census of Canada, 1840–1875* (Toronto, 2001), p. 3.

3 Statistics Canada, *75 Years and Counting: A History of Statistics Canada* (Ottawa, 1993), pp. 2–4.

4 See Curtis, pp. 4–5. David A. Worton, in *The Dominion Bureau of Statistics: A History of Canada's Central Statistical Office and its Antecedents, 1841–1972* (Montreal, 1998), p. 16, illustrates that the Canadian statistical system was under-resourced and largely unproductive into the early twentieth century. Thus, statistics remained a developing practice two hundred and fifty years after the work of Jean Talon.

5 M.C. Urquhart, “Three Builders of Canada's Statistical System,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. LXVIII, no. 3 (September 1987), p. 426; Worton, p. 54.

6 For further information about R.H. Coats and his contributions to Canadian statistics in general, and cost of living statistics in particular, see N. Keyfitz and H.F. Greenway, “Robert Coats and the Organization of Statistics,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, vol. XXVII, no. 3 (August 1961), pp. 313–322; and Urquhart's article.

By 1925, at the Conference of Official Labour Statisticians held in Geneva, it was recognized that Canada needed updated cost-of-living data. The emerging welfare state required new kinds of knowledge and documentation. At the 1935 Conference of British Commonwealth Statisticians held in Ottawa, it was resolved that "... it is desirable that in those countries of the Commonwealth in which no family budget enquiries have been made during recent years such enquiries should be undertaken at the earliest possible date ..."<sup>7</sup>

In late January 1938 an interdepartmental committee was created "to discuss the need for statistical data on family living expenditures."<sup>8</sup> The Committee, chaired by Dominion Statistician R.H. Coats, included representatives from the departments of Agriculture, Pensions and National Health, and Labour, and from the National Research Council. Statisticians from the DBS aided in the deliberations. Regrettably, it does not appear that records from this committee have been transferred to LAC.

One of the decisions made by the Committee was that only urban areas would be studied – there were simply insufficient resources to survey rural areas.<sup>9</sup> With this limitation, the 1931 census was used to determine the appropriate urban environments. Eventually, the cities of Charlottetown, Halifax, Saint John, Quebec City, Montreal, Toronto, London, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Vancouver were selected. Ottawa was then added to the list because international standard of living comparisons were usually based on conditions in a country's capital city.

It was also decided that those of British origin would be approached, with the exception that only those of French origin would be surveyed in Quebec City; those of British, French, and "Other" ancestry in Montreal; and British and "Other" backgrounds in Winnipeg.<sup>10</sup> The surveys indicate that the definition of "British" included those of English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish ancestry.<sup>11</sup> French was also defined as French-Canadian. The definition of "Other" appears to have depended upon the city. In Montreal, this group included people of Polish, Finnish, Swedish, Jewish, Romanian, Italian and, what was termed then, "Negro" background. In Winnipeg, people of Ukrainian, Syrian, Finnish, French, Italian, Russian, German, Jewish, and other backgrounds were surveyed.

7 *Conference of British Commonwealth Statisticians, 1935* (Ottawa, 1935), p. 35.

8 *Labour Gazette* (September 1938), p. 967.

9 Various secondary sources exist which contain some basic information about the conduct of the survey, including published reports of the data and the *Labour Gazette*.

10 Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Family Income and Expenditure in Canada 1937–1938* (Ottawa, 1941), p. 7.

11 "Racial origin" was asked as part of the identifying information for the family in the "Family Budgetary Record."

The Committee also identified the “typical” Canadian family:

- It had to be a wage-earning family, with a husband and wife.<sup>12</sup>
- All families were to have from one to five children – although this limitation was not imposed in Quebec City or Montreal.<sup>13</sup>
- The household was to contain, at most, one boarder and/or domestic.
- The families were to be self-supporting (i.e., not on relief), with an income between \$450 and \$2,500 at the time of the survey.
- Homes were to be self-contained, with no shared services (such as kitchens, bathrooms, water supply, etc.).<sup>14</sup>

Using the 1931 census, a random group of 45,000 families meeting these criteria were selected. From that, a final group of 6252 was chosen and asked to participate in the survey.<sup>15</sup>

