

Lone Mothers Project

Funded by CIHR (Awarded March 2004)

Principal Investigator: Barbara Clow, Assistant Professor (Research), Faculty of Health Professions, Dalhousie University and Executive Director, ACEWH.

Co-Investigators:

Carol Amaratunga, Chair, Women's Health Research, University of Ottawa

Ausra Burns, Research Associate, Rural and Small Town Programme, Mount Allison University

Fiona Chin-Yee, Program Consultant, Public Health Agency of Canada, Atlantic Region, Health Canada

Margaret Conrad, Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies, University of New Brunswick

Shanthi Johnson, Associate Professor, School of Nutrition and Dietetics, Acadia University

Donna Murnaghan, Associate Professor, UPEI School of Nursing, and Director of Programmes and Partnerships of the PEI Health Research Institute

Christine Saulnier, Senior Research Officer, ACEWH

Malcolm Shookner, Regional Development Coordinator, Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre, Dalhousie University

Shirley Solberg, Associate Professor, Nursing, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Kay Willson, Research Manager, Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence

Problem Statement

A Social and Economic Inclusion (SEI) framework will form the basis of this research programme aimed at promoting policies to improve the health of lone mothers in Atlantic Canada.

Notwithstanding a decade or more of research on the social determinants of health, significant and troubling health disparities among vulnerable populations remain, including among poor women raising children on their own. Sometimes we lack requisite research about specific populations: at other times we lack mechanisms to transform research into appropriate policies and programmes. The need is particularly urgent to re-frame and augment research and public policy development so that all regions and populations can benefit from more equitable and responsive public policy.

Marginalized groups in poorer regions of the country, such as Atlantic Canada, tend to be hardest hit by illness and by economic and social exclusion. Women are among the most vulnerable groups in this region of the country, and women raising children alone are at greatest risk of illness and marginalization. Recent research suggests that the social and economic circumstances of lone mothers in Canada has improved, but many programmes and policies remain insensitive, irrelevant or even antithetical to their needs.

To date, policy development dealing with lone mothers has often been the purview of elected officials and bureaucrats, with very little input from local community leaders or even lone mothers, the people for whom such policies are made. We propose to use an Social and Economic Inclusion framework to create a more integrated policy-development model. Such a model will bring together individuals, groups and organizations interested in promoting more equitable approaches to addressing poverty and social marginalization.

SEI is a methodology and an approach to knowledge translation. The SEI methodology for this project will be modelled after the research that has been done in Europe, where this work has advanced the furthest. While SEI, particularly in the United Kingdom, has influenced a change in thinking about poverty, which is now understood to include a lack of education, poor health, poor nutrition, powerlessness, voicelessness, vulnerability and fear, as well as low income, there has been little applied research work done in Canada using this concept.

More inclusive and responsive public policy is crucial in Atlantic Canada, where the social and economic conditions facing lone mothers, children, and their communities have been worsening or at least not showing significant improvement comparable to other parts of the country. Refining a framework for a multi-sectoral solution will not only improve the health of lone mothers in Atlantic Canada, it will also serve as a model for policy reform across the country.

Objectives

The primary objective of this project is to develop a research programme that will create a basis for knowledge transfer aimed at creating public policies to decrease the health disparities and vulnerability of lone mothers in Atlantic Canada, and to improve their health. Specifically, this project will use an SEI framework to:

- 1)** provide a complex, nuanced portrait of the perspectives, experiences, needs, and resources of lone mothers and their families in Atlantic Canada;
- 2)** conduct research that will identify the most significant associations between lone mothers' health and their social and economic inclusion/exclusion status in Atlantic Canada;
- 3)** assess the effectiveness and responsiveness of policies and programmes designed for lone mothers in Atlantic Canada;
- 4)** evaluate how public policies and programmes could be enhanced and improved to promote even greater social and economic inclusion; and,
- 5)** aim to bring together lone mothers, community leaders, policy makers, and researchers from a wide range of sectors and locales, to develop a robust, multidimensional, collaborative research network.

Methodology/Research Plan

The CIHR grant is a development grant that will be used to develop a full research program focussed on lone mothers in Atlantic Canada. The team will seek to do the following:

- identify appropriate SEI factors to understand the conditions facing lone mothers in Atlantic Canada,
- provide a synthesis of the current state of research on lone mothers in Atlantic Canada,
- undertake an intersectoral scan of current federal, provincial, and municipal policies and programmes (legislative, regulatory, and funding) designed to assist lone mothers and their families,
- conduct focus groups and interviews with lone mothers in each province,
- develop a steering committee, which will include community leaders, researchers, policy makers and lone mothers in Atlantic Canada, and
- conduct public workshops in each of the four Atlantic provinces to discuss outcomes.