

The Role of Socio-economic Strategies in the Childbearing Decisions of Anglophone  
Women in Montreal, Quebec

by

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degree of Master of Arts

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## **Abstract**

Do welfare and social service provisions affect the childbearing decisions of Anglophone single mothers living below the low-income level in Montreal? Neoliberal rhetoric has asserted that increased welfare generosity will ultimately breed dependence on social services and propagate a lack of self-sufficiency for single mothers.

Rather than a direct cause-and-effect relationship between welfare generosity and the birthrate of single mothers relying on welfare, my evidence suggests a weak correlation: while these provisions may alter the context in which childbearing decisions are made, they do not solely or primarily determine the outcomes of a pregnancy. By altering the economic context in which childbearing decisions are made, an environment is created that may be supportive of single motherhood to a greater or lesser degree; however this alone will not determine outcomes.

## Résumé

L'accès aux prestations d'aide sociale et aux services sociaux influence-t-il les décisions reproductives des mères célibataires anglophones de Montréal vivant sous le seuil de la pauvreté? Selon la rhétorique néolibérale, l'augmentation des prestations d'aide sociale provoquerait une dépendance envers les services sociaux et contribuerait à propager un manque d'autosuffisance chez ces mères célibataires.

Or, contrairement aux allégations néolibérales qui proposent l'existence d'une relation directe de causalité entre l'accès à l'assistance sociale et le taux de grossesses menées à terme des mères célibataires comptant sur l'assistance, les résultats de ma recherche suggèrent plutôt une faible corrélation entre ces deux variables. Bien que l'accès à ces prestations et services viennent modifier le contexte dans lequel les décisions concernant la maternité sont prises, ils ne constituent pas les principaux ou les premiers déterminant l'issue d'une grossesse. Certes, dans une certaine mesure, la transformation du contexte économique au sein duquel la décision d'avoir un enfant est prise crée un environnement susceptible d'encourager les mères célibataires à poursuivre leur grossesse; cependant elle ne suffit pas à en déterminer le résultat final.

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## Preface

The disproportionate number of single mothers living below the low-income level and receiving assistance from social services has increasingly garnered attention from policy makers, social scientists and the general public. Reasons for this interest are related to claims about the “breakdown” of the nuclear family, increased governmental spending on welfare, and teenage pregnancy (Edin and Kefalas 2005:197). On one side of the spectrum of voices drawing attention to issues of single mother welfare recipients stand conservative politicians and many members of the middle and upper class, sometimes referred to as “neoliberals;” trumpeting the need to reform not only welfare policy in efforts to dissuade dependency, but also the necessity to reform the mothers themselves as they are assumed to be making the “wrong” decisions in their own lives and therefore jeopardizing their children’s futures (Edin and Kefalas 2005:3). On the other side of the spectrum stand activists and employees from community organizations, many social workers, and the single mothers themselves.

The debate that is raging concerns ways in which welfare policy is harmful to single mothers and their children. While both of the above-mentioned coalitions agree that it is, they do so for very different reasons. The former group, standing on the side of conservatives, assert that by providing a cradle-to-grave welfare state the government is breeding dependence on the system and providing a disincentive for single mothers to achieve self-sufficiency; a disincentive that they are concerned will become instilled in the children of these women. The latter group is appalled by the meagre welfare provisions for single mothers, as they assert that it is impossible for a single mother working at minimum wage or relying on welfare payments for income to raise her household above the low-income level and to rise out of poverty; in the interests of the children involved, they argue, welfare generosity needs to be increased.

For conservatives, the solution to welfare dependence is to force single mothers off of the welfare rolls and into paid employment. By decreasing access to welfare services and the amount that a household may receive,<sup>1</sup> they believe that they will be

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<sup>1</sup> It is not that they are literally decreasing the monetary amount, but rather that welfare payments in Canada have not been adjusted accordingly for inflation (Stephenson and Emery 2003:36).



forcing single mothers to establish self-sufficiency through employment, in addition to lessening the financial burden to taxpayers.

My interest in the dichotomy of these two sides has evolved in the context of having completed a one-year research project at a women's transitional living facility in Florida, where - in the United States - the voices heard loudest and most frequently resemble those of the conservatives; and the undertaking of my research in Quebec, perhaps the most socially democratic province in Canada.

### ***The "Welfare Queen"***

In conducting research in Quebec, I was interested to see to what extent policy initiatives and public sentiment differed from those voiced in Florida, and in pursuing this line of inquiry, I opted to focus on the childbearing decisions of women in poverty. The reason why this was the most attractive topic was due to the sentiment held in much of the United States that single mothers on welfare were simply "milking" the system. The United States' notion of the "welfare queen" renders single mother welfare-recipients as opportunistic users of the system: Aware that with every child she bears she will receive a monetary increase in her welfare check,<sup>2</sup> the 'welfare queen' spends her days lazing about, providing little quality care for her child or children, being promiscuous and just waiting till her next pregnancy so that she may increase her household income.

While this notion seemed somewhat preposterous to me, I was interested to learn the extent to which a more socialist-democratic society mirrored these perceptions of single mothers on welfare, and whether there was a valid basis to the assertions of neoliberals from the United States. With those on the side of extreme conservatives stressing that low-income women were only having babies to enhance the monetary amount of their welfare checks, I believed that the best way to investigate whether or not the Quebec residents and their government held to the same perspective as those prevalent in the United States, and whether the assumption was indeed true: that is, that

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<sup>2</sup> Prior to 1996 the United States offered "incremental benefits," meaning that the amount of welfare checks received by single mothers was determined by the number of children in the household. After the 1996 reform the United States government removed incremental benefits from welfare policy, stipulating that any women who became pregnant while on welfare and who opted to bear and raise the child would receive no additional monetary support.

low income women made their childbearing decisions based upon financial incentives, or their lack.

## **Introduction**

The primary data presented in the following work has been gathered from service providers and users of Montreal's food banks and collective kitchens. These services were selected due to the social nature of such facilities, with the majority of their clients living at or below the low-income level. Primary data, both demographic and personal narratives, was collected through the use of interviews and participant-observation. All fieldwork was conducted by myself, the Principle Investigator.

### ***The Questionable Relationship Between Welfare Generosity and the Birthrate of Welfare Recipients***

Within the literature review conducted for this research project I have been struck by the idealistic assertion of many theorists that upon discovering their pregnancy, women will rationally weigh the cost and benefits of bearing and rearing the child.

The economic model of fertility assumes that upon learning of a pregnancy, a couple will "weigh the financial costs and time inputs of a child against the utility gains" and that "[t]ax and transfer payments that vary with family size alter these costs and benefits and should therefore influence fertility behaviour" (Argys et al. 2000:570). While ethology and socio-biology assert that this assessment of costs and benefits may be subconscious, they still imply that a rational assessment of these factors is the primary determinant in childbearing decisions (Hill and Low 1992:36). Within ecological approaches to childbearing decisions, the two main schools of theory are the "life history approach" and the "game theory approach." The line of reasoning in the life history theory of reproductive decisions is the weighing of "expenditure of effort" and the possibility for "different ends (somatic, reproductive)" (Hill and Low 1992:37). Under this approach, the optimal goal is fitness, or the transmission of genes, at the cost of energy and risk (Hill and Low 1992:37). The other cost-benefit approach, games theory, takes into consideration the probability of mate desertion. Under both of these models it is asserted "that for the parent to invest profitably, the increment in this offspring's

survival or reproduction must be greater than the decrement in production of future offspring caused by expending these resources now" (Hill and Low 1992:37). Should the male desert the female the decision to bear and raise offspring depends upon "her assessment of reproductive benefit for continued investment now versus her expectations of future possibilities" (that is, finding another mate) (Hill and Low 1992:37).

These presumptions naively assume that the woman or couple is willing and capable of making this quantitative type of comparative analysis and that she (or they) are aware of all factors pertinent to the costs and benefits of childrearing. However, evidence gathered during my fieldwork and interviews would suggest that the childbearing decisions of those with whom I have interacted were not based upon an empirical, rational assessment of the individual's (or couple's) situation.

In resolving her first pregnancy, one informant, Amy, implied that her childbearing decision was based upon her Catholic faith, illustrated in her statement that "God doesn't give me a baby for no reason." When asked about avenues alternative to bearing and rearing the child, Amy responded that she was strongly against abortion for herself and that she "personally could not carry a child for nine months and then just give away. Never!" If adoption and abortion were not options cognitively available to Amy, the availability and strength of the welfare and social service system would have no affect on her childbearing decision.

When another informant, Sheryl, was asked if, upon learning of any one of her pregnancies, she and her then-husband Peter had discussed any concerns about the costs of bearing and raising a child, she responded, "it wasn't even in our minds." Like Amy, Sheryl felt that abortion was not an appropriate means of resolving her pregnancy and that while adoption was acceptable, it wasn't a path that she and Peter had ever considered pursuing.

Although many women do not have such misgivings about abortions or adoption, it is important to recognize that any woman, upon learning of her pregnancy, will already have firmly established notions about appropriate pregnancy outcomes (Meyers 2001:750). I find that these feelings, arising from an absorbed cultural knowledge, appear to have a greater bearing on pregnancy outcomes than any empirical rationalization of the cost and benefits of raising a child, should this line of questioning

occur in the first place. In her 2003 work, *Authoritative Knowledge and Single Women's Unintentional Pregnancies, Abortions, Adoptions and Single Motherhood: Social Stigma and Structural Violence*, author Marcia A. Ellison asserts that:

Women who terminated a pregnancy were most influenced by their own personal needs and circumstances [and] birth mothers'<sup>3</sup> decisions were based on external sources of knowledge, such as their mothers, social workers, and social pressures. In contrast, single mothers based their decision on instincts and their religious or moral beliefs. 2003:322

The author elaborates that the "internal sources of knowledge" on which a single mother is likely to base her childbearing decision included "instinct, religious and moral beliefs, their own needs, and doing what they felt was best for their child" (Ellison 2003:335). In opposition to women who elected to terminate their pregnancy or "adopt away" their child, single mothers were

significantly less influenced by their marital status or lack of financial security... In contrast to women who terminated their pregnancy, single mothers reported being significantly more influenced by what they thought was best for their child and by their religious beliefs. Ellison 2003:336

These statements strongly reflect the narratives of women with whom I have interacted over the course of this research. Perhaps it should then come as little surprise that those multiple economic and sociological studies on welfare provisions and childbearing patterns, reviewed for this project, which relied on a quantitative analysis either led to inconclusive results or claimed a correlation between welfare and the birthrate of welfare recipients, only to have it refuted in by others.<sup>4</sup>

In 1996 the United States restructured its welfare policy, particularly in their program "Aid to Family's with Dependant Children" (AFDC), which provides additional monetary payments to low-income families. Previously all AFDC recipients had gained

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<sup>3</sup> Here, Ellison is using the term "birth mothers" to describe women who bore the child but then allowed it to be adopted by another family.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that quantitative analysis is inappropriate or useless in pursuing questions regarding the factors affecting childbearing decisions. I realize that quantitative analysis can provide essential support for development workers and policy makers by providing "meaningful statistics that purely ethnographic studies sometimes lack" (Rende Taylor 2005:17). However, I also believe that when investigating large and diverse urban populations such as Montreal, there are limitations to this approach. "We need the voices, faces and experiences of women to realize the actual impact of policies and numerical representations" in order to be able to assess how and why these policies have the affect that they do (Doe and Rajan 2003:vi).

an increase in monetary payments upon the birth of an additional child (known as incremental benefits), but the policy was reformulated to prevent those already on the welfare rolls from receiving any increase in welfare payments should they bear another child. Multiple researchers believed that this would be a prime opportunity to observe any alterations in birthing patterns that might arise as a result of this policy. However, when one considers that childbearing decisions are made as the result of a person's social *and* economic environment, it becomes very hard to discern the sole effects that welfare policy revisions may have on the outcomes of a pregnancy.

