Reducing Delivery by Program Recycling: An Analysis of the Poverty Reduction Strategy in Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

The literatures on policy development and the agenda-setting power of governments often point to governments' ability to strategically use in-place programming to supplement existing policy, although this type of policy or program recycling is rarely discussed as a standalone type of strategic policy development. Yet, governments often credit-claim based on the appearance of a robust set of programming that is, in fact, a cobbled together pastiche of new initiatives and existing programming – often emphasizing its novelty, but relying on existing programs and budget measures to deliver. The benefit to governments is obvious: policymakers are able to appear innovative and committed to solving a policy problem while keeping budget costs down. In this article, we present this phenomenon – "policy and program recycling" – as a unique way in which governments develop policy while foregoing new programming or resources. In doing so, we set out several concrete indicators that empirically identify cases of policy and program recycling across policy sub-fields, suggesting both its costs and benefits and discussing how this behaviour can affect citizens' use of programs. Our theoretical argument is empirically supported through a study of the Poverty Reduction Strategy in Ontario, Canada – an example of program recycling that impacts Ontario's most vulnerable citizens.

*Keywords***:** Policy analysis; poverty reduction; policy and program recycling

Résumé

La littérature au sujet de l'élaboration des politiques et du pouvoir d'influence des gouvernements souligne souvent la manière stratégique dont les gouvernements utilisent des programmes déjà établis pour compléter les politiques existantes. Cela dit, ce genre de politique ou de recyclage des programmes est rarement mentionné comme une stratégie distincte d'élaboration des politiques. Pourtant, les demandes de crédit des gouvernements sont fondées sur un ensemble de planification, en apparence solide, qui est en fait un pastiche enchevêtré de nouvelles initiatives et de programmes existants. Bien qu'on souligne son caractère novateur, sa réalisation dépend des programmes et des mesures budgétaires existantes. Évidemment, cela bénéficie aux gouvernements, car les responsables politiques paraissent novateurs et déterminés à résoudre les problèmes politiques sans affecter les coûts budgétaires. Dans cet article, nous présentons le phénomène de « recyclage des politiques et des programmes » comme un concept unique par lequel les gouvernements développement des politiques tout en précédant des planifications ou des ressources nouvelles. Ce faisant, nous avons établi plusieurs indicateurs concrets qui identifient de manière empirique des cas de recyclage des politiques et des programmes dans différents sous-domaines de la politique. Nous indiquons ses coûts et ses avantages et nous discutons de la manière dont ce comportement peut affecter l'utilisation des programmes par les citoyens. Nous appuyons notre argument par les données empiriques d'une étude sur la stratégie de réduction de la pauvreté en Ontario (Canada), un exemple de recyclage de programme qui affecte les Ontariens les plus vulnérables.

Mots clés: Analyse des politiques; réduction de la pauvreté; recyclage des politiques et des programmes

Program Recycling: The Poverty Reduction Strategy in Ontario, Canada

There is a large and growing body of literature that comments on the agenda-setting power of governments (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014; Soroka, 2002) and their organizational capacities to design, implement, and evaluate policies and programs (Good, 2011; Lustick, 1980; Lindblom, 1979). While governments perpetually have their critics, their ability to strategize priorities and selectively frame the performance of new public policies tends to work to their benefit (Cox and McCubbins, 2005). Yet, little is said about how governments can strategically use in-place programming to supplement their broader policy agenda. In doing so, governments can credit-claim for what is essentially repackaging or rebranding existing programming. The benefit to governments is obvious: policymakers are able to appear innovative and committed to a policy initiative, while keeping budget costs down. The drawbacks to the public are equally as evident: it is often misleading and suggests to citizens that governments are investing new money, when, in fact, they are "recycling" programs that are already in place.

This paper investigates one such program, the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), in Ontario, Canada, and the authoring provincial Liberal government's decision to engage in this action of program recycling. The presumed intention of this decision is to enhance citizens' experience and perception of the PRS, while keeping the investment of new funds to a minimum. The result is a patchwork approach that includes a majority of reframed and recycled programs with limited newly funded and developed programs. From a pragmatic perspective, it may not be necessary to solely presume cost-savings motives to government. It may be the case that existing programs served as a pilot for a broader programmatic roll out or that in-place programs sparked the idea for a wider set of policy initiatives. Equally, it may be the case that governments want to re-engineer their program development without increasing citizens' tax burden – generally, a politically risky move that governments prefer to avoid. Nevertheless, the implications of this type of policy programming are underdeveloped in the literature and deserve their own treatment as an off-shoot of the agenda setting and framing literatures. This paper aims to fill that gap.

What follows is an exploration of what we term "policy and program recycling," including a theoretical sketch of what this term means as it relates to the broader concept of agenda setting. In doing so, we propose several concrete indicators that may be useful to empirically identify cases of policy and program recycling. We then apply our theoretical understanding to analyze the Ontario PRS for elements of program recycling. Following this analysis, we discuss the implications of program recycling for Ontario's most vulnerable citizens, the intended recipients of the PRS.

Policy and Program Recycling: Purpose and Drawbacks

While there is no specific literature that identifies the utility or drawbacks of program recycling, we can situate the concept in the broader literatures on policy design, agenda setting, and policy narratives. If we consider that program recycling consists of the

use of previously designed and/or funded programs for a broader policy program or programmatic strategy, we evoke two linked concepts related to policy development: incremental policy change and the presentational or marketing aspects of policies to the public. These, combined, point to a specific type of agenda setting that governments can strategically use to enhance their public profile and make it appear as if they are "doing something" with little actual new program development.