After selection, these families provided an account of expenditures during the year ending September 1938. It was expected that the “homemaker” would complete the form, with other members of the household assisting as required. Questions were asked about the members of the household (age, occupation income, etc.) as well as the housing expenditure (rent, mortgage, upkeep, etc.), expenses paid for operating the household (telephone costs, laundry bills, etc.), amount paid for clothing, furniture, and various equipment purchased (like ice boxes, stoves, mirrors, baby carriages, postage, etc.), gifts received, health expenses, personal care expenses (i.e., barber, hairdresser, soap, toothpaste, cosmetics, etc.), education expenses (for both children and adults), money given to “community welfare” (taxes, church and Sunday school donations, etc.), transportation costs (costs associated with a car, bicycle, or public transportation), recreation expenses, including newspapers, magazines, sports equipment, holiday costs, radio, pets, etc., as well as the situation with regard to family finances at the end of the year (total savings plus total income and credit received from other sources). At the end, a final “Summary of Income and Expenditure” for the year was completed, where families listed their total income versus their total expenditures.

The families were then visited three more times during the next year, in October/November 1938, February 1939, and June 1939, to complete the “Weekly Record of Food Supplies.” This questionnaire contained separate pages “for each day of the week, upon which the home-maker was instructed

12 This is an interesting stipulation given that the number of single-parent families increased during the Depression. See Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson, and Naomi Black, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto, 1988), p. 236.

13 A random study of the surveys indicates that those families questioned in Quebec City and Montreal did in some cases have more than five children.

14 Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Family Income and Expenditure*, p. 8.

15 Ibid.

to enter purchases day by day as they were made.”<sup>16</sup> People were asked to be specific in their statements, giving the type of good purchased and the amount. A typical entry could read “bread, white, 24 ounces (2 loaves),” “beef, steak, 1 pound” or “salmon, maple leaf canned, 16 ounces.” It appears that the connecting link between the “Budgetary Record” and the “Weekly Expenditure” was the “schedule number” indicated in the upper right hand corner of the survey.

The field staff selected to distribute and collect the completed surveys, as well as answer any questions the respondents might have, were specially hired graduates of household science programs or social service workers. Similarities in handwriting across surveys indicate that in some cases the field staff entered the answers to the questions, presumably from information supplied by the families. The expenditure records, when completed, were checked by a local supervisor, or assistant supervisor, before being sent to Ottawa, where they were verified again. If there were questions, the supervisor was consulted; or, in some cases, the family was contacted directly.<sup>17</sup>

### Survey Function

Originally, the survey was conducted to satisfy four principal objectives:

1. To gather information that could be used “for the construction of wage-earner family budgets and living cost index numbers.”
2. Information about food purchases was to be related to studies organized by the Canadian Council on Nutrition.
3. The purchase records for food and other goods were to be used for product marketing studies.
4. To provide information for international comparisons of standards of living.<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, the index produced was used as the basis for a “scientific weighting system” for a new cost-of-living index – superseding the one developed by Coats in 1909. This new index was used by the government in the calculation of cost-of-living bonuses, and in the government’s price and wage stabilization efforts during the Second World War.<sup>19</sup>

In 1948, the Royal Commission on Prices (also known as the Curtis Commission)<sup>20</sup> was launched. One of its recommendations was that cost-of-living

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Wartime Activities of the Bureau of Statistics* (Ottawa, 1943), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Order-in-Council PC 3109, 8 July 1948.

statistics be re-worked for the post-war environment. In October 1952, the Consumer Price Index was released, replacing the cost-of-living index developed using the 1937–1939 Family Expenditure Survey.<sup>21</sup>