While many of the articles on this topic did attempt to take into consideration additional factors such as race, age, education, ethnicity, religion, and family background (Argys et al. 2000:576), the value attributed to each was only estimated. Due to interstate variation, the under-reporting of abortions, as well as cultural factors for which the authors tried to assign numerical values; I find that the results of many of these studies must be regarded with caution.

In a 2000 study on AFDC policy in the United States, authors Laura M. Argys, Susan L. Averette and Daniel I. Rees conclude that in reducing the incremental benefits of AFDC recipients, there has been a decrease in this group's pregnancies, with no increase in abortions.<sup>5</sup> In the literature review conducted for their work, the authors provided an overview of previous. Despite their statement that studies' results were mixed, the authors asserted that "taken together [these studies could be] seen as providing support for the belief that there is a relationship between fertility and welfare generosity" (Argys et al. 2000:571). I find this assertion unfounded, as the results of all studies elaborated upon were problematic in some way. The first study discussed, conducted by Robert W. Fairlie and Rebecca A. London in 1997, found a positive correlation between incremental benefits and the occurrence of subsequent births for AFDC recipients after the 1996 restrictions were enacted (however, Argys et al. neglect to mention that this correlation was statistically insignificant). Yet Fairlie and London also found a stronger

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<sup>5</sup> The authors' assertion that the new AFDC policy reduced births *without* increasing the occurrence of abortions leaves me further questioning the accuracy of this study in that while the authors state that up to eighty percent of abortions go unreported, they gloss this over by asserting that "as long as [abortion] is not systematically related to the explanatory variables estimates will remain unbiased" (Argys et al. 2000:574). Feelings towards abortion *are* explanatory variables for low-income pregnancy: should a person be opposed to abortion or not be able to afford one, avenues for pregnancy resolution will be limited.

correlation within their control group (which was exempt from the policy reformation); indicating that it was not the restricted AFDC payments that were reducing the birth rate, but rather that the relationship between the decline in birthrate of welfare recipients and the removal of incremental benefits was a “spurious correlation” (Fairlie and London 1997:575). The second study discussed by Argys et al. was conducted in 1996 by Gregory Acs, who found “that variations in welfare benefit levels and the incremental benefit have no statistically significant impacts on the subsequent childbearing decisions of young mothers in general, nor on the subsequent childbearing decisions of women who received welfare in particular” (Acs 1996:908). However, this study was excused by the authors with their statement that high-order births had not been examined (Argys et al. 2000:570).<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, citing an experiment conducted in New Jersey by J. O’Neill during 1994 (prior to the national implementation of the AFDC incremental payment restrictions), which claimed to find a correlation, the authors are honest enough to add that a subsequent investigation, conducted by the New Jersey Department of Human Services and using this same study, found that “capping benefits had no effect on fertility” (Argys et al. 2000:571). Despite these inconclusive results, the authors gloss over all the inconsistencies by citing seven studies (without discussion or elaboration upon any) that conclude: “broader segments of the population (e.g. all teenagers) respond to incentives created by the welfare system” (Argys et al. 2000:571). While this may be the case, I do not find that the authors present evidence in their literature review that sufficiently sustains their assertion that the sources cited “provid[ed] support for the belief that there is a relationship between fertility and welfare generosity” (Argys et al. 2000:571).

This is not the only weakness of Argys et al.’s study. While they do take measures to incorporate state-fixed effects (which could explain cultural and welfare policy variation within and between states) into their equations, when results are tabulated to incorporate these state-fixed effects, the correlation found between welfare generosity

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<sup>6</sup> A 2002 study conducted on the fertility of women with a high school diploma or less states that such females will bear just over two children their lifetime (Edin and Kefalas 2005:206). This suggests that the argument that high-order births would drastically affect the results of Acs’ study is false.

and pregnancies becomes statistically insignificant.<sup>7</sup> It is rather misleading for the authors to assert in the article's abstract that their "results lend some support for the proposition that reducing incremental AFDC benefits will decrease pregnancies without increasing abortions" (Argys et al. 2000:569).

It appears that there is little agreement about the extent of the relationship between welfare generosity and the birthrate of welfare recipients. My interpretation of these studies is that while there may be a positive relationship between welfare generosity and the birthrate of recipients, it is not a direct cause-and-effect relationship. Rather, increasing or decreasing welfare payments alters the context or environment in which women make their childbearing decisions. Therefore, when changes in welfare policy are implemented, end results may not be felt for a generation, assuming that the changes remain constant or at least progress in a fixed direction. It may not be until people have been acculturated into a system where reduced welfare contributions are the reality that these revisions may begin to be reflected in the birthrate.

### ***Socialist Feminist Theory***

Through the literature review conducted for this project it has become apparent that in the majority of industrialized nations, Canada being among them, there is an omnipresent contradiction between middle-class notions of the 'good mother' and ideals of self-sufficiency for single mothers. These clashing ideologies present a great challenge to women's identity within their cultural environments. In examining these contradictions, juxtaposed with those of the welfare state, I have applied a socialist feminist theoretical framework. Imbedded within this framework are key analyses of the societal values of caring, motherhood, and social reproduction; within structures involving gendered citizenship, individualism, welfare, and employability.

Socialist feminist theoretical approaches revolve around the degree to which women have access to "decision-making process[es]." While women's position within power structures is intrinsic to this approach, it is not *the* central tenet around which such

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<sup>7</sup> Correlations becoming statistically insignificant once state-fixed effects are taken into the equation appear to be a trend in sociological studies (Haas-Wilson 1997:228). This may indicate the limitations of quantitative studies on issues that are deeply imbedded in cultural factors, particularly in societies where there are multiple socio-cultural factors at work.

theories are based, but rather serve as indicators of women's ability to participate in the public sphere (Hill and Tigges 1995:104).

Mirroring a socialist feminist approach and drawing from the Marxist perspective of women's role in production, anthropologist Eleanor Leacock asserts that

Female subordination within the family as an economic unit... [has] enabled an upper class to squeeze more surplus from workers, serfs and slaves. The fact that domestic work could be separated from the public sphere and assigned to women as the wards of men assured to an upper class the reproduction and maintenance of workers through socially unremunerated [labour].... The household subordination of women was buttressed by ideological and social sanctions as its economic advantages were realized. Leacock 2000:437-8

These ideological and social sanctions have been perpetuated to this day, though perhaps more subtly than was the case previously:

Gender differences are not merely given by culture but enacted and maintained through the interactions and practices of everyday life... [G]ender identities are created and sustained through culturally coded acts carried out in the presence of others, what has been termed 'performativity.' Orlove 2005:358

This performance of gender is interwoven throughout all social relations and is likely a reason why it is widely perceived that household maintenance, such as cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and care giving, are primarily the concern of the females within the household (Turner 2000:129; Ostrander 1987:113; Schleiter 2002:762).

These necessary, but invisible, contributions women have made to world economic functioning, through caring and intergenerational relations remain hidden in considerations of women's citizenship:

Gendered citizenship goes beyond women's participation in the paid work force to include supports for social reproduction, recognition for unpaid work, and how opportunities and identities are shaped by class and race, as well as by the choice of non-family caring. McDaniel 2002:129

As Canada's welfare policy is based on citizenship rather than entitlement, in denying women recognition and remuneration for childbearing and childrearing, the system denies women full citizenship (Mink 1998:58). This gendered citizenship holds the potential to jeopardize the security of mothers within the Canadian welfare system: these women's social and economic opportunities are compromised in that the dominant ideology of society burdens a woman with activities that go without societal accreditation



(Ostrander 1987:113; McDaniel 2002:passim). Women become “time poor” as a result, limiting their abilities to compete for resources necessary to their (and their family’s) survival: “Women are time poor as a consequence of the disproportionate level of household tasks they are required to perform within present social structures” (Turner 2000:129).

Within my theoretical framework, I must assert that women’s unpaid domestic labour is central to the burdens of self-sufficiency faced by single mothers in Montreal, and has led to confusion among policy makers, who have acted without recognition of women’s second-class social and economic citizenship, and its effects upon ideologies of motherhood and employability.

## **The Emergence of the Welfare State**

During the feminist movement of the 1960’s, middle- and upper-class women fought for the right to be employed. They were fighting for the *choice* to hold paid employment outside of the home and with that right won, many women of all classes joined the workforce as part-time employees in an effort to supplement their household incomes (Brenner and Laslett 1991:319-321). This extra income enabled many families to raise their standard of living, an adjustment which in turn led to the necessity of having two bread-winners within the household: women’s right to work became women’s obligation to work and they now must absorb this extra burden while still maintaining the domestic sphere (Mink 1998:61).

As this phenomenon occurred at the micro level, government policies evolved with it, causing changes within society’s macro structures (Brenner and Laslett 1991:passim). Structures that have been affected by this shift are most noticeable in the welfare state. Safety-nets such as unemployment insurance,<sup>8</sup> pensions, and state-subsidized healthcare have been structured to conform to this notion of the nuclear household: in order for a woman to rear a child, she is either reliant on a male bread-winner or must make a decision to forfeit time with the child for paid employment (devaluing motherhood and often working for wages that will not keep her family above

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<sup>8</sup> In Canada, unemployment insurance was renamed ‘Employment Insurance’ during a policy reform that was implemented January of 1997 (Human Resources and Social Development Canada 2001).

the low-income cut-off); or to rely on the 'public-patriarchy' of governmental support, surrendering her family to the intrusive policies of welfare and workfare and yet still struggling to make ends meet with the meagre provisions the state is willing to allocate her:

[T]he welfare state, rather than providing women access to income and services as an alternative to their dependence on men for support, establishes a 'public patriarchy' that reinforces women's dependence on the male-breadwinner family and on a male-controlled state. Brenner and Laslett 1991:312

This notion of "public patriarchy" is illustrative of divisions in feminist theory on welfare. While some feminist scholars may assert that "welfare remedies poor single mothers' inequality, specifically the inequality of economic disenfranchisement" (Mink 1998:62-63), others perceive it as "a source of oppression and domination that reproduces and reinforces capitalism and patriarchy" (Ostrander 1987:112). I would argue for the latter viewpoint. At the advent of welfare policy and throughout its evolution, the intention was not an empowerment of *all* women to establish themselves without a male through means such as equal employment, pay, and considerations for stages of the female life cycle (such as pregnancy and childrearing); but rather to help the deserving (that is women who bore children in wedlock, but lost their male breadwinners to death) survive (Vivekanandan 2002:48-51).