The vast majority of policy literature that has focused on policy change establishes theories to explain change at the macro level, and includes such approaches as "punctuated equilibrium" (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993), "policy drift" (Hacker, 2004), "path dependency" (Pierson, 2000), and "institutional continuity" (Fenger et al., 2014) (see Béland and Powell, 2016 for a thorough overview of this literature). These approaches necessarily focus on alteration of policy direction with (presumably) new policy initiatives. This varies from our core area of interest here: instances where existing policies or programs are recycled or re-appropriated for other programs. Yet we can situate a conversation about program recycling in the discussion of Lindblom's (1959) model of incremental policy design quite comfortably. In his study of the administrative and decision-making process embedded in government, Lindblom argued the limitations and feasibility of the "synoptic" approach of assessing and selecting, with full information, the best option from a complete set of policy alternatives (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963). He suggested an alternative: "incrementalism," which reflects the need to "cope with" policy problems as they arise, rather than resolve them in pursuit of some centrally planned direction. Lustick (1980) identifies this model as the product of decision-makers' uncertainty in complex policy environments or when rational decision-making is bounded by pragmatic considerations such as scarce resources, competing understandings of the problem, or political indecision. Owing to this inherent complexity in the policy environment, policymakers reduce the informational burden required to implement broad scale changes by simply choosing to advance a smaller subset of policy options. The result is that programs are advanced by incorporating policy options that "differ only marginally from policies currently in effect" (Good, 2011).

Program recycling can be seen as stemming from this logic, but it is ultimately a different mechanism for the implementation of programs that reflect a broader policy initiative. Even its variant, "disjointed incrementalism," which recognizes the plurality of interests from multiple policy stakeholders or government actors in incremental policy change, cannot account for program recycling. Whereas incrementalism suggests amending or adjusting policies at the margins, program recycling suggests the reuse or appropriation of existing policies for other purposes or the marketing or rebranding of an existing program that permits claiming credit for the same program under multiple banners. In that sense, it brings together the emphasis on programmatic change embedded in the incrementalism literature with the strategic initiatives embedded in the agenda-setting literature, and may, in fact, be more in line with Atkinson's (2011) critique of

incrementalism that focuses on the strength of the status quo in reducing the likelihood of innovation in program development.

Another literature in which the concept of program recycling fits nicely is the recent developments in the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) and the use of branding, positioning, and elements of story-telling to create a shared understanding of the advantages and risks of a particular set of policies. Work by McBeth et al. (2014) points to a connection between policymakers' decisions regarding programming and presentation and the types of external narratives produced by government, stakeholders, and media about the policy in question. This presentational aspect of the policy process opens up a dialogue about how policies are presented to the public for legitimation and acceptance. Obtaining public buy-in through positively constructed narratives can help facilitate governments' agendas and gloss over the technical details of policies with more human-interested oriented aspects of policy outcomes. While the NPF stops short of explicitly engaging in formal marketing techniques to advance policy acceptance, it does point to a link between the strategic presentation of policies and the public perceptions of government choices.

Program recycling stands at the intersection of these two theories, but perhaps sits in closer proximity to a variant of agenda setting. Whereas agenda setting is a broader theory that posits the selective presentation of issues in a way that permits governments to select which issues to address (Pralle, 2006; Soroka, 2002), program recycling is a tool through which governments can further their agenda. Much in the same way that venue shifting can present new opportunities for policymakers who hope to change the organizational structure around how a policy is presented or implemented (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Pralle, 2006), program recycling can provide the opportunity for governments to shift focus and obscure the origin, funding source, or past successes or failures of a specific policy. In effect, program recycling runs counter to the dominant narrative of transparency taking hold of present-day governments as it functions as a tool of government agenda management and manipulation.

From a practical standpoint, we can also observe that program recycling hinges on two concepts quite familiar to social scientists: first, spuriousness: recycled programs are not necessarily caused or created by the overarching programmatic strategy they are associated with; and second, time ordering: recycled programs necessarily precede the programmatic strategy that they are purported to support. In some sense, program recycling reflects what Montpetit (2008) refers to as an absence of policy design, instead borrowing from existing policy spheres to fill out the intended programmatic structure (note that neither is defined as inherently negative). In some sense, policy and program recycling can be considered a sign of efficiency – the re-use of well-designed or executed programs – although this is likely more true when we see signs of transparent recycling or the re-use of ideas and approaches, rather than credit-claiming for the same program twice.

The advantages of program recycling are (potentially) manifold. The policy literature suggests that governments will often engage in practices of credit-claiming for successes (either unrelated or attributable to other governments/actors) (Bonoli and Shinkawa, 2006); program recycling is one clear mechanism to credit-claim for a policy that has already been enacted and been shown to be fruitful. Reusing a policy or program implies that it has already been successful and is therefore worth implementing (or at least advertising) again because of its known positive outcomes. Second, in the era of New Public Management, the emphasis placed on performance evaluation and management, defined by Diefenbach (2009) as the "systematic, regular and comprehensive capturing, measurement, monitoring, and assessment of crucial aspects of organizational and individual performance through explicit targets, standards, performance indicators, measurement, and control systems," (p. 894) suggests that measurable outcomes are viewed as essential for public servants, and therefore policies or programs that guarantee success are prioritized over riskier projects (Brodkin, 2008; van Berkel, 2014). Using programs that are already in place reduces costs and eliminates inefficiencies in expenditure because of the known process of implementation or because in the act of recycling a program, no new expenditures are incurred.