### What the Surveys Offer

The surveys themselves supply wonderful information about urban Canadians and their living conditions during the later stages of the Depression and the lead up to the Second World War. In addition, the field agents, after collecting the completed surveys, would sometimes write comments about the veracity of the information, the general state of the family, or any other relevant topic. For example, one family from Winnipeg was listed as having five children under the age of ten, four boys and one girl. Their total income for the year was \$1215. Under clothing expenditure, it was noted that \$31 was spent on clothing for the “male members of the family over 18” (i.e., the husband) and \$71 was spent for the “male members from 3 to 18 years” (i.e., the four boys). To explain the apparently low amount, the enumerator wrote “mother makes over old clothes for children and does considerable knitting.” In addition, under “Supplementary Clothing Costs” it is noted that forty-six yards of cotton (for a total cost of \$4), four yards of terry cloth (\$1), six pounds of yarn (\$14), and \$3 worth of various “findings” (i.e. tape, buttons, etc.) were purchased, for a total cost of \$22. Under “Kitchen and Cleaning Equipment Purchases,” \$16 was entered for the purchase of “Soaps, cleaning powders, etc.,” – and the agent noted that there is “a great deal of washing – husband’s clothes and children’s.” Other notations related to payment for violin lessons and a violin, and continued payment of an “old hospital bill.” At the end of the survey, after another note about the cost of the clothing and potential cuts to food budget were made, an additional statement about the family’s accommodations was added – “Low rent area, poor housing.” The family was paying \$16 per month in rent.<sup>22</sup>

Another example of the information elicited and agents’ comments relate to the survey of a family from Saint John, New Brunswick. The husband worked as a carpenter, earning approximately \$600 per year. The wife was a home-maker and they had a daughter of seven (there was no age or racial origin entered for the parents). A note from the agent explained the inability to give an exact amount of income: “This man is not on a wage, he is a carpenter and works a couple of days a week, here and there.” Overall, the family spent \$120 on rent, \$75 for wood (heating), \$12 for electricity, \$13 for the husband’s

21 Worton, p. 250; Statistics Canada, *75 Years and Counting*, p. 63.

22 LAC, Statistics Canada Fonds, “Weekly Record of Food Supplies” and “Family Budgetary Record,” 1938–1939, Accession 2004-01248-X (hereafter “Weekly Record”), Box 4.

clothing,<sup>23</sup> and \$11.80 for the wife's clothing<sup>24</sup> for the year. The only expense for the daughter's clothing was \$3 for a pair of "shoes for street and evening" as, according to the agent, "The wife's sister provides all the clothes for the little girl." The family also bought four yards of cotton (total cost of \$2), "brooms, brushes, mops" (\$1), "postage and writing supplies" (\$2) and "medicine and drugs" (\$2). The barber was visited (\$4), donations were made to "church and Sunday school" (\$5), "income, personal property" taxes were paid (\$6), "Christmas, birthday, etc." presents were bought (\$5) and occasionally, the family used the street car or bus (\$2). For recreation, newspapers were purchased (\$6), "spectator sports" were attended (\$1), and they had a radio to upkeep (\$2.50). Life insurance premiums totalled \$62.65. Overall, the family estimated that they paid \$6 a week for food. Their total yearly expenditures were \$650.82. The agent also noted: "When I went to the house the man had a statement made out, it was very difficult to attempt to question either him or his wife on small items. They just said that they didn't buy anything that they could get along without. Their relations provide most of their clothing."<sup>25</sup>

At times, the agent's statements related to issues not associated with the survey. A family in Charlottetown was listed as having two children, with both the husband and wife earning an income. The agent noted "Children are not her own but she clothes and feeds them from the board money. The boy of 11 has been with her since he was born. She has received no board money for him. The housewife's income came partly from board for two babies last year."<sup>26</sup>

For a family of six in Winnipeg, the effects of the Depression were evident in the comments of the agent.

This family were very poorly off. They have had a lot of sickness but have not had the doctor because they cannot pay him. They also need dentist attention but have been holding back on that. They are determined not to go on relief, but at the present they are barely existing. They managed to catch up on their bills this summer but cannot get ahead. The father's work takes a slump in the winter, and the wife cannot work until her son is a bit older. [The youngest child was three years of age.] She is not really fit to work anyway. They are very proud and hate to tell how matters are with them, but they apparently can't see the way ahead of them. The living room was in very good condition and the rest of the house not too bad. All the earnings are used for household purposes. The 16 yr old boy has stopped school and cannot find work.<sup>27</sup>

23 Including one "windbreaker/jacket" for \$3, three sets of winter underwear (for a total of \$6), one pair of leather shoes (\$3) and one pair of "rubbers and overshoes" (\$1).

24 They purchased "1 dress for street and evening wear" (for \$3), 4 pairs of stockings (total of \$2.80), 1 brassiere (\$2), and 1 pair of "shoes for street and evening" (\$4).

25 "Weekly Record," Box 1.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., Box 4.