Historical studies of welfare state development have asserted that "women were typically unrepresented or highly underrepresented in the political arena and in the labour market" when public pensions originated (Hill and Tigges 1995:103) and furthermore, that the concept of the male "worker-breadwinner" household wielded powerful influence on the development of welfare systems (Flowers 1977 in Hill and Tigges 1995:103). The emergence of welfare state policy was shaped not only by the labour market, but also by the structure of the family (Haney 1998:757). Because of the undue emphasis placed on the male-breadwinner model of the family, there now remains however a necessity for society to come to recognize that "caring carried on in the home is work" and that therefore reform "must involve a massive increase in society's resources devoted to those

who care for our dependants;" for without such action, these demands bring women "into conflict with men, the state, and the capital (Dale and Foster 1986:135).<sup>9</sup>

Throughout a woman's lifecycle, she is likely to experience periods where she may be unable to compete equally for employment with other able-bodied members of the population, for reasons such as pregnancy and obligations of care giving. This manifests itself in interrupted opportunities for wage growth and the possibility of promotion and becomes evident in her work history, thereby decreasing her employability due to lengthy periods without employment (Meyers 2001:736). Furthermore, these occurrences will consequently limit the quality of her pension (Hill and Tigges 1995:101). Radical feminists contend that the mere fact that issues of gender equality are not taken into account in Canadian pensions provides evidence that welfare state procedures are both inadequate and gender-biased (Hill and Tigges 1995:114).

However, single mothers today have come to represent an array of "wrong" choices: to raise children without fathers, frequently without a stable economic base, and with the necessity of dividing her time between childrearing and securing necessities for her household (Nelson 2002:583). Attributed to single mothers who "chose" welfare reliance over paid employment are character flaws such as laziness, promiscuity, a lack of motivation, the likelihood of 'cheating the system,' and in worst-case-scenarios, having children simply to increase the monetary payments of welfare and extend the period for which they may receive such payments (Nelson 2002:583; Mink 1998:59). Members of middle-class society perceive these women as "looking for a free ride – not only violat[ing] cultural mandates to be independent and self-sufficient, but rely[ing] on resources provided (through taxes) by those who have chosen the route of hard work" (Nelson 2002:584). These preconceived notions of the single mother on welfare are what make up the myth of the "welfare queen" (Seccombe 1998:passim).

In many ways, the debate over who is deserving of welfare is shaped by these notions of "dependency, dysfunctional cultures, and character flaws, rather than in terms of structural causes of poverty, including... an adequate (or livable) minimum wage" (Nelson 2002:608).

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<sup>9</sup> The authors go on to caution that with the above-suggested reformation of the welfare state, an accompanying reformation of patriarchy and capitalism must follow. However, the feasibility of such a massive overhaul appears extremely unlikely.

## Context

Between 1981 and 1996, Canada experienced rapid growth in the number of single-parent families, specifically those headed by single mothers (Harris and Manning 2005:5). In 1981, single mothers made up approximately 14.1 percent of the total population (4,185,365 persons), while in 1996 this group made up 19.2 percent of the total population (4,915,815) (Stephenson and Emery 2003:30). This was a growth from 590,136 single mothers in 1981 to 943,836 in 1996; a 59 percent increase. In addition, 45.7 percent of all single mothers in 1996 fell below the low-income cut-off<sup>10</sup> for their province; with an astounding 94 percent of single mothers between the ages of 15 through 19, and 89 percent of single mothers aged 20 through 24 falling into this category (Stephenson and Emery 2003:34). For Canada as a whole in 1997, single mothers accounted for approximately 28.4 percent of all households considered “poor” – up from 22.5 percent in 1981 (Ross et al. 2000:41). According to *Statistics Canada*’s 1996 Census, within Quebec 48 percent of all single mother headed households were living in the low-income category (Stephenson and Emery 2003:44). These figures clearly indicate the increased economic vulnerability of single mothers. However, the governmental response to this phenomenon has been a restructuring of the welfare state in efforts to reduce the number of persons receiving aid, rather than an investigation of the economy, job market, and social conditions that may have created or at least contributed to this situation.

Like other Western nations, Canada has experienced a shift in its job market as a result of globalization, with a drastic lessening of employment opportunities in the last 30 years. While in the 1970’s there was a prevalence of low-skilled, full-time, full-year work that offered benefits (such as medical, dental, and paid leave) to its employees, globalization and increased competition have triggered a shift from this type of employment to “non-standard” or “contingent” work (Stephenson and Emery 2003:21).

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<sup>10</sup> The Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO), commonly known as the “poverty line” is a measure that asserts that all households with an income below the LICO are living in “strained circumstances.” A household is living at or below the LICO if it spends 70 percent or more of the household income on basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter, leaving little room for expenditures on “transportation, health, personal care, education, household operation, recreation or insurance” (Ross et al. 1994:7). For a good description of LICOs, please refer to the Canadian Council on Social Development website: [http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/archive/fb94/fs\\_povbk.htm](http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/archive/fb94/fs_povbk.htm)

“Non-standard” employment includes part-time, contractual, temporary, split-shift, and self-employed types of labour, very few of which offer any benefits that would provide the employee with some form of safety-net (Stephenson and Emery 2003:43). In Montreal, Quebec, there had been a long history of employment in factory production of finished goods, which required little education, skill, or training and provided benefits. However, many of these jobs have now moved overseas (Stephenson and Emery 2003:71). Compounding the issue is the government’s aim to replace these jobs by attracting corporations from the aerospace industry, specialized production, and high-tech firms. All of these require highly-skilled labour, beyond the reach of single mothers who usually have low educational and job-skill levels (Stephenson and Emery 2003:71).

In addition to the changes in manufacturing, Canada has an expanding service sector as well,<sup>11</sup> but jobs that are full-time and full-year are not often attainable for unskilled labourers with little education and spotty job histories (Stephenson and Emery 2003:40). Single mothers are further marginalized because of their sole responsibility for young children (Stephenson and Emery 2003:28). As employees, single mothers tend to require paid time-off, more flexibility from their employers, and medical, dental, and other benefits. Unfortunately the majority of full-time jobs that women have traditionally held which provided these services, such as clerical or office work, have disappeared from the job market and have been replaced by part-time and temporary positions (Stephenson and Emery 2003:49). Single mothers have the highest rate of involuntary part-time employment, with 18 percent of all employed single mothers working part-time, even though most would like to work full-time (Stephenson and Emery 2003:27).

In addition to the emphasis on part-time or temporary work, the accessibility of clerical and office positions has greatly decreased for single mothers because of the skills required due to technological advancements that have been implemented in most office environments (Stephenson and Emery 2003:44). There is very little work available that meets the skill and education levels of the majority of single mothers and that also pays a sustainable living wage.

Not only is the structure of these newly emerging “non-standard” jobs undesirable, and their benefits negligible, but single mothers are also burdened with the

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<sup>11</sup> 80 percent of jobs held by residents of Montreal are in the service sector (Allaires 2006:1).

insubstantial pay offered by this type of work, which is usually only slightly above the hourly minimum wage, if even that (Stephenson and Emery 2003:67). In the Canadian labour market, low-income single mothers have come to be “valued as cheap labourers who will fill the growing number of low-tier/low-wage service-sector jobs” (Kaplan 2000:257). It appears that single mothers practically have to pay to work:

If a parent leaves welfare for the workforce, she will lose thousands of dollars in cash and in-kind benefits; face employment-related expenses (e.g. clothing for work, transportation and daycare); and will have her (likely already low) wages reduced by Canada Pension Plan contributions, employment insurance premiums and federal (and in many provinces, provincial) income taxes. Stephenson and Emery 2003:14

Interestingly, for single mothers under the age of 25, there has been very little difference in median family income for those who were members of the labour force (either employed or actively looking for employment) and those who were not (not employed, not looking). In 1995, the median income for a single mother younger than 25 and with a child under the age of six, who was in the labour force, was \$11,949, while the median income for a single mother younger than 25 with a child under the age of six, who was not in the labour force, was \$10,569 (Stephenson and Emery 2003:37). Though there is more of a marked difference in median income for labour force participation for those women younger than 25 whose children are over the age of six, the median income for those in the labour force is only \$3,236 higher than those not in the labour force (Stephenson and Emery 2003:37). The older the single mother, the more participation in the labour force increases their median income in relation to those not in the labour force. This is most likely due to the woman gaining greater employment skills and having a more concrete job history.

Furthermore, the same data shows that, should median incomes remain in constant 1995 dollars, all single mothers in the labour force have seen a *decrease* of \$1,921 in their median income between 1990 and 1995, while for those not in the labour force the decrease was only \$672. This provides no incentive for young single mothers to attempt to find work in the increasingly inaccessible labour market. It is here that one sees financial incentives for welfare use, but this concerns the choice of employment versus welfare, rather than a choice of employment or childbearing.

Compounding the issue is the decrease in income for *all* fields of work and job types for single mothers (if constant 1995 dollars are applied) (Stephenson and Emery 2003:41). Yet Canadian policy makers appear to be ignorant of these trends. Rather than acknowledge the changing nature of the job market as a force driving the new preponderance of single mothers on welfare (Stephenson and Emery 2003:2), both the provincial and national governments are implementing neoliberal policies (Doe and Rajan 2003:13) to simply remove these people from the welfare rolls by enforcing stricter criteria for eligibility (Deniger et al. 1995:11, 17). As a result, many women have moved off of welfare to employment, increasing labour force participation rates; however this has done very little to increase their economic situation, rather it has only increased the number of working “very poor” (Stephenson and Emery 2003:16). It appears that Canadians have heightened their concern that by providing a cradle-to-grave welfare state, the system has fostered welfare dependence; something that government politicians have made clear they are no longer willing to support (Harris and Manning 2005:23-29).

## **The Canadian Welfare State**

The Canadian welfare system has been hailed by many as “robust” and “one of the most advanced welfare systems in the world today” (Vivekanandan 2002:46, 63); however over the last thirty years it has experienced major cut-backs in spending as the country moves in the direction of its neoliberal neighbour, the United States (Vivekanandan 2002:57). During the 1980s the Canadian economy experienced a deep recession, with jobs rapidly disappearing and unemployment and interest rates reaching the double digits. With a growing budget deficit and the defeat of Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal government in 1984, the Progressive Conservatives under the leadership of Brian Mulroney took control of the federal government. Despite his pre-election promises to preserve Canada’s universal social service programs as a “sacred trust,”<sup>12</sup> it was under his leadership that the nation witnessed an “attack” on welfare state policies (Vivekanandan 2002:49). Citing the growing budget deficit to justify cutting back social spending, the Progressive Conservatives converted both the Old Age Security and Family

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<sup>12</sup> Universal welfare policies are citizenship-based: all citizens are entitled to its benefits regardless of family role, employment, or economic status (Haney 1998:753).