Recycled programs could also contribute to the stability of existing programs for a new, broader policy strategy for government, but that is not the purpose of program recycling. In leveraging previous successes, governments may free up the resources to pursue new, riskier programs that have not yet been tested. However, that is a by-product, not an intention of program recycling. Unlike the more laudable goal of using existing programs for broader programmatic strategies, program recycling is a way in which governments obfuscate their policy activities to make it appear as if they are doing more than they actually are.

This points to a number of risks associated with program recycling. The idea that program recycling could be beneficial is entirely contingent on the perception that government is initiating these activities intentionally and independently, and more to the point, that the public will not pick up on or blame them for taking credit for existing programs. This is not unrealistic as research by Giger and Nelson (2011) suggests that the public may not be adept at appropriately assigning blame to parties around social policy change. Presumably, this is even more the case in multilevel federations such as Canada, where social policy responsibility and funding often crosses jurisdictions. Similarly, governments may risk seeming out of touch with the times by recycling a program that was initiated a few years ago. This act strongly relies on governments having a clear sense of the political feasibility of the success of reusing an existing program.

Patching Together a Solution: The Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy

The Government of Ontario first launched its Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2008, almost 20 years after the Canadian federal government promised to eliminate child poverty in 1989. The PRS was the result of the concerted organizing efforts of the 25-in-5 Network (reflecting the goal of reducing child poverty by 25 percent over five years) and numerous community and social service organizations and concerned individuals who advocated to the government for a PRS built on firm targets and timelines (Barata and Murphy, 2011). The Ontario government thus launched the PRS with a commitment to a 25-in-5 reduction in child poverty (Hudson and Graefe, 2011).

After five years, in 2014, the Ontario government conceded that it had not met its target, and renewed its pledge to reduce child poverty in the 2014-2019 PRS. This time, the government's policy avoided attaching explicit timelines to their programming and outcomes. The new PRS promised to continue efforts to achieve the 25 percent reduction in child poverty, and also committed to end homelessness in Ontario. The focus of the revised PRS is on vulnerable populations (defined as single mothers, Aboriginal peoples, youth, Crown Wards, newcomers/immigrants, persons with disabilities, as well as individuals who are experiencing unemployment, drug addiction, and/or mental illness) and leverages, *inter alia*, discourses of social inclusion, economic benefit, expert knowledge, and community engagement to articulate its overarching goals (Smith-Carrier and Lawlor, 2016). Benbow et al. (2016) note that the PRS' foci include "breaking the cycle" of intergenerational poverty, increasing employment as a means to end poverty, creating a long-term goal to end homelessness, and using evidence-based social policy approaches to ensure consistency and reliability in the application of programs. Such policies are often linked with economic recovery or benefit to make social spending appear more as an investment than as a humanitarian act or public good (Fernando and Earle, 2011).

The ways in which the Ontario government's goals were meant to be achieved involved a series of individual programs including, but not limited to: employment training, student-focused nutritional programs, full-day Kindergarten, microloans for small businesses, changes to the minimum wage, etc. The PRS is not a standalone program in that its constituent components were not necessarily designed exclusively for the PRS. In some cases (e.g., increases to the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB)), funding was new (or renewed), while in others (e.g., an increase to the minimum wage, the implementation of full-day Kindergarten), policy changes were made quite apart from the PRS, both in terms of timing and the individuals/ministries responsible for decision-making. At times, the PRS discusses policy change as being prospective (e.g. "[The Ontario Senior Homeowners' Property Tax Grant] is expected to help more than 600,000 seniors…" (Ontario, 2014, p. 31), whereas in others, it speaks of targets in a manner that suggests they have already been accomplished (i.e. "20,000 youth job opportunities created…" (Ontario, 2014, p. 24).

A read of the 2014-2019 PRS suggests that some programs are well underway, while others are in progress. Given the 2008 start date of the PRS, it is unsurprising that some programming is in place. However, many of the elements of the PRS have start dates well before the introduction of the PRS under the Liberal government in 2008, while others initiated after 2008 were done so by other ministries. Criticism of the program has therefore been multi-pronged; not only has government appropriated existing – and often only tangentially related – programs for the PRS, but the results have been lacklustre. Noted conservative columnist Tasha Kheiriddin encapsulates the PRS this way: "[the PRS] threw bits of help and money at the problem, and hoped that together, the result would be greater than the sum of its parts. Not surprisingly, they weren't" (Kheiriddin, 2013).

Proposed Indicators of Program Recycling based on the Ontario PRS case study

Given the logic of the above literature and our examination of the Ontario PRS, we propose five key indicators of program recycling potentially applicable to other policies, particularly, those related to social policy. The indicators can be grouped into three areas: (1) structure, (2) funding, and (3) promotional. We do not suggest all indicators must be met to illustrate an instance of program recycling. Indeed, to some degree we may see programs that feature elements of the individual indicators in routine policy development. However, the presence of multiple indicators points toward the trend of recycling to varying degrees:

Structural Indicators

Indicator 1: A lack of clear ownership of the program by a single (or multiple) ministry(ies).

While it is often the case that programs must involve multiple stakeholders (e.g., the Interim Federal Health Program for refugee health care will necessarily involve both the federal Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and the provincial Ministry of Health), in a case of program recycling, we see programs that are not under clear ownership by any single (or multiple) ministry(ies). Here we differentiate ownership from shared scope and coordination.[1] Certainly, we do not preclude the possibility that multiple ministries might "own" a program; however, our observation in this indicator is a notable *lack* of ownership. This is signalled by a lack of coordination and a failure to house the policy in any single space (e.g. failure to create a single access point on a government website or through a ministry services office). This organizational feature is necessary as a lack of clear communication and a specific access point hinders citizens' ability to access government services effectively. Whereas there may be clear-cut ownership of the program upon design and implementation, recycling opens up opportunities for other ministries to claim credit for the program or use the program to supplement an existing policy design.