The assessment of another Charlottetown family was not as gentle: "Very poor managers, home and children filthy. Income probably rated too highly."<sup>28</sup>

Comments were generally not added to the "Weekly Record of Food Supplies," although the basic information is still quite revealing. One family of five from Halifax completed the survey in February, 1939. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, they purchased three quarts of fluid, sweet milk; two pounds of butter; one dozen cracked eggs; eight pounds of lamb "front"; a three and one-half pound ham cottage roll; twenty-four pounds of Robin Hood brand flour; one pound of "flake white" shortening; a sixteen ounce container of Schwartz brand peanut butter; one package of "Jello" (the flavour is not given); a peck of potatoes; one Best-brand yeast cake; one package of shredded wheat; five pounds of sugar; a half-pound of Salada tea; three pounds of carrots; and half a peck of cooking apples. The total cost of these groceries was \$5.18. During the rest of the week, the family purchased three pints of "fluid, sweet milk" each day, as well as one or two little things – bread, bologna, sausage, etc. Overall, the week's grocery purchases totaled \$6.78, and the family used plum jam and pickles from "stocks on hand." The family did not eat out during the week, did not purchase any "candy, ice cream, drinks," or any other such treat.<sup>29</sup>

Other families spent their grocery money differently. One family of six in Charlottetown spent a total \$12.96 for groceries during the week, with purchases of "candy, ice cream, drinks" occurring twice (to a total cost of sixty cents).<sup>30</sup>

### **The Surveys as Archival Records**

Regretfully, we can only guess at the completeness of the set of surveys we have in our holdings. About 1600 surveys have entered LAC custody, yet it is believed that over 6200 were completed – which means we have roughly a one-in-five sample. There is no indication in the secondary sources of the number of questionnaires completed for a particular city and the number in the accession varies by place – for example, there are seventy-eight copies of the completed annual survey for Halifax, and fifty of the "Weekly Food Expenditure" for 1938. However, for London, there are only sixty-five annual surveys, and no weekly surveys for any year.

When boxing the surveys, the department attempted to keep the same kind of survey for each city in the same box. For example, there were two "lots" of "Family Budgetary Record for the Twelve Months Ending September 30, 1938" for Charlottetown in Box 1 and for Vancouver in Box 5. Overall, it

28 Ibid., Box 1.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.



appears that there are at least two surveys (i.e., the annual survey and/or one of the weekly surveys, or at least two weekly surveys) for most cities, except Quebec City, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Ottawa.<sup>31</sup> No surveys for Toronto exist in the collection.

As previously mentioned the link between the surveys appears to be the “Schedule number” entered in the upper right hand corner. Some of the different surveys can be matched by this means, allowing for comparisons to be made between the yearly budgetary record and the grocery expenditures. However, not all numbers are present in each group.<sup>32</sup> This means that a complete portrait of one particular family at this time cannot be created.

The surveys had not been placed in folders, but were simply piled into boxes, with two piles in each box. Surveys were bound together with an elastic band and a note indicating the city and the number of completed questionnaires in the grouping (although sometimes this number can be inaccurate). Some surveys carry comments added by the agents responsible for collecting and, in some cases, transcribing the data.

These records came to LAC due to a stipulation that records created by federal institutions before 1945 are to be reviewed by an archivist. The potential value of these records readily became apparent, both for the documentation they offer of a function (i.e., the development of cost of living statistics) unknown in the existing record holdings from Statistics Canada at LAC, and the secondary/evidential value they offer to researchers. Moreover, the small size of the accession (five boxes) made it easy to justify keeping records that may not have been considered archival under traditional macro-appraisal criteria.

## Conclusion

The effects of the Depression on Canadian society were profound. While the published reports provide a statistical understanding of depression-era living standards, the forms completed for the Family Income and Expenditure Survey help to illustrate the lives of families in urban Canada during this momentous period. These surveys provide outstanding portraits of individual families during this difficult time.

31 For Quebec City, only the “Weekly Record of Food Supplies for October/November 1938” is in the custody of LAC. For Saskatoon, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Ottawa there is only the “Family Budgetary Record for the Twelve Months Ending September 30, 1938.”

32 For example, if a “Family Budgetary Record” is numbered 835, there are not necessarily three correspondingly numbered “Weekly Record of Food Supplies” questionnaires.