Allowances into income-tested programs via the “social benefits repayments” or what is popularly known as the “clawback system”<sup>13</sup> (Vivekanandan 2002:49; Stephenson and Emery 2003:71). In addition to this policy, the Mulroney government instituted a cap on the Canadian Assistance Plan (CAP) for three of Canada’s wealthier provinces – Alberta, Ontario, and British Colombia (Vivekanandan 2002:53). Under this policy, the federal government declared it would not increase their contributions to CAP by more than 5 percent a year, regardless of need. By 1992-93, the federal contribution to CAP in these provinces had been drastically scaled back; with a 28 percent decrease in funding for Ontario and a 36 percent decrease for British Colombia (Vivekanandan 2002:53).<sup>14</sup> Another of the Mulroney government’s contributions to the decline of the welfare state in Canada was its withdrawal of federal funding from the Unemployment Insurance Fund (later renamed Employment Insurance), leaving it to be financed solely by employers and employees and shedding all federal responsibility towards the unemployed. Crucial areas of human development, such as education and medical care, were “left to market forces,” further leaving the poor, and single mothers in particular, at a disadvantage (Vivekanandan 2002:56).

Despite the radical shift of Jean Chretien’s Liberal government away from the previous conservative reign, and the attempted repeal of the CAP, the universalist welfare state was not restored. Instead, the Chretien government implemented further changes to reduce the federal government’s contribution to welfare and social services: rather than sharing with provinces the cost of these specific social services, the federal government now would provide funds to the territories and provinces via block funding, without stipulating which services had to receive monies. In 1995 the Canadian Assistance Plan was repealed and in its place the Canada Health and Social Transfer Program (CHST) was instituted. The CHST now was responsible for funding Medicare and post-secondary education as well as social services for low- and middle-income families. The Budget Implementation Bill of 1995 also stipulated that there would be no further cost-

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<sup>13</sup> Clawback is a term used to describe the lowering of social assistance payments should the individual qualify for additional welfare-related program. An example of this frequently occurs with the Canadian Child Tax Benefit (CCTB), which is intended to provide additional monetary support for families with low incomes. Most provinces and territories in Canada will clawback part, or all, of this supplement from families on welfare by reducing welfare or similar social assistance payments.

<sup>14</sup> Alberta was not greatly affected by this new policy as the provincial government had already decided to reduce the provinces welfare program (Vivekanandan, 2002:53).



sharing for these services from the federal government (instead it would be handled at the discretion of the province through the federal block-funding). With the above trends in place, perhaps it should be no great surprise that under the new CHST the federal government has greatly reduced the amount of funding transferred to provinces from the amount provided under CAP, with a 3.4 percent reduction per capita since 1995 (Stephenson and Emery 2003:71). However, these federal transfers manage to provide 14 to 42 percent of provincial revenues (Vivekanandan 2002:54).

This trend in policies can be seen as reflecting what John J. Rodger calls a postmodern “attack” on the welfare state, in which “social services [are] decentralized and privatized” in an effort to “better serve diverse social needs” (Reese 2001:363). However, the above-mentioned postmodernist perspective could also be seen as a guise under which policy-makers may be concealing their antimodernist<sup>15</sup> agenda, with the intention of putting an end to ways in which they see the welfare state as “interfering with the market and undermining family and community responsibilities for social welfare” (Reese 2001:363).

## **Welfare Provisions of Quebec**

While the national government allots each province with an income (determined by provincial demographics) that may be used for social service purposes, it is now within the domain of the provincial government to determine who qualifies as eligible and what additional employability programs will accompany these qualifications in order for a citizen to continue to receive aid (Harris and Manning 2005:22).

In the context of Canada as a whole, the province of Quebec has upheld notions of social-democratic social support<sup>16</sup> to a greater extent than the rest of the nation, as evidenced in the provincial policy of \$7 a-day daycare,<sup>17</sup> among other programs (National Council of Welfare 2004). However, it appears the province is experiencing a

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<sup>15</sup> According to Rodger, antimodernists may also be known as neoconservatives and neoliberals (Reese 2001:363).

<sup>16</sup> For an excellent description of social assistance provisions in Quebec in relation to three other provinces, please see *Income for Living 2007*.

<sup>17</sup> However, the majority of persons who are self-employed do not qualify for this supplemented childcare service (Harris and Manning 2005:69).

shift away from citizenship-based entitlement to means-tested programs (Vivekanandan 2002:49, 59, 61-62).

A central tenet within Quebec's restructuring of welfare has been the identification of those "unfit to work" (Deniger et al. 1995:13). This was a shift away from the trend during the early 1980's when entitlement was based on "need" and was a direct effort to bring down the numbers relying on welfare (Deniger et al. 1995:14). Later in the 1980's, the emphasis fell to employability, leading to the replacement of welfare with "workfare" (Deniger et al. 1995:14).

Based on the notion that the extensive welfare system was enabling dependence and incapacitating people's drive for self-sufficiency, the Canadian government has attempted to institute deterrents for prolonged welfare use. Among these is welfare-to-work, popularly known as 'workfare.' According to the Canadian Human Rights Program, traditional workfare must meet two criteria: "(1) participation must be mandatory rather than voluntary, and (2) work or other approved activity must be done in exchange for the basic welfare payment, rather than for a supplement to that basic payment" (Federal Responses 2003). As the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) prohibits provinces from imposing mandatory work requirement in exchange for basic assistance, workfare in its classic sense is not found within Canada. However, provinces are able to "set reasonable requirements respecting 'work availability' (job search, acceptance of suitable work) and 'employment preparation' (participation in employability enhancement programs) as a condition of eligibility for employable applicants and clients" (Federal Responses 2003). This same flexibility exists under all programs that are block-funded under the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). When program recipients fail to fulfill employability requirements, all provincial and territorial governments have the ability to "terminate, suspend or reduce a client's benefits or refuse an applicant's request for assistance; these requirements are sometimes waived because of poor labour market conditions or significant barriers to employment" (Federal Responses 2003). Quebec has taken the stance that it would be "out of the question" for the provincial government to impose workfare upon its population of social assistance (currently known in Quebec as "income support") recipients, yet welfare recipients are expected to "make reasonable efforts to regain their economic and social independence" (Quebec 2003). In order for them to do

so, the province provides numerous employability programs<sup>18</sup> in which welfare recipients may *voluntarily* participate, which add an additional monetary sum (\$120 per month) to their income support payments. Yet while this option is viable for many income support recipients, it may not be feasible for single mothers:

I think a lot of these agencies need to realize that when people are living hand-to-mouth, and at the poverty line, and they're thinking about how they're going to pay their bills and their food and their prescriptions. It's very hard to think about working [or volunteering]. Like, right now you're just thinking about, OK, I've got to get enough groceries over this period of time, and your last concern is steps you need to take to get to that job [program]. You're just surviving, day by day, week by week. Doe and Rajan 2003:15

There appears to be little understanding or consideration that for a single mother who is poor, it is much more difficult for her to “muster up the personal, structural, and psychological resources that are needed to find and maintain a job,” especially when they believe that the job will not be likely to significantly improve their standard of living (Kaplan 2000:257).

In addition to the paralysing anxiety a single mother may experience worrying about how she will provide for her family (Ensminger 1995:347; Doe and Rajan 2003:65), should a mother participate in an employability program, she will not only need to find affordable childcare for her child (which would not be easy should her place not have come up on the \$7 a-day daycare waiting list), she would also have to pay for transportation. If a single mother with only one child were to participate in an employability program two days a week *and* be able to receive \$7 a-day daycare, her expenses would be approximately \$100 per month.<sup>19</sup> Given the amount of time the mother would lose with her child, the potentially exhausting commute and work she would need to complete as a member of the employability program, it might hardly seem worth participating for only an additional \$20 in her household income; as once the expenses of her commute and childcare were covered, this would be all that was left over.

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<sup>18</sup> Included under employability training is volunteering as it is believed that this will pride an individual with opportunities to learn how to get to work on time, appropriate dress and behaviour, as well as additional employment skills (Harris and Manning 2005:35). However, by transforming volunteer work into a form of workfare policy-makers are displacing traditional volunteer workers while profoundly changing the “meaning of volunteer work itself” (Michaud 2004:268).

<sup>19</sup> This amount consists of a metro ticket to and from the work facility (\$2.75 each way, multiplied by eight days) and childcare (\$7 multiplied by eight days).

While participation in employability programs are optional, it is obligatory for adults receiving social assistance [to] be available for employment unless there are temporary or permanent constraints preventing them from doing so. They must also take the appropriate steps to find suitable employment and comply with any instructions given to that end by the Minister of Employment and Solidarity. Quebec 2003

In order to show that an income support recipient is taking “appropriate steps to find suitable employment,” she or he must complete and provide proof of a set number of job applications each month.<sup>20</sup> during 2004, the number of application required in Ontario was twenty (Michaud 2004:271).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, recipients are obliged to take any job that is offered, “unless they have serious cause for refusing” (Quebec 2003). Non-compliance with these stipulations most frequently results in the reduction of benefits, though according to Services Canada it is possible that that all benefits be revoked due to “disentitlement” (telephone inquiry, August 29, 2007).

In conjunction with the required job-searching expected of all recipients of income assistance, there is also the necessity of maintaining frequent contact with recipients’ case managers. These appointments can be time-consuming and the experience demeaning and intrusive for single mothers due to the scrutiny she may feel as a social worker reviews her file (Doe and Rajan 2003:33; Nelson 2002:584; Seccombe et al. 1998:854), though they are absolutely necessary in order to ensure that the mother’s benefits are not cut off (Michaud 2004:270; Davis 2003:148). The increasing suspicion of abuse by those on welfare is mirrored in the above-mentioned policies, recipients’ interaction with social service providers, as well as by the ideology represented in media discourses (Nelson 2002:passim).

While there may be an increase in suspicions of welfare abuse throughout Canada, a 1995 study offers evidence that welfare recipients in Ontario feel judged for using welfare services more than recipients in Quebec. Funded by The Canadian Council on Social Development, this cross-provincial comparison, entitled *Poverty Among Young Families and Their Integration into Society and the Workforce: an Ontario-Quebec*

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<sup>20</sup> In a 1996 policy reform, Quebec increased the penalty for welfare recipients who failed to look for employment or who quit a job without a “legitimate reason” (Harris and Manning 2005:29).

<sup>21</sup> According to Services Canada, in Quebec the number of job applications and the proof of such required of income assistance recipients were left to the discretion of the recipient’s case-manager (telephone inquiry, August 29, 2007).

*comparison*, utilized surveys and focus groups as a means of data collection. In one question on the project's "young families" questionnaire (which consisted of fifty-two questions), the trends in each province were noteworthy. In the three aspects of this question pertaining to the frustration and fear of being judged by society as a welfare recipient, there was a noticeably different trend in answers between respondents in Ontario and those in Quebec: with those in Ontario feeling much more "judged" by society for being on social assistance than those in Quebec (Deniger et al. 1995:84). In response to the statement "You feel you are being judged by society as a welfare recipient," 87 percent of Ontario respondents said "often" or "sometimes," whereas only 68.4 percent of Quebec respondents replied similarly (Deniger et al. 1995:84). Regarding the statement "You feel useless because you are not working," 74.4 percent of Ontario respondents replied "often" or "sometimes," with only 47.6 percent of Quebec respondents answering similarly (Deniger et al. 1995:84). And finally, in reaction to the statement "You feel guilty for the discrimination your children have to cope with because you are on welfare," 75 percent of Ontario informants replied "often" or "sometimes;" with merely 44.3 percent of Quebec informants responding similarly (Deniger et al. 1995:84).