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[1] Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for noting the relevant difference.

Indicator 2: Program "design" is focused on repackaging existing programs, rather than introducing new programs.

Recycled programs tend to be found in programmatic structures that can be considered hollow shells or overarching strategies that are made up of smaller programmatic measures, rather than new, concrete policy initiatives. Note that this is different than the amalgam of newer programs with more established programs to facilitate the transition to a new programmatic structure. Rather, in the case of recycled programs, we should see evidence of existing initiatives being marketed as "new" or "improved." Similarly, we see an absence of clear criteria for inclusion of a program within a broader strategy. Programs are often lumped in with broader initiatives to strengthen the overall appearance of government "doing something" about a policy issue.

Funding Indicators

Indicator 3: Unclear budgetary structures with budget lines from multiple ministries.

While it is often the case that complex policy initiatives draw from multiple ministries (see indicator 1), recycled programs tend to be funded in a piecemeal manner with small budget lines coming from multiple sources that are difficult to track. This sort of obscured financial reporting is often meant as a way to make available the necessary funds, but in a manner that facilitates their easy movement in the case that the program's funds could be applied to other, more pressing initiatives.

Indicator 4: Program funding is openly tied to external economic conditions.

Almost all social policy programs are vulnerable to partisan change in government and economic conditions. However, recycled programs tend to be found in programmatic structures whose independent funding is openly stated by government to be contingent on the economic well-being of the funding body/government. This provides governments with the opportunity to easily retract funding as desired.

Promotional Indicators

Indicator 5: Measures of success or failure are broad.

Perhaps the most clearly identifiable of the five indicators, recycled programs tend to have few concrete targets (either measures for success or firm timelines) associated with them. Strategic communication of evaluative criteria obscure key features of measurement including origin and termination point of any program and the evidence that is to be judged as a valid indicator of the program's success or failure. These five points are useful to academics and practitioners alike as they identify ways to hold governments to account for their social policy choices.

Data and Analytical Approach

To explore the utility and applicability of our theoretical understanding we draw on a case study of the Ontario, Canada PRS. Ontario is not alone in its development of a PRS – several other Canadian provinces have similar initiatives, as does Canada's largest city (Ontario's capital), Toronto. Thus, the analysis here is generalizable to other PRSs with similar jurisdictional restrictions, as well as other countries with similar poverty reduction initiatives.

Embedded within the Ontario PRS are a number of programmatic/policy statements and decisions deriving from a myriad of ministries and government agencies. These data are not aggregated online or elsewhere for ease of access. Therefore, we constructed a top-down approach to data collection, beginning with each thematic area of the PRS (youth unemployment, Crown Wards, housing/homelessness, etc.) (N=14), and enumerated key policy initiatives outlined in the PRS under each thematic area (N=42). From there, we sourced the ministry assigned to developing policy strategies to address the policy concern. In each case, we reviewed ministry policy documents and press releases to determine program elements for their applicability to the theory developed above. Given the abundance of documentation that forms the core of our empirical research, we aggregate empirical data on the Ontario PRS in Appendix 1, where we outline the key programs that make up the PRS, the government ministry(ies) responsible for their introduction, as well as the timelines and costs associated with their implementation.

The second last column notes the indicators that suggest whether a particular program making up the broader policy has been recycled. Our analysis uses a qualitative text analysis approach that assesses the programs according to our identified theoretical understanding of program recycling. In doing so, we identified the following elements of program recycling within Ontario's PRS using the indicators above. Drawing on the data in Appendix 1, we critically review the indicators as they apply to the PRS. Further detail on the sources used, including web links and specific quotes that support the assignment of a program to a particular indicator is available in an expanded version of Appendix 1.

Results

Indicator 1: Involvement of different ministries/agencies, rather than clear ownership of the program by a single ministry

The Ontario PRS itself is not housed under a specific government ministry, but rather under a sole decision-maker: the Minister Responsible for Poverty Reduction (MRPR), under a Poverty Reduction Office, fitted with a small staff (currently 14 members). Numerous ministries are mentioned in the PRS, including the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS), Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Labour (MoL), Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MoMAH), Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MoHLTC), Ministry of Children and Youth (MoCY) and Ministry

of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU). On the one hand, having multiple ministries assist in poverty reduction could widen the scope and potential reach of this project. Indeed, some contend that only when all levels of government collaborate together will real reductions in poverty in Canada be realized. For example, Battle et al. (2015) stress the need for a federal poverty reduction strategy, arguing that "it could help direct and co-ordinate efforts within the government itself, which involves Finance, the Canada Revenue Agency, Employment and Social Development, Aboriginal Affairs and Health, to name a few key departments" (para 6). On the other hand, having multiple players attached to the poverty alleviation project, as delineated in the PRS, obfuscates the ultimate lines of responsibility for achieving this goal.

As reflected in Appendix 1, the PRS is replete with examples of programs that derive from a myriad of different governmental ministries and/or agencies, making the accountability for their design, implementation, and/or monitoring opaque. The Ontario Catapult Microloan Fund, for example, was introduced in 2013 by the Ministry of Economic Development and Growth (MEDG), although it was created in partnership with a number of private business and/or financial institutions, and managed by a social enterprise: the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI). Although a reading of the news release associated with the program indicates that it most aligns with the MEDG, it was also embedded, a year later, within the 2014-2019 PRS and is described as "a partnership between the provincial government and the not-for-profit and private sectors" (Ontario, 2014, p. 42). It also appears on the CSI website with the following description: "The Ontario Catapult Microloan Fund enables social entrepreneurs and innovators to grow their world-changing enterprises with access to capital and CSI's existing programming and services," and is featured as a "recent government initiative" on the website of the Office of Social Enterprise (Ontario, 2016). The operational remit of the program resides with the CSI, although the accountability for the program, the relationship between the private and public actors identified, and the distribution of financial support invested by each partner to sustain the program remain unspecified.

