

research snapshot

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Sweden Tops Canada in Care for the Aged

What is this research about?

Care workers are people who are paid to provide care to the body, mind, and the living space of others. They include assistant nurses (ANs) and care aides (CAs) – and they tend to be women. In much of the existing research, however, care workers lack a voice. Very little attention has been paid to their everyday working conditions, which can be demanding. It is important to see how larger forces – like political decisions or the economic climate – shape these conditions. How do the lives of care workers in different countries stack up next to one another?

What did the researchers do?

Researchers in Toronto and Stockholm considered the day to day life of care workers who look after older adults in Canada and Sweden. They analyzed the comments of workers who had taken part in a survey from an earlier York University study. All of the workers surveyed were unionized. The Canadian participants, however, represented only three provinces in the country: Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba.

What you need to know:

Because of their resources and the way their work is organized, Swedish care workers can provide better care than their Canadian counterparts. They are better placed to improve living conditions for their residents and themselves.

What did the researchers find?

In Canada and Sweden, long-term care workers – and their elderly charges – tend to be women. But the resources and facilities available are quite different. Sweden spends more money per capita on care, and has more staff to deal with the residents of their facilities. Swedish facilities are smaller, and almost all of the residents have private rooms. Canadian facilities, on the other hand, are bigger and more hospital-like. Residents sometimes share their living quarters.

In terms of the nature of the work, Canadian care work breaks down into smaller, more rigidly defined tasks – an ‘assembly line’ approach. This is because care workers often have too many residents and too little time to care for them. Their tasks are also more specialized. As a result, Canadian care workers are unable to meet the social care needs of residents; they usually don’t have the time to relate, or even

listen, to residents. Swedish care work, however, is more 'holistic.' Each worker is responsible for most of the care of a smaller number of residents.

Although Swedish CAs and ANs report having similar experiences, Canadian CAs view their working conditions as more demanding than those of ANs. In general, Canadian care workers seem to face much tougher conditions than their Swedish colleagues. Not surprisingly, they tend to feel more exhausted at the end of their workday.

How can you use this research?

The relationship between care workers and older adults has important consequences for the lives of all parties. It can also tell us a lot about how a country values some of its most vulnerable citizens. Researchers, then, need to examine the everyday lives of care workers and how larger social, political, and economic forces impact their ability to do their jobs.

Policymakers need to make better care possible by improving working conditions. They need to recruit care workers with high ideals – but they also need to ensure that these workers are compensated and have the time and space to better relate to residents.

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