I find it very interesting that Quebec respondents felt they were less stigmatized for receiving social assistance than their Ontario counterparts. Given that there are more welfare recipients per-capita in Quebec than in any other province in Canada, this indicates a link between the social acceptability of welfare use and heightened use of the welfare system, although it might actually be the reverse: eligibility restrictions to welfare services are not as rigid in Quebec, so more people qualify as recipients and feel less stigmatism.

### **Definition of a Single Mother**

In the interest of clarity, it will be useful to have an understanding of how the term "single mother" is defined for the purposes of this research. According to Canadian federal law a mother is considered single on the conditions that she has been separated and living apart from her partner for at least ninety days. However, should she not have resided in the same dwelling as her partner for more than twelve consecutive months, she

would have maintained single status throughout the relationship. Furthermore, if a couple had resided together for a period of twelve months or more and then discontinued the relationship, they would not be considered legally separated until they established separate residences (Canada Revenue Agency 2007). This definition clearly defines the parameters of those who qualify as single parents for tax and benefit payment purposes, though there are cases in which it does not serve all parents who consider themselves to be single. Sheryl, whose narrative may be found below, had legally ended her marriage to Peter (who was suffering from alcoholism), although due to their dire financial situation and the need to provide for their five children, she was unable to establish a separate residence from her ex-husband (or rather, he was unwilling and unable to find his own separate dwelling). Sheryl shouldered the burden of the household budget and care giving, as Peter's alcoholism had become so extensive that he could no longer provide her or their children with any support. While Sheryl considered herself a single mother, the welfare system still categorized her as coupled, since Peter had not established a separate residence. Federal law stipulates that:

if you reside in the same household and continue to share parenting and financial responsibilities, we will not consider separation to have occurred-for the purpose of administering the Canada Child Tax Benefit or Goods and Services Tax/Harmonized Sales Tax (GST/HST) credit legislation.  
Canadian Revenue Agency 2007

While Sheryl was actually no longer sharing parenting or financial responsibilities with her husband, this was something that her social worker would not believe and was something hard for her to prove.

It is for this reason that the concept of "single mother" shall, for this project, be defined by the informants: women who have considered themselves to be "single mothers." The men involved with many of the single mothers who participated in this project were intermittently in and out of their lives. While the men may have resided with the single mother for periods of time, possibly contributing to the household income, relationships frequently broke down. Even though some of the mothers with whom I talked had boyfriends, they still considered themselves to be single mothers. They did not feel that the man's participation in their and their children's lives was at all guaranteed, and the mothers themselves still shouldered the burden of all care-giving and

finances. While many of the boyfriends would buy gifts for the children (and the mother), this was a type of courtship rather than a sense of any continued obligation to the family. Due to the uncertainty of romantic relationships and the frequency with which boyfriends were not the children's fathers, mothers considered themselves single, for they were the only ones fully invested and dedicated to providing for and raising their children.

## **Overview**

In investigating the factors influencing single low-income mothers' childbearing decisions in Montreal, it has become apparent that there is no single aspect deterministic of whether a woman will opt to bear and rear a child rather than finding an alternative outcome for her pregnancy. Many themes of this thesis are interlinked and I will attempt to return to topics in order to draw connections between the multiple features that may come into play when a single woman living at the low-income level in Montreal makes her childbearing decision.

The following chapter of this thesis will consist of the methods utilized in this research project. It will discuss the different field sites at which participant-observation took place, as well as discussing the various informants' relationships to each site as well as their role in this study. Once the methodology is established, I will then discuss the results of the primary data that emerged from this project. Included in this chapter will be a demographic profile of food bank recipients from my primary field site, Helping Hands; as well as the narratives of the two primary informants, Sheryl and Amy, who made their childbearing decisions while single mothers living at the low-income level. Following this discussion of the primary data will be a chapter in which I will discuss prominent themes that emerged over the course of this research. In elaborating upon these themes I will draw upon literature from psychological, philosophical, sociological, and feminist, as well as anthropological standpoints. The concluding chapter of this work will be a discussion of recommendations to policy-makers on ways in which social service structures could be altered to better meet the needs of low-income women in Montreal.

## Methodology

In researching this topic, I have applied the anthropological methods of participant-observation and semi-structured interviews.<sup>22</sup> Participant-observation was conducted over a six-month period at one of Montreal's food banks - Helping Hands<sup>23</sup> - in addition to a two-month period in which I participated in a program for young parents organized by another non-governmental organization (NGO), Pathways. Informants for interviews were selected by availability, from among those with whom I came into contact through my field research.

A side-project in this research emerged as a result of my partnership with Helping Hands, in which, at the behest of the Food Bank's director, I developed a client intake survey. This survey was designed to gather greater information on the food bank's clientele in an effort to assess ways that the facility might better meet the needs of its clients. Brief interviews were held with each of the Food Bank's clients over a two-month period, covering more than fifty percent of their consumers. While it was beyond the scope of this project that I continue to monitor the responses to these surveys, they are still being undertaken with all new clients, with information being stored in a database that I designed for the Food Bank.

As a result of these surveys, I was able to establish a demographic profile of Helping Hands' clients, in addition to the immediate aid provided to several survey-informants as their needs were identified (one single mother found a full-time job as a result of this survey).

Participant-observation conducted for this research project exposed me to the reality of the daily struggles of single mothers living in poverty. Through this experience, I interacted with multiple mothers as they accessed social services, as well as participated in volunteering programs resembling workfare. I was also exposed to the

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<sup>22</sup> In their 1991 work, *The Politics of Reproduction*, authors Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp assert the "power [of applying] anthropological perspectives [to] contribute to understanding the specific subjective consequences, local responses, and human costs of hegemonic medical interventions into women's reproduction. [Anthropological approaches] also demonstrate the particular ways racial, gender, and class categories are imposed upon and construct social and individual bodies" (318).

<sup>23</sup> The name of this food bank, as well as all other names in this thesis are pseudonyms. They have been assigned in an effort to maintain the confidential identity of all informants and research centres.



challenges faced by service-providers: many a lunch hour at Helping Hands was spent in discussion with their director as well as their social worker (in addition to the input of other women, who each had great familiarity with the facility and its clients) on topics such as the barriers to expanding the programs, and the inherent difficulties of trying to encourage clients to participate in the legal economy.

## ***Field Sites***

### **Helping Hands**

Helping Hands, an organization first established in the 1980's, has evolved to encompass multiple programs. Among these are a school lunches program; a school supplies program; a teen centre; a mobile food delivery program; a second-hand clothing boutique; multiple community activities such as spaghetti suppers, dances, and fundraising dinners; as well as the food bank with which I worked most closely.

The food bank is available to low-income residents of the neighbourhoods surrounding Helping Hands, except in case of emergency,<sup>24</sup> when a food basket will be provided and the client then referred to a food bank serving their area of residence. Open for two hours two days a week, clients are able to utilize the food bank from anywhere between one and three times a month, depending on their location and the number of children in the household. Those living in the immediate neighbourhood of Helping Hands may attend the food bank three times per month, while households with children are automatically allotted an additional day of access to the food bank, though are never granted access more than three visits per month. Clients pay \$1 for each adult person in the household, and food is distributed according to the number of household residents. While the food provided is substantial in relation to the money paid for it, it is not intended to fulfill all nutritional needs of the recipient household, but rather as a supplement to food purchased individually.

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<sup>24</sup> A food basket will be provided on an emergency basis to anyone, regardless of their area of residence, should they be in dire need of supplies. Recipients of this service are frequently referred to Helping Hands by social workers and are often experiencing hardships related to the immediate loss of a job or income, the death of someone near to them, or as victims of a theft or a fire that may have deprived them of much of their possessions. In order to receive an emergency food basket, it is necessary for the individual to have good reason for their request and it will be given at the discretion of the facility's staff.

Helping Hands makes a concerted effort to provide food with nutritional quality, always attempting to make fresh fruit and vegetables available. Included in each food basket is a serving of meat, some form of pasta, canned and fresh fruits and vegetables, one or more loaves of bread, and some form of dessert. As they receive their food, clients are allowed to select for themselves the fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as the bread and desserts. Formula and baby food is always available to mothers, and the staff tries to supply expecting mothers with a greater amount of food containing protein and vitamins. While the majority of the food is donated through larger organizations such as Moisson Montreal (Montreal Harvest), Helping Hands must purchase certain items, such as Kraft dinners. For this reason the food bank is always closed during the first week of the month to provide the facility with time to replenish its food stocks.

When clients arrive on the specified food bank days, they line up outside of Helping Hands, as the food bank does not open until 1:00 p.m. Frequently clients will begin to arrive as early as 11 a.m. in order to reserve their place in line, since the first clients through the food bank always get the best pick of fruits, desserts, and bread. This procedure has its benefits and drawbacks: the benefits being that those who do not like what is offered can refuse the food, leaving it for others; the drawback being the need to monitor the clients as they make their selections so that they don't take too much of a particular item in order that there be some left for the late-comers.<sup>25</sup>

Operated by both staff and volunteers, the food bank offers its clients volunteer opportunities that garner welfare recipients an additional \$100 in their welfare check, in return for their regular volunteer work at Helping Hands. Most of the full-time staff members at Helping Hands were once welfare recipients themselves, and several have resided in the general vicinity served by the organization for most of their lives. This has aided in the prominence of Helping Hands in the community as well as enabling people to feel less marginalized and isolated when receiving the services provided.

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<sup>25</sup> While most clients understand the need to take only what they and members of their household can consume in one week, there are clients who attempt to capitalize on the food provided by the food bank. These clients will take as much as they can get their hands on and sell the foodstuffs to others in an attempt to supplement their income.

## Pathways

Through the director of Helping Hands I was put into contact with an employee of Safety's Sake, a youth and family services organization, who in turn referred me to a young mother who participated in the Program for Young Parents at Pathways.

Pathways is an organization that aims to inform and promote the mental and physical health of young people through programs that utilize all forms of social services from both public and private sectors. Among its programs, Pathways provides continuing education tutorials, a food pantry, mental-health counselling, health education workshops, medical services and clinics, legal advice and education, a youth outreach program, a teen centre, and the group in which I undertook participant-observation, a young parents program. Pathways' Program for Young Parents provides an opportunity for parents under 25 with children under five to meet several times a week, take a break from their parenting duties through on-site childcare, and to share their experiences over lunch and snacks. The program also organizes social events, learning workshops, activities and fundraisers.

My participation with Pathways' Program for Young Parents largely revolved around their collective kitchen, where the mothers would gather and share whatever was on their mind twice a week over lunch.<sup>26</sup> While not all members of the Program for Young Parents were single mothers, the majority were, and almost all could be considered low-income. The other dimension of my participant-observation with this organization was my inclusion in a series of "learning circles" on poverty, which took much the shape of focus groups.