Similarly, the MoHLTC's announcement of a "$16.2 million investment to create 1,000 new supportive housing units" (Ontario, 2015a, para 1) included references to a host of actors, including links to and reports from the Expert Panel on Homelessness, the Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions Leadership Advisory Council, Health Quality Ontario (HQO), the PRS, and the MoHLTC Patients First: Action Plan for Health Care report. Quotations from multiple ministers and/or political advisors are also included in the newsroom release including those from the Ministers in charge of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Health and Long-Term Care, the PRS itself, as well as from the Health and Addictions Leadership Advisory Council and the Chief Executive Officer, and HQO. As with other programmatic and/or policy changes associated with the PRS, it is difficult to ascertain which government ministry is responsible for this supportive housing expenditure.

The Youth Jobs Strategy provides another example of policy change appropriated from one government ministry to another, blurring the lines of policy ownership. The programs are described as "a comprehensive suite of youth employment and training programs, including mentorship opportunities, entrepreneurial experience and start-up support…" and are identified as "part of the province's renewed $250 million investment in the Youth Jobs Strategy announced in the 2015 Budget" (Ontario, 2015b, para 5).

This news release was issued by the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Science in November 2015, however, a news release issued earlier, in January 2015, indicated "the Ontario Youth Jobs Strategy is investing $295 million over two years to help connect 30,000 youth with the tools, experiences, and entrepreneurial support they need to find employment or start their own businesses" (Ontario, 2015c, para 4), though this announcement was released by the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development. In the 2014-2019 PRS, the Government of Ontario (2014), in discussing the Youth Jobs Strategy, introduces another actor, CivicAction, to the mix, not acknowledged in the previous news releases:

> Ontario is partnering with CivicAction to increase private-sector employment and mentorship opportunities for youth. […] CivicAction has identified practical, private-sector-led actions to help all youth succeed and, with government, is now planning to implement these actions in collaboration with the private sector and community partners (Ontario, 2015b, p. 25).

The multiplicity of actors, both public and private, involved in the Youth Jobs Strategy, like the PRS, make it impossible to ascertain who is directly answerable for meeting the Strategy's objectives, preventing the direct attribution of responsibility should policies go awry.

Indicator 2: Program design is both ex ante and post-hoc.

The PRS contains programs that were initiated prior to its launch and those that have yet to be introduced. The MoE's announcement in 2011 that full-day Kindergarten would roll out across all Ontario schools by September 2014 (Ontario, 2011), for example, demonstrates *ex ante* program design. Yet, the Ontario government had introduced this change as early as 2007 with the appointment of a Special Advisor (Ontario, 2007). In other words, the announcement preceded the launch of the original PRS suggesting that this policy change would likely have been introduced in the absence of such a Strategy, and was not directly contingent on it. Likewise, the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) was announced prior to the launch of the PRS, but portrayed as a PRS-specific program. The OCB, announced in the 2007 provincial Budget, began to be issued to families experiencing low-income in July 2007 (Ontario, 2007). The government announced the PRS by noting: "The Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction… will develop a focused poverty reduction strategy by the end of 2008. It will be built around the Ontario Child Benefit" (Ontario, 2008b, para 3).

The PRS also contains significant *post-hoc* program design. The 2014-2019 PRS notes the Government's commitment to "establish a long-term goal to end homelessness in Ontario" (Ontario, 2014, p. 5). Although the PRS affirmed that the Government "will set a target to measure our success" (Ontario, 2014, p. 43), this target was not specified, nor were any timelines for the long-term goal indicated. The commitment is, however, linked to the creation of the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy, which was first announced in 2010 (Ontario, 2016), years before the 2014-2019 PRS came to fruition.

Minimum wage legislation provides an example of policy decision-making incorporating both *ex ante* and *post-hoc* design. In 2007, as Hudson and Graefe (2012) note, the other provincial political parties (the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Conservatives) were not explicitly in support of poverty reduction efforts, although the former had had some success in earlier by-elections resulting, in part, from adopting a (narrow) minimum wage platform. The Liberal government required a "supportive constituency" (Hudson and Graefe, 2012, p. 6) before proceeding with its own minimum wage action plan. Yet, this plan was not a novel one; it had been in the making some three years earlier. The MoL has primarily been identified as the key government ministry associated with the multiple increases in the minimum wage over the past two decades. Ending the wage freeze of the $6.85(CAN)/hour rate that remained unchanged from 1995 to 2003, from 2004 to 2010, the minimum wage was augmented in a series of seven gradual steps. As such, the incremental increases began prior to the introduction of the PRS, and do not emanate from it. The Government of Ontario's stated policy objectives when considering adjustments to the minimum wage, as reflected on the MoL's webpage, are instructive. These include: "(a) fostering economic viability; (b) minimizing potential adverse employment/economic effects of increases; (c) encouraging participation in the labour market; (d) ensuring that workers' earnings are not diminished by rising inflationary costs; and (e) increases should be viewed by labour and employer stakeholders as fair" (Ontario, 2015c, sect. 2.1). As is evident here, alleviating poverty is not explicitly listed as a contributing rationale for the incremental minimum wage changes. In addition to the notable absence of poverty reduction as justification for the minimum wage increases, the fact that these increases began prior to the initial 2008 PRS, and carried throughout the subsequent 2014-2019 PRS, suggest that minimum wage adjustments would have occurred irrespective of the Strategy.

