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National study of single mothers produces first community report

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Contact: Dr. Lea Caragata
Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work
(519) 884-0710 ext. 5219 or lcaragata@wlu.ca

or Kevin Crowley, Associate Director: News and Editorial Services
(519) 884-0710 ext. 3070 or kcrowley@wlu.ca

WATERLOO – Wilfrid Laurier University is releasing the first report to come out of an ongoing Canada-wide study that explores the impact of workfare and labour market changes on lone mothers receiving social assistance.

The report is based on the national study *Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion*.

“Lone mothers have been forced into situations where it becomes almost impossible to raise a family,” said Lea Caragata, the study’s principal investigator and associate professor in Laurier’s Faculty of Social Work.

In addition to literature, policy and Statistics Canada analyses, the report focuses on interviews with 42 lone mothers on social assistance who live in Toronto. Caragata hopes the research will eventually lead to policy changes and a recognition that lone mothers require different types of support to make workfare work for them.

“Workfare has forced many of these women into non-standard jobs that aren’t regulated by employment standards, are typically low-paying and come without benefits or employment insurance,” said Caragata. “Lone mothers are often no better off financially with a job than they were when they were on social assistance, and they worry about the care their children are receiving.”

The research revealed five main themes, which touch on the complexity of the women’s experiences: their depth of poverty, daily stressors, social stigma, resiliency, and support versus control from the social assistance system.

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The report discusses the difficult choices faced by many mothers. With the housing portion of social assistance too low to cover renting costs, some must decide between buying food versus paying the rent. Lone mothers must also balance their roles as the primary source of support for their children with high levels of daily stress caused by searching for work; depending on an often controlling and unreliable social assistance system; facing the threat of eviction; and dealing with the stigma of being on social assistance.

Yet despite these challenges, the research also reveals stories of resilience.

“It’s amazing how lone mothers manage,” said Caragata. “Manage is such a small word, but it’s how they manage economically, how they manage the social stigma, and how they manage the stress of raising a family.”

The research group hired and trained eight lone mothers with experience living on social assistance to help conduct the interviews. Study participants ranged in age, number of children, background and levels of education.

In addition to Toronto, the five-year study looks at Vancouver and St. John’s, which will be highlighted in future reports. The study involves five universities, as well as government and non-profit community organizations, and is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

To access the complete report online, visit: www.wlu.ca/lonemothers