Organized by the national non-profit organization KARE,<sup>27</sup> these learning circles documented the thoughts and frustrations of the participants as users of the Quebec social service system, in an effort to compose a report on poverty and marginalization that

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<sup>26</sup> While fathers are welcome to join and attend the programs and activities of Pathways' Program for Young Parents, it is rare that a father has regularly attended. In fact, throughout my experiences with the Program for Young Parents I have yet to see a father participate.

<sup>27</sup> KARE is a national church-based organization that promotes social justice in Canada and developing countries.

KARE will present in Ottawa in an effort to influence governmental policy.<sup>28</sup> My experience with the learning circles of Pathways exposed me to many of the inherent contradictions of welfare provisions, as well as enabling me to witness the pro-activity of marginalized mothers living in poverty. A detailed account of my experience with the Program for Young Parents and their learning circles can be found in the section entitled "Tree of Problems."

## ***Interviews***

The semi-structured interviews utilized in this project adhered to the style of a life-history interview. Two mothers who bore children while receiving welfare services were interviewed using this format.<sup>29</sup> The age of the informants varied greatly: one of the mothers was forty-nine, and bore her last child in the 1980's; while the other was twenty-six and had two children under the age of three. This dimension of the project provided me with a window into the emergence of present trends in welfare policy and social service provisions in Montreal, allowing me to assess how these provisions have changed over the last thirty years.

All interviews were voluntary, with babysitting time equal to that of the interview (between two and two and a half hours) being offered as remuneration.<sup>30</sup> The semi-structured questions followed a life-history format, commencing with the interviewee's childhood family background and progressing towards their present situation and their expectations of the future. The goal of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the socio-economic factors that influenced the interviewee's feelings towards motherhood, social welfare, and employment. In order to fully understand these women's backgrounds it was necessary to address very personal and sensitive subjects, and at times during the interview the informants demonstrated emotional distress. Through the

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<sup>28</sup> The report composed by KARE is expected to be completed by October, when it will then be taken to Ottawa. It is therefore beyond the scope of my project to include a follow-up on the results of KARE's work, as this will occur post-publication.

<sup>29</sup> While it would have been greatly beneficial to conduct a greater number of in-depth interviews with mothers who had experienced a pregnancy while being single and on welfare, the time constraints of this project limited this.

<sup>30</sup> It was beyond the provisions of this project to offer monetary remuneration for the time given by interviewees. However, I felt that it was important that some kind of payment be offered to informants in exchange for their time and so I offered myself as a babysitter.

informed consent process<sup>31</sup> all interviewees had been informed prior to the commencement of interviews that they could refuse to answer any question with which they were uncomfortable without the interviewer asking why, something I reiterated throughout the interview. While there were occasions in which informants asked to take a break, upon resumption of the interview all questions were answered.

In addition to the interviews conducted with single mothers who bore their children while receiving welfare, I conducted one structured interview with a social service provider. This service provider worked for Head Start, a centre for young pregnant women from the lowest economic bracket. The programs operated by Head Start were geared towards responsible parenthood and the maintenance of self-sufficiency: taking on young women while they are still pregnant and helping to prepare them for what is to come; or alternatively, helping them to decide whether or not adoption is a viable option.<sup>32</sup> This interview was invaluable to my gaining an understanding of the desires of young women, who might barely be able to take care of themselves, to bear and keep a child.

## **Discussion of Primary Data**

The primary research question of this project has been whether or not monetary social assistance provisions affect the childbearing decisions of single mothers living in poverty in Montreal. My experiences conducting participant-observation and interviews have echoed the sentiments expressed within literature on this topic: that financial provisions alone have very little effect, if any on the childbearing decisions of women in poverty.

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<sup>31</sup> Informed consent forms were provided to and signed by all interview informants prior to the commencement of the interview. These forms detailed the guarantee of anonymity as well as the interviewee's rights as participants in this project. The form allowed for the women to opt whether or not they consented to being tape-recorded as well as alerting them to the possibility that they may experience some emotional distress in response to events they are asked to recall in the interview. A copy of the informed consent form may be found in Appendix B.

<sup>32</sup> While Head Start is pro-choice, they do not offer abortion services. Montreal has multiple clinics that will perform abortions within the first and second trimester, some offering subsidized rates for Quebec residents, and the unsubsidized cost being between CAN\$450 and \$600.

## ***Demographic Profile of Helping Hands Clientele***

As mentioned above, while conducting fieldwork at Helping Hands the facility's director, Julie, asked me to design a survey to be conducted with a member of each household served by the food bank. Consisting of eleven questions, the survey was designed to elicit information on social and economic problems experienced by the client, as well as to offer them information about services offered by Helping Hands and their policies. As roughly thirty percent of the households served by Helping Hands speak only French (31 percent), a French-language version was created and administered by French-speaking staff and volunteers.<sup>33</sup>

While Helping Hands has become notable for providing their services in English, there are numerous staff and volunteers at the facility who speak French. The mother tongue of Jennifer, Helping Hands' social worker, is French; although she had commented to me that Francophone clients often attempted to use only English when accessing services, even after she has told them they could feel free to speak in French.<sup>34</sup> While the mother tongue of the majority of the staff at Helping Hands is English, all employees make an effort to learn and utilize basic French. While there are several volunteers that speak Spanish, there are no staff members fluent in this language. For clients that speak Spanish or a language other than French or English, they are encouraged to bring a family member or friend to the food bank so that they may be able to communicate. However, as long as an individual is able to provide proof of their residential address (which must be within one of the five neighbourhoods served by Helping Hands) and presents either their social insurance card, immigration card, or welfare card, they will receive a food basket.

Through information gathered via the Client Intake Interview, a demographic profile of the clientele of Helping Hands has been possible. Helping Hands has always kept a basic record of its clientele, though this database had not been updated in over a year. While conducting the Client Intake surveys, new clients were added to the database, and information on clients who had not utilized the facility in over a year still

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<sup>33</sup> Both French and English copies of the Client Intake survey may be found in Appendices C and D.

<sup>34</sup> When asked why she thought this to be the case, Jennifer responded that it was possible that the clients believed they would receive better treatment and services should they try to communicate in English.

remained listed. In order for the results of my analysis of this data to be most accurate, all numbers quoted are in relation to households that utilized the food bank during the months of January and February 2007 only, the period in which the interviews were conducted with all clients accessing the food bank. Though Helping Hands has a food basket delivery program, these clients rarely if ever come to the physical location of the facility, and have therefore not been included in this profile (most of these clients are elderly, as well, and therefore not likely to be single mothers).

A total of 251 households consisting of 525 individuals utilized the food bank of Helping Hands during January and February 2007. Of these 525 clients, 35.4 percent were children (186 persons below the age of eighteen).<sup>35</sup> Coming from 79 different households, 48 of which were headed by single parents, families with children under the age of eighteen made up roughly 31 percent of households served by Helping Hands and approximately 58 percent of all clients (see Table 1). While 85 children under the age of

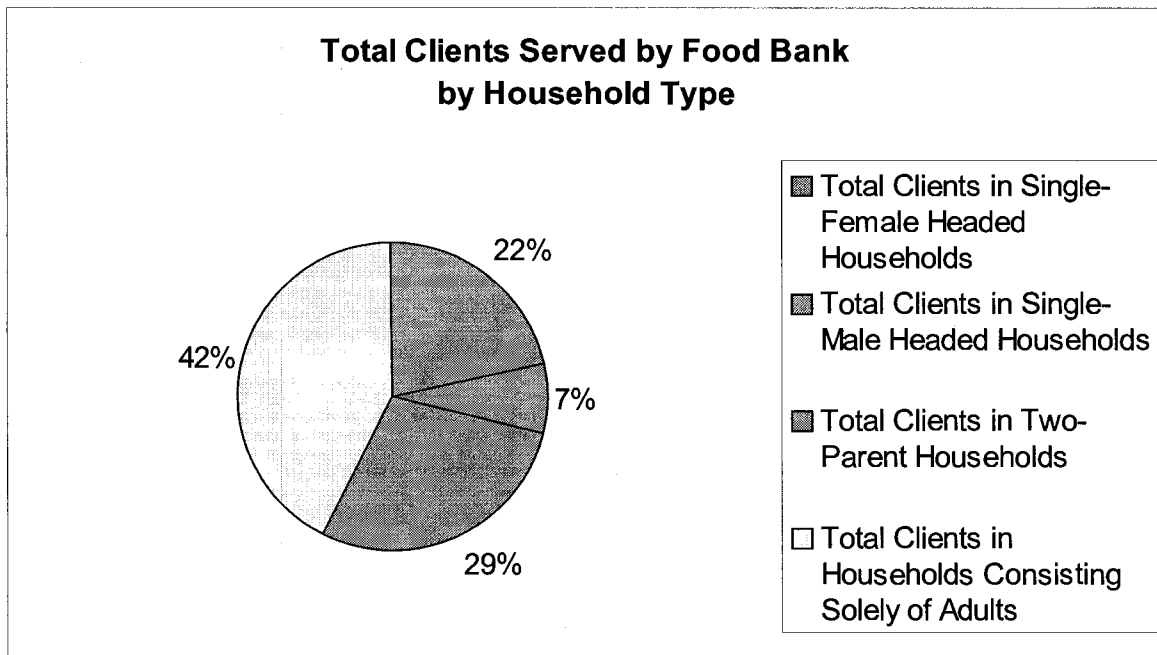


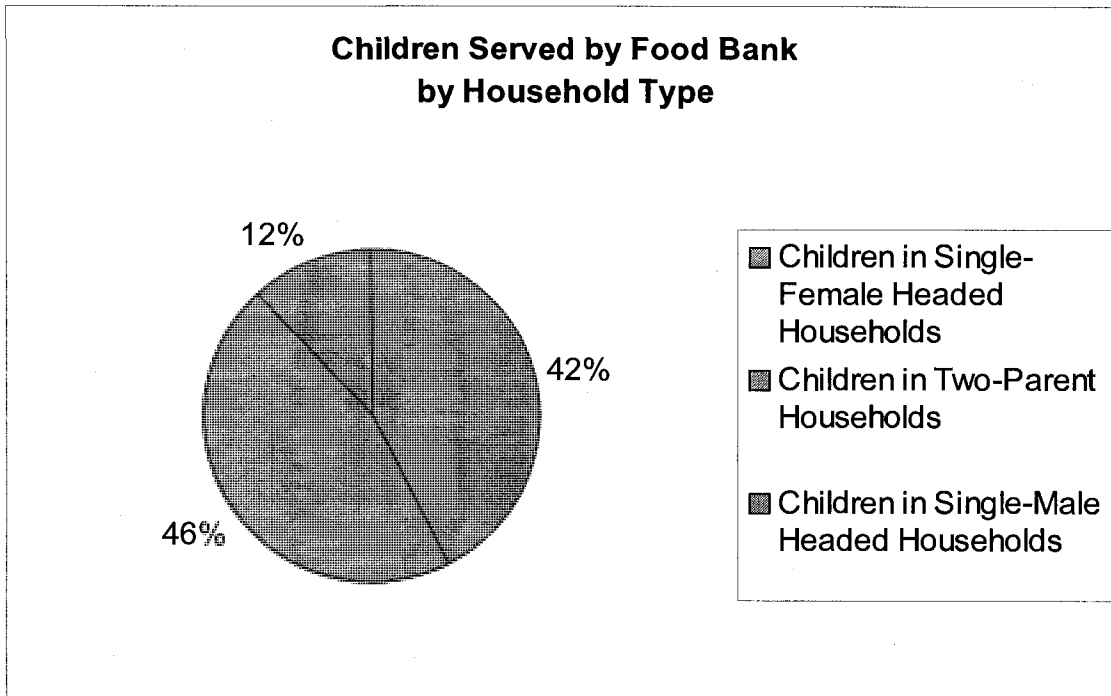
Table 1

eighteen resided in 31 different two-parent households, 101 children resided in 48 different households headed by single parents. This means that over half (53.4 percent)

<sup>35</sup> According to the Canadian Association of Food Banks, more than forty percent of food bank recipients are children (Wilson 1999:1). However, if one were to include the school lunches program in this demographic profile (as well as all other programs of Helping Hands), it is likely that the percentage of food bank clients who were children would be closer to, if not greater than the national average.

of the children benefiting from the food bank resided within single-parent homes, and of these, over 70 percent resided in households headed by a single mother (see Table 2). Furthermore, a portion of the single-male headed families only had their children on the weekends as a result of joint custody; indicating that an even greater number of the children regularly served by the food bank of Helping Hands resided in households with a single mother as the sole breadwinner.