Indicator 3: Funding is made up of smaller budgetary lines from multiple programs.

As is evident in Appendix 1, many programs in the PRS are listed without clear budget lines; some draw from multiple funding pots while others appear to be carried over from previous budgets. The Student Nutrition Program (SNP) provides an interesting case in point of the latter. It is difficult to ascertain, using available resources, when the SNP began, although three years prior to the launch of the initial PRS, the Government of

Ontario (2005) announced that "more than 253,000 elementary and secondary students this school year are arriving at school better prepared to learn, thanks to more provincial funding and a revamped student nutrition program" (para 1). Similarly, during the year the original PRS was released, the Government of Ontario announced that "as a down payment to the Poverty Reduction Strategy, we re-doubled our investment in the Student Nutrition Program, with a new investment of *$32 million over three years, beginning in 2008* [emphasis added]" (Ontario, 2008a, p. 10). Seven years later, in the 2014-2019 PRS, the government indicated that "an initial investment of an *additional $32 million over the next three years will* [emphasis added] establish 340 new breakfast programs in elementary and secondary schools and enhance support to some existing student nutrition programs" (Ontario, 2014, p. 13). The verb tense employed in both documents suggests both an *a priori* financial commitment in 2008 ("we re-doubled our investment… with a new investment of $32 million over three years") and a forthcoming funding infusion in 2014 ("an initial investment […] will establish 340 new breakfast programs").

Many announcements of programs outlined in the PRS introduce a dollar figure earmarked for specific programs, but few delineate which ministry the funds derive from, and which hold financial accountability for their implementation. Accounting for provincial expenditures in the overall provincial budget remains elusive. General reporting of the overall revenue and expense compositions in the Ontario budget are available, but detailed accounts of specific programmatic expenditures are missing. Given that the apparent lack of transparency in Ontario's financial accounts, it is difficult to determine how much of the budget is spent on specific programs, and how much overlap exists between ministry budgets. More detailed accounting can be found on the Government of Ontario's [2016] webpage providing expenditure estimates; however, these generally provide the operating and capital expense estimates for each ministry, not for the specific programs introduced or maintained by them.

Indicator 4: Fair weather funding. Program funding is retractable and contingent on external economic conditions.

Ultimately, the success of the 2008 PRS itself was premised on a favourable economic climate and federal government partnership. From the outset, in the original PRS, the Government of Ontario claimed, "Ontario can't do this alone – meeting this target depends on having a willing partner in the federal government and a growing economy" (Ontario, 2008a, p. 2). The lack of fidelity to poverty reduction efforts, dependent on federal partnership and a growing economy, did not escape the notice of a few in the media. Cohen (2012), from the *Toronto Star,* wrote, "Premier Dalton McGuinty made poverty reduction a centrepiece of his government in good times when it seemed affordable. But in tough times, the price of doing nothing is equally unaffordable - because welfare costs keep going up" (para. 3). Accordingly, seven years after the initial PRS, the Government of Ontario justified its failure to achieve the 25 percent reduction in child poverty in part by

pointing to the federal government. The 2014 report cited the failure of the federal government as having neglecting to "make adequate investments to help Ontario meet our goals." Similarly, the report submitted that the global recession and economic downturn negatively impacted their ability to achieve the target (Ontario, 2014, p. 10).

In sum, the overall Strategy was contingent on other actors and robust economic conditions as were specific initiatives and/or programs. For example, in relation to the affordable housing strategy, key to the Government's commitment to end homelessness, the Government of Ontario stated:

> The future of housing depends on adequate, sustained funding, which is why a long-term commitment is needed from the federal government… We have often partnered with the federal government to ensure that Ontarians have more access to affordable housing throughout the province (Ontario, 2010, para. 41).

In this way, it wasn't the program itself that was recycled, but rather the *notion* of the program, with its contingency clause allowing governments to justify potential policy failures.

Indicator 5: Measures of success/failure are sufficiently broad to be able to cobble together small successes.

There are few targets and timelines reflected in the PRS. Many of the targets that are evident are a result of other ministry timelines that appear independent of the PRS. Moreover, language used to operationalize measures of success in the PRS tends to be imprecise and variable. There does appear to be a clear proclivity to project numbers specifying (past or future) program achievements that are detached from population estimates, making it impossible to assess the relative merits of the program/policy changes on the target population(s). Statements, such as the one that follows signal a nod in the positive direction, although as articulated, are unmeasurable: "Under our new Poverty Reduction Strategy, we will continue supporting the Youth Employment Fund, which has already helped over 18,000 young people find jobs, get training, and gain valuable work experience" (Ontario, 2014, p. 24).

Here, the proportion of 18,000 youth as a share of all youth in Ontario seeking employment remains unspecified, relative to population estimates as a whole, and what counts as valuable work experience is indeterminate. Similarly, it is exceedingly difficult to assess whether an investment of $93 million in annual funding to serve a total of 55,000 kids and their families over three years, as indicated below, is an adequate public investment.

While proponents of evidence-based policy-making support improvement plans and evaluative criteria to judge the quality of policy design and administration (De Marchi et al., 2016), clear assessment criteria in the PRS appear largely absent. Indeed, the only definitive commitment in the 2008 PRS, to reduce poverty by 25 percent over five years,

was not met, and no new timeline for this goal was articulated in the 2014-2019 PRS. The aforementioned "bold and ambitious long-term goal of ending homelessness in Ontario" also involved no decisive timelines, though the Government maintains that it (eventually) "will set a target to measure success" (Ontario, 2014, p. 43).

