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\$1-million grant to fund national study of single mothers

Social inclusion involves them in research of labour market, welfare and other factors

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WATERLOO – A \$1-million grant will allow university researchers and social service providers to undertake a national research project on how changes to the labour market and welfare/workfare system are impacting one of Canada's most vulnerable groups – single mothers.

Over the next five years, 21 investigators representing five universities, seven social service agencies and Canada's largest city will seek to understand how single parents, most of them mothers, are faring under a set of circumstances not seen in 70 years. The research project, entitled Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion, will focus on a labour market that offers single mothers fewer secure jobs at a liveable wage and a social services system that is replacing welfare with workfare.

"In Canada we have not had a comprehensive, national examination of how these two factors intersect since these changes began in the 1990s," said Lea Caragata, associate professor of social work at Wilfrid Laurier University and principal investigator of the study. "A unique set of conditions is impacting one of Canada's most vulnerable population groups. We are no longer privileging lone mothers to stay at home. At the same time, their employment options are more limited, often to what are called McJobs, or non-standard work characterized by low pay, no benefits and irregular hours of work."

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The researchers will use what is known as a social inclusion/exclusion lens to explore a range of factors that contribute to lone mothers' experience. Along with labour and welfare issues, they'll explore racialization and immigration, spatially concentrated poverty, housing, health and wellbeing, among the multiple dimensions of social exclusion.

The ultimate goal is to contribute to the development of policies and practices that directly address the real needs of lone mothers. The researchers anticipate their recommendations will include micro and macro issues related to job training and labour force development, welfare policy and delivery, and associated health and community services. They also plan to launch several pilot programs to test their recommendations.

Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion will involve a number of different studies undertaken in Halifax, Toronto and Vancouver by researchers and practitioners from those cities. Each city will also involve lone mothers as advisors and as researchers.

"Each of these pieces is crucial," said Susan Cadell, assistant professor of social work and family studies at the University of British Columbia. "The experience of a poor single mother here in Vancouver is very different than anywhere else in the country. More important still is ensuring that the people who are living the experience play a role in the research, which is why involving lone mothers in an advisory capacity and in other parts of the research is a key component."

Funding for the project is being provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, through its Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) program. CURA grants help community organizations and university researchers combine forces to tackle issues that they have jointly identified as priority concerns. The CURA grant for this project totals \$992,815 over a five-year period.

For more information on Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion, including a list of investigators and partner organizations, please send an email to lcaragat@wlu.ca.