Table 2



These results indicate that single mothers have great difficulty meeting the essential needs of their families. However, a word of caution is in order. As will be illustrated in the accounts of Sheryl and Amy, many mothers are aware that they may qualify for additional resources were they to register as single mothers, rather than as living in a household with two adults, for each household would gain additional days of access to the food bank. Though food baskets are designed according to the number of people in the household, clients are able to take as much fresh bread, produce and desserts as are available for the loss of the second adult's food basket portion. To my knowledge this did not happen. If it did, staff would certainly put an end to the practice



and possibly levy penalties upon the perpetrator (such as losing access to the food bank for a period of time).

The greatest portion of clients resided in households headed by an individual between the ages of 35 and 49. This might reflect the fact that the youngest generation in the household had not yet established a separate dwelling. Another explanation could be that adults in this age group are more likely to have difficulty finding employment, as generally it is harder for persons of middle age or who are nearing retirement to find employment (Townson 2003:37). A third explanation could be that elderly family members had moved in with their children's family after retirement for health reasons or the lack of an adequate pension. I have observed examples of each of these cases during my fieldwork, though can make no assertions as to which is the most common.

## ***Interview Results***

The following narratives are those of the two primary informants of this research project, Sheryl and Amy, as told by them. As always, these accounts are subjective to the narrator, and while others portrayed in these depictions may perceive the events or circumstances to have occurred differently, it is primarily the perspectives of the single mothers that are the focus of this research, as it is the mother who exercises her agency when decisions are made in regards to pregnancy outcomes. These narratives are central to the themes of this thesis, as they demonstrate the multiple factors taken into consideration during the decision-making process by individual actors – the women themselves.

### **Sheryl**

The first interview conducted was with a woman to whom I was introduced through my participant-observation at the food bank of Helping Hands. Sheryl, a forty-nine-year-old mother of five with a high school education, had experienced a pregnancy while being a single mother and relying on welfare payments, but this was not until her fifth and final pregnancy. During her first and second pregnancies carried to term<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Sheryl had experienced her first pregnancy at age 18, though had miscarried. It was her family doctor, who had a long-standing relationship with her family, who treated her for the miscarriage and informed her

Sheryl was unmarried, though after the birth of her second child she married the children's father, Peter, who had been her high school sweet-heart. Sheryl felt that she was pressured into marriage by both her husband's and her own family in an effort to "give the children a name." However, despite all that came after, Sheryl feels that Peter was the "love of her life," and does not regret marrying him.

Upon the birth of their first child, Peter was unemployed and somewhat ambivalent about becoming a parent, feeling that he was too young and ill prepared. However, since Sheryl had had a previous miscarriage, she felt that "it was meant to be." Sheryl, given autonomy, would never elect to have an abortion: partly because of the horror of the one she was pressured to get upon her third pregnancy, but also because she does not believe it to be appropriate for herself (though she is open to abortion for victims of rape and incest). Aside from Peter's anxieties about not having a job, when Sheryl was asked whether she or Peter had any concerns as to providing for the family (beyond the question of his employment), her response was:

that wasn't even in our minds... I [know] really... that's bizarre... It wasn't even on our minds.

Peter soon found steady employment, and thrived in the role of father, something that became essential upon Sheryl's third pregnancy carried to term in which she bore twins. Sheryl was a stay-at-home mom throughout the early childhood of all five children, a decision she does not regret.

Sheryl's marriage to Peter lasted 25 years, although towards the end it became very destructive. After the death of his mother and before the birth of their only son, Peter descended into alcoholism. Prior to this, their marriage had been happy and Sheryl felt that there were multiple people in her community and family to whom she could go for support: whether it be babysitting, financial, or emotional. Yet, towards the end of their marriage, this safety net began to deteriorate. Neighbourhood friends increasingly withdrew support; Sheryl believes this to be in part because they were aware of the

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that she would never carry a child to full term. Soon after the birth of her first child, Sheryl became pregnant once again. In seeking prenatal medical advice from this doctor, Sheryl was informed that she was destined to miscarry and it was strongly recommended that she have an abortion. While Sheryl was very against this idea, both her mother and the doctor "scared" her into having the abortion. Sheryl stated that "I had no choice" in this abortion, despite being legally and adult. It was not until 2002 that Sheryl learned from a cousin that her mother had asked the doctor to pressure her to abort the pregnancy.

problems within the marriage and did not want to take sides. Peter's family developed anger towards Sheryl, blaming her for Peter's alcohol abuse and believing that she was turning the children against their father. Lastly, Sheryl's family moved out west, consequently limiting avenues of support that had previously been available to her. Her family had also become increasingly suspicious when she went to them for financial support. She recollects occasions when she had attempted to turn to her family for monetary aid and been rebuffed with the exclamation: "Why? So you can buy that alcoholic beer?"

When her oldest children grew to be school-aged, Sheryl entertained the idea of going back to work, as she was aware of the growing financial burden on the household. Yet, throughout her attempts to rejoin the workforce (prior to becoming a mother she worked for Bell Canada), Sheryl was consistently informed that her skills were insufficient for the job at hand:

When you're told for many years you're stupid, you're ugly, you-you can't do anything... your education sucks, and that you'll never get a job and all that, but you're told this for years, and I mean years! You lose your confidence in yourself... And then when you do go out for a job, and you're told 'nope, sorry, we'll call you' type things, it was because of French, my French was terrible, and living here you needed French... then another place said, I was so [heavy], it was because of my appearance.

When Sheryl told me she had been turned down for a job because of her appearance, I had replied that this was illegal. Her response was:

Mmmm. I know. You don't know things like, back then, what you could have done... You're ignorant to all that.

Compounding the issue was that this was around the time Peter's alcoholism had taken over and he had become increasingly abusive towards her. Not only was she rejected by possible employers, but their rejection was reinforced by her husband:

then to go home and to [have to say]... 'yeah, you were right Peter, nobody wants me: I'm fat, I'm ugly and I'm stupid.' Because you're told that so many years, it-it was hard.

In experiencing both external rejection from potential employers, and the internal rejection of her husband and family, Sheryl felt as if she were worthless and inept in every way. However this was certainly not the case as through her willingness and

savvy, Sheryl was able to secure essential needs for her family such as food and clothing (Nelson 2002:599).

Sheryl made capable use of food and clothing banks, a strategy she had learned from neighbourhood residents within her social network. The experience of attending the food and clothing banks never troubled Sheryl, and she said that she enjoyed the opportunity to catch up with friends and neighbourhood acquaintances while waiting in line. Sheryl had no complaints about these services at the time she accessed them, although according to clients of Helping Hands, there has been a deterioration in the quality of food offered at many Montreal food banks, as well as increased rudeness and condescension from staff (this was not typically the case at Helping Hands, where clients frequently exclaimed to me 'how nice' the service providers were).

Throughout much of the 1990s Sheryl utilized these services, and it was therefore no great leap in 1996 when she joined a volunteer program resembling workfare and which involved Helping Hands. Owing to new legislation in Quebec, programs were developed for those unemployed but deemed 'fit to work' in which they would volunteer several days a week and receive an additional CAN\$100 in social assistance payments. For almost two years she volunteered at the food bank and was then hired full-time in November of 1998. Sheryl is adamant that her experiences at Helping Hands helped her regain stability:

Coming to Helping Hands... God did they build up my confidence! Now, they gave, Helping Hands has given me back my confidence. A lot! And it wasn't just me: my family, my kids, it's-it's, oh! Damn, yeah!

Through the supportive community of Helping Hands, Sheryl was able to realize that she did not have to stand for the abuse surrounding her home life. The food bank's executive director, Julie, was instrumental in helping Sheryl to see that she had options other than simply to put up with Peter's maltreatment. With this support she was able to end her marriage to Peter.

However, by this point Peter's health had deteriorated to a state where he was incapable of taking care of himself, so that although they were separated, Peter continued to live with Sheryl and their children. Their financial state had worsened quite drastically, with Peter going so far as to borrow money from a loan shark (a debt that Sheryl took

over – and is still paying off – out of fear that Peter’s legs would be broken or that their family would be harmed due to non-payment). During the first years of their separation, Sheryl had no income and qualified for social welfare payments. As a single mother, she could qualify for additional monetary income, providing that there was no partner living in her house; however, Peter continued to live with her. By accepting money intended for single mothers while Peter still resided within the house, her actions qualified as welfare abuse, since she did not meet the criteria of being the sole caregiver and breadwinner in the household. While Sheryl agrees that her behaviour was in fact welfare abuse, she maintains that it would have been impossible for her to get by without it:

I won’t say I’m sorry. I, I can’t say I’m sorry because, Elise, if I didn’t do it, I don’t... It was the only way I was able to survive.

The federal definition of a single parent is based on the premise that there be only one income or welfare check coming to the household. In Sheryl’s case, Peter was also unemployed at the time and receiving a welfare check, which he always made an effort to give to Sheryl towards household expenses. However, when one considers the expenses from Peter’s addiction to cigarettes and alcohol, it becomes apparent that he was withdrawing more money from the family budget than he was putting in:

He would hand his check over and go ‘here you go babe.’ Yeah, Ok. Here’s a man who [consumes] eight king cans a day and three packs of smokes. He thought that \$300 helped cover part of the rent, part of the food, and then all [his costs]? Yeah, right.

This type of welfare abuse appears to be quite common, and was a strategy employed by both mothers interviewed for this project. Interestingly, both identified this behaviour as welfare abuse, but both were adamant that the strategy was necessary. Further discussion of this behaviour and its justifications will be discussed in the section entitled “Amy.”

Reflecting on Sheryl’s situation, it is clear that she was torn between her love for a man who was no longer himself, the desires of her children to be with their father, and the realization that his behaviour was poisonous and destructive and something that she should no longer enable. She did not want to turn Peter out onto the streets, bore her children’s resentment that she had left their father, and was trying to come to terms with the fact that the man she loved was gone. Her children, now in their twenties, have still

not forgiven her for leaving their father; in part because soon after the divorce was finalized she began a relationship with one of his friends, and upon Peter's death (which followed two years after their divorce became formal) her son stopped talking to her for two years.