Finally, although the Government avers that it will use evidence-based policy to measure success, decisions to revise and/or preserve specific programs in the 2014-2019 PRS appear to have occurred in the absence of empirical evidence, quality improvement plans, or benchmarks. Instead, it has out-sourced policy solutions through its establishment of a Local Poverty Reduction Fund, equipped with $50 million "to build evidence, reward local solutions that get results and help them to grow" (Ontario, 2014, p. 6).

Discussion

In his seminal work describing policy-making as a process of "muddling through," Lindblom (1959) argued that the remaking of policy involves a "process of successive approximation to some desired objectives in which what is desired itself continues to change under reconsideration" (p. 86). It is plain to see how this definition of policy-making succinctly describes the case of state-organized poverty reduction. Poverty, a "wicked problem" with, ostensibly, few apparent solutions (Head and Alford, 2015), appears to be held captive to a muddling- (or muddied-) through approach. Part of the muddling might be brought about by the perceived intractable nature of the problem; however, the frequency with which poverty and its constituent elements is addressed with program recycling does little to resolve the core of the problem, instead focusing on small, incremental, and sometimes backwards-mapped solutions.

Program recycling is a useful concept for scholars studying both theoretical and empirical aspects of public policy. It expands our understanding of how and when governments may actively (or passively) engage in institutional inertia or "do nothing" policies. There is a certainly a strategic dimension that we do not explicitly engage here, but nonetheless provides a compelling avenue for further research. Program recycling may be found to a great extent during certain points of the electoral cycle, by minority governments, and by governments who are generally "in trouble" in terms of public approval – all testable hypotheses worth exploring. Finally, program recycling draws the rapidly expanding political marketing and communications literatures into the centre of more traditional policy theory such as incrementalism and agenda setting. Understanding how branding (Marland, 2016) influences policy (not just parties) may further our understanding of the relationship between policy attitudes and government choices.

As it relates to our case study, the Ontario PRS provides a fitting case study to observe the impact of minor, tweaked, or repackaged policy changes arising from an ongoing process of program recycling reminiscent of Lindblom's approach. It is reflective of the agenda-setting process wherein governments "call the tune" or decide the focus or framing of the policy problem. Many of the programs embedded within the PRS are not

unique policy changes; they stem from, or operate through, government departments exogenous to the MRPR (the government actor responsible for poverty reduction). These programs typically derive their funding through different government ministries, from a variety of funding pots, which often lack transparent budget parameters. The absence of clear timelines and targets allow governments to promulgate small, cobbled together successes that frequently boast of significant improvements without situating these numbers within population estimates, obscuring the mass of people who continue to suffer in poverty.

Understanding the PRS through the lens of program recycling enriches contemporary accounts of this policy by helping to explain motivations for deviation from original program goals. It also exposes a mechanism by which governments can further include or exclude groups based on exclusively political (as opposed to needs-based) considerations (see Carrier-Smith and Lawlor, 2016). By exploring motivations for mid-cycle policy changes as reflective of conditions external to the program itself, we can understand how the PRS faces extraordinary challenges, including meeting new social needs with little to no new funding and coordinating policy decision-making across sometimes unwilling or ill-equipped program delivery sectors. In short, it helps explain program shifts and perhaps even program demise, without formal changes of government. Using this approach, academics and non-governmental sectors may be better able to challenge governmental claims about policy innovation and set out more robust evaluation metrics for government measures to combat pervasive social problems.

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Appendix 1: 2008-2019 Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) Programs/Initiatives

Area	Program/ Initiative	Cost	Target/ Outcome	Timeline	In 2008 PRS	Indicators	Ministry
Poverty	Reduce child poverty	Not specified (NS)	2008 & 2014-2019 PRS reduce child poverty by 25%; 1.6% actual percentage point decrease in child poverty 2008-2011	Target not met; no new timelines	Yes	4	Minister Responsible for Poverty Reduction (MRPR)
	Local Poverty Reduction Fund	$50m	Expand community organizations and municipalities poverty reduction initiatives	6 years	No	5	MRPR, Treasury Board Secretariat
Social Enter-prise – Partner-ing with Business	Social Enterprise Demonstration Fund to provide grants/ loans to social ventures	$4m	NS	NS	No	5	Ministry of Economic Development, Employment and Infrastructure; MRPR
	Ontario Catapult Microloan Fund and Social Impact Bonds	NS	NS	NS	No	1,5	Ministry of Economic Development and Growth (MEDG)

Child Care/ Family Policy	Ontario Child Benefit (OCB)	$1b/year	Increased from $250/year in 2007 to $1,310/year per child in 2014; 2015 - OCB indexed to inflation	No new timelines	Yes	1	Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS), MRPR
	Child care	"More than $1b annually" (p. 27); "Additional $33.6m to protect licensed child care spaces and provide subsidies" (p. 27)	NS	NS	No	1,2,3	Ministry of Education (MoE)
Food In/secur-ity	Student Nutrition Program	Increase of $32m over next 3 years	2012-2013 program served 695,000 students; expand to on-reserve schools in First Nations communities	Add 56,000 students; 340 new First Nations programs over 3 years	Yes	1,5	MCYS, Ministry of Finance (MoF)
Youth Employ-ment	Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program	NS	2013-2014 - 21,603 Grades 11/12 students participated	NS	Indirectly	2,5	Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills

							Development (MAESD)
	Youth Jobs Strategy	$295m over 2 years	"20,000 youth job opportunities created…" (Ontario, 2014: 24)	30,000 opportunities for youth	No	1,2,5	MAESD, Ministry of Research, Innovation and Science
	Minimum wage	NS	Increased from $6.80/hour in 2003 to $11/hour	2014-2019 PRS proposes indexation	Yes	2	Ministry of Labour (MoL)
Social Assis-tance	Benefits	$114m/year by 2016-2017	1% benefit increase; provide additional $30/month for lone adults without children	Completed	No	3,5	Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS)
	Remote Communities Allowance	NS	Remote Communities Allowance – clients receive additional $50/month for first person and $25/additional family member	NS	No	2,5	MCSS
Seniors	Ontario Retirement Pension Plan index to inflation	NS	NS	NS	No	2	MoF
	Guaranteed Annual Income System	NS	NS	NS	Yes	1	MoF

	Ontario Senior Homeowners' Property Tax Grant	NS	"Expected to help more than 600,000 seniors…" (p. 31)	5 years	No	2	MoF
Housing / Home-lessness	End homelessness in Ontario	Over $4b (since 2003)	NS	NS	No	1	Ministry of Municipal Affairs, MRPR, Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness
	Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy	NS	NS *updating long term affordable housing strategy	NS	Yes	1,2,3	Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH), MRPR, MCSS, MCYS
	Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative	$251m in 2014-2015; enhanced funding by $42m starting in 2014-2015, total of	Supports local governments to develop community homelessness programs	NS	Conso lidate d Home lessne ss Preve ntion Progr am	2,5	MMAH

	$294m/year			(2008)		
Supportive housing	$16m	1,000 new spaces	3 years	No	1	Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MoHLTC), MRPR, MMAH
Athletes' Village from 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games	NS	Form 253 new affordable housing units from Athletes' Village	NS	No	1	Minister Responsible for the 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games, Minister of Economic Development
Extend investment in Affordable Housing for Ontario (IAH) program for 5 more years	$400m to match federal government's investment ($801 million combined	Extend off-reserve Aboriginal housing through IAH (151 Aboriginal households received loans); build and repair over 10,360 affordable units; provide rental and down payment assistance to over 10,200 low to medium-income	NS	No	2	Minister Responsible for the 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games

		contributio ns)	Ontarians" (Ontario, 2014, p. 36)				
Mental Health	Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy: Open Minds, Healthy Mind	Over $65m in 2014-2015, about $83m/year by 2016-2017	55,000 children/youth participating as of 2014	10 years Initiated 2011	No	1, 5	MoHLTC
	Moving on Mental Health	NS	NS	NS	No	1, 5	MCYS
	Tele-Mental Health Service	$95m/ annually under mental health strategy	Increase to Aboriginal, rural, remote and underserved communities; training for Aboriginal mental health and addiction workers; develop provincial youth suicide prevention plan, with Aboriginal component	NS Initiated 2013	No	1, 2, 5	MCYS
Health/ Dental	Healthy Smiles	NS	2014 - 70,000 more children/youth eligible to participate	NS; Initiated 2010	Yes	2, 5	MoHLTC

Aboriginal Initiatives	Postsecondary Education Fund for Aboriginal Learners	$30.5m to postsecondary institutions for Aboriginal learners; $1.5m student bursaries	NS	NS Initiated 2014	No	1, 5	MAESD
	Aboriginal Economic Development Fund under the Jobs and Prosperity Fund	$25m over 3 years	NS	NS Initiated 2014	No	1, 5	Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation (MIRR)
	Métis Voyageur Development Fund	$30m over 10 years	NS	NS	No	1, 5	MIRR
Abused/ At-risk Women	Employment Training Program for Abused /At-risk Women	NS	NS	NS Initiated in 2010	No	1, 2,5	Ontario Women's Directorate (OWD)
	Women in Skilled Trades and Information	NS	NS	NS	No	1, 2, 5	OWD

	Technology Training Program			Initiated in 2009			
	Microlending for Women in Ontario Program	NS	NS	NS Initiated 2013	No	1, 2, 5	OWD
Crown Ward Initiatives	100% Tuition Aid for Youth Leaving Care	NS	NS	NS Initiated in 2013	General paragraph on tuition support	1, 2, 5	MAESD
	Living and Learning Grant	NS	NS	NS Initiated in 2013	No	1, 2, 5	MAESD
	Youth-in-Transition Worker Program	$4.2m/yr to employ workers supporting youth leaving care	NS	NS Initiated in 2013	No	1, 2, 5	MAESD
	Children and Youth Care	$2m	NS	NS	No	1, 5	MoE

	Innovation program pilots						
Edu-cation	Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario	NS	Achieve increase in student achievement (measures NS); Increase secondary school graduation rates (NS)	NS Initiated 2014	No	1, 2	MoE
	Full-day Kindergarten	NS	Implementation of full-day Kindergarten across all Ontario schools	Completed 2014	Yes	1	MoE
	Before- and after-school programs	NS	Through Child Care Modernization Act	Act passed 2014	No	1, 2, 5	MoE
	Urban and Priority High Schools Initiative	NS	NS	NS; Initiated 2008	Yes	1, 2, 5	MoE
	Summer Learning Program	NS	NS	NS; Initiated 2013	No	1,2,5	MoE
	After School Program	NS	NS	NS; Initiated 2009	Yes	1,2,5	MHLC; MRPR
	Life After High School Program	NS	NS	NS; Initiated 2011	No	1,2,5	MTCU