Today Sheryl works full-time for Helping Hands, coordinating donations received for the facility's various programs, and time has healed many of the wounds felt by her children upon her separation from their father and his subsequent death. Sheryl loves her work and feels that Helping Hands is family, a family that supports her and her children and that she can support in return.

## **Amy**

This project's second in-depth interview was held with Amy, a twenty-six-year-old mother of two. Amy and I were introduced by an employee of Safety's Sake,<sup>37</sup> a child-services organization that has ties to Helping Hands. Amy was a member of the Program for Young Parents operated by Pathways and invited me to attend their collective lunches, as well as the above-mentioned learning circles on poverty.

Amy grew up in a dysfunctional household, with her father using intravenous drugs and only intermittently involved in her life, and her mother struggling with alcoholism. Amy had three siblings: her older brother, who committed suicide at age twenty, when Amy was ten; one sister, two years younger than she and who has been diagnosed as HIV positive;<sup>38</sup> and a brother four years younger who is now attempting to earn his high school diploma. Throughout her childhood, Amy's family frequently moved, both within and between provinces. From the age of five to fifteen, Amy's family moved eleven times, mainly due to monetary problems – particularly the fact that “drug money” was owed and there was a need “to get out of town.”

At the age of twelve, Amy's mother experienced an emotional breakdown, and she moved to live with her father; owing to his drug use, however, she was then moved to a foster home. After running away from the foster home, Amy ended up in a group home, where she resided from age fifteen to sixteen. Upon leaving the group home, Amy

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<sup>37</sup> Safety's Sake provides youth and family services and helps clients to quickly and efficiently access additional social services for which they qualify.

<sup>38</sup> Amy frequently takes care of her sister's little boy due to the strains of the illness on her sister.

moved back to live with her mother, who had by this time recovered. With the transience and instability of her childhood, it is no wonder that Amy had very few people in her social network to whom she could turn to in times of need. She had never had the opportunity to build up a long-term reciprocal relationship.

By the time she moved back to live with her mother, Amy had begun experimenting with drugs with friends from school. Starting in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Amy had begun to smoke marijuana and drink alcohol. She had always been bright and had done well in school; though after she began experimenting with drugs she lost interest in school assignments. Amy had a strong work ethic, and while fifteen and living in the group home, she took on a job cleaning offices in order to buy herself small things like a new pair of Nike sneakers. Although she stayed in school throughout all this, she frequently skipped classes and rarely attended a full day of school. Amy did make it all the way to 11<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, though she still requires a math credit so is technically not a high school graduate. While she would have liked to continue her education, she felt that this was not possible, for by this time she was living on her own and needed to pay her bills.

By the time Amy finished school she had begun using cocaine. She soon after established a relationship with another drug-user, Jason, who not only abused cocaine but also intravenous drugs. Amy and Jason have had a very rocky relationship, due mostly to their drug dependency. While living in New Brunswick, where they moved several years after her graduation, Jason increased his intravenous-drugs use and Amy left to move back to Montreal. At this time she was regularly using cocaine and smoking marijuana. Soon after her return to Montreal, Amy learned that she was pregnant at age twenty-three. She had never given much thought to motherhood, but had always wanted kids; and as a Catholic, she believed abortion to be wrong. Accepting that adoption may be an appropriate resolution to unplanned pregnancy for some women, Amy “personally could not carry a child for nine months and then give it away.”

When asked if the emotional and monetary costs of raising a child had had any impact on her decision, Amy asserted that this had not been a concern for her. She felt that “God doesn’t give me a baby for no reason” and “knew” that she was supposed to have it. As far as her financial concerns, Amy was very realistic about finding a way to

get by. She was fully aware that her pregnancy meant that she would have to go on welfare, as she had not been working at her place of employment long enough to qualify for maternity leave or Employment Insurance, something she accepted quietly and without resentment.

Upon confirmation of her pregnancy, Amy got high on cocaine one last time and then quit; she never experienced withdrawals, which she attributes to her habitual use of marijuana throughout that first pregnancy. While Amy's sister was supportive of her decision to raise the child, her mother and other family members were dissuasive, as they felt that her drug problems made it would inappropriate for her to have a child. Yet Amy stood firm on her decision to "get her life together" and to bear and raise the child.

When her ex-boyfriend Jason learned she was seven months pregnant, he moved back to Montreal to join her, becoming the only father Amy's first-born – Taylor – has ever known.<sup>39</sup> During their time apart, Jason had a relationship in New Brunswick that eventually resulted in three children. However, owing to his intravenous drug use, the mother of these children applied for a court order requiring Jason to stay away. For her part, Amy empathized with Jason's struggles with addiction and was ready to give him a second chance if he stayed clean.

Despite his promises of sobriety, Amy's relationship with Jason continued to be turbulent. When Taylor was nine months old, Amy found herself evicted from her apartment as Jason had "gambled away the rent money." Amy and Taylor moved into a women's shelter and at this point she began accessing social services, in addition to welfare, in an effort to regain some stability. While not formally employed (as she wished to be a full-time mother to Taylor), Amy cleaned office buildings once a week for cash, providing for the bare necessities. While living in the women's shelter Amy successfully petitioned for additional social welfare payments since she resided in a shelter; however she felt that this extra \$100 per month provided her little opportunity to find housing and take care of her daughter. It was at this time that Amy arranged to be put on the waiting list for low-rental housing (also known as subsidized or low-income housing) – a waiting

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<sup>39</sup> Jason was not the biological father of Taylor. Jason was involved throughout the birth and thinks of Taylor as his own child. Amy speaks of Jason as Taylor's father, and Taylor knows of no other father.



list that was three years long.<sup>40</sup> During this period Amy began accessing food and clothing banks to help provide for Taylor and herself. Through her association with the women's shelter, she was able to receive substantial useful information on available social service, which assisted her in regaining some stability, both financially and emotionally.

From the shelter, Amy moved into an apartment, though she did not reside there long, for she had once again begun using cocaine and was evicted. As she put it, at this time it was more important to her to "get a fix than pay the rent or the bills." She quickly secured another apartment, however, for her mother was willing to co-sign the lease. At this point Amy once again made an effort to get clean, and now she had very little choice, for the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (CDPDJ), the youth protection agency, had begun to monitor her behaviour.

At one point Taylor was taken away from Amy by CDPDJ and placed with Amy's mother. However, Amy's mother worked full-time and found herself paying for childcare; a burden both Amy and her mother believe to be unjust. Once Amy had gotten "clean," Taylor was returned to her, but it was mandated that Amy attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings several times a week, during which she was forced to pay for childcare, amounting to \$125 per month. For a single mother employed on a part-time basis in the informal economy,<sup>41</sup> Amy felt this to be an enormous expense.

While Amy struggled to secure the basic necessities for herself and Taylor, she continued to use available social services. In addition to continuing to access food and clothing banks, Amy discovered several organizations that exclusively served young low-income mothers. From these organizations she gained access to babysitting networks, anger-management counselling, and children's activity groups. She became a participant in Pathways' Program for Young Parents, and obtained a paid cooking position within the organization for their twice-weekly lunches.

Jason continues to be a part of her and her children's life, though only sporadically. Two years after the birth of Taylor, Amy bore Arianne, whose biological

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<sup>40</sup> Amy now lives in low-rental housing and has stated that this is one of the resources that has made it possible for her to get by, despite the drawbacks of low-rental housing. A discussion of low-rental housing may be found in the section entitled "Affordable Housing."

<sup>41</sup> Amy had an under-the-table job cleaning office buildings once a week.

father is Jason. While Amy feels that he is a loving father, she has no delusions as to the fragility of his ability to care for both the children and her. At times he has resided with Amy and her children, despite Amy's receiving additional social welfare payments for being a single mother and the sole provider in her household. However, while Amy and Jason co-resided for twelve months, the relationship was quite unstable. Amy realized that her living situation could well change, with her once again becoming the sole household provider. Thus, she believed that it would not be feasible to declare Jason's presence in the household in case she had to "kick him out" again; as it would then take time to get re-enrolled for the additional benefits. Jason still struggles with his drug dependence and Amy has indeed had to ask him to leave on more than one occasion. Recently Amy again severed ties with Jason and as of the writing of the thesis she has no idea as to his whereabouts.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Factors Influencing Childbearing Decisions***

Throughout literature pertaining to childbearing decisions and my experiences conducting field research, it has become unconditionally apparent that there is no one factor that determines the outcome of a pregnancy despite neoliberal claims to the contrary.

Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp assert in their article "The Politics of Reproduction" that childbearing decisions are "always embedded in cultural, theological, and legal frameworks on which the rights and duties of people are individually and collectively based" (1991:316), and that "reproductive decision-making cannot be understood apart from socio-economic phenomena such as ecology, food sources, migration, warfare, and famine which influence the development of cultural patterns of childbearing" (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991:326). These cultural patterns of childbearing in Canadian society are shaped by structural factors akin to Ginsberg and Rapp's "legal frameworks," such as the "distribution of economic, political, and institutional resources"

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<sup>42</sup> At the time of our interview, Amy was romantically involved with Jason, and while they were residing separately, she expressed the desire that they move in together. When we next met about a month later, Amy was in the process of making it clear that she wanted Jason out of her and her children's lives, as he had experienced a relapse in drug use. Several weeks later Amy had not seen or heard from Jason and stated that she had no intentions of finding him. This was the status of their relationship upon my most recent contact with Amy.

that characterize material conditions (Browner 2000:773). Included under variable material conditions are opportunities for employment, class divisions, the nature of healthcare and access to it, and the types of birth control available (Browner 2000:773). Yet it is not solely these structural factors that shape peoples' perceptions of motherhood. These factors are “experienced, interpreted, and made meaningful through specific cultural processes, particularly gender ideologies, norms about morality, and beliefs about how women should behave” (Browner 2000:773). Furthermore,

a woman becomes pregnant within a specific network of social relations, which include her sexual partner or partners, her children, other relatives, neighbours, employers, reproductive health care providers (physicians, midwives, nurses, etc.), birth control manufacturers, and the authorities associated with religious institutions and the state. Browner 2000:773

All of these social relations shape a woman's gender identity and imbue in her an ideal of womanhood from the time she is acculturated into society (Meyers 2001:748; Orlove 2005:358).

## **Contraceptive Use**

It is assumed that women are in direct control of their fertility and rationally “time” their pregnancies. The term “family planning” indicates that the timing of one’s reproduction is a matter of choice (Meyer 2001:736). Through contraceptive use, women are expected to take precautions against an unwanted pregnancy, and therefore avoid the dilemma of an unplanned pregnancy. However, the interviews and conversations I had with low-income single mothers in Montreal support the feminist literature on low-income childbearing, and have indicated to me that financially impoverished women are not as firmly in control of their fertility as some members of the middle class expect them to be.

Montreal residents are provided access to multiple family-planning clinics and birth-control measures through the universal healthcare held by all Canadians. According to my informants, these clinics are located in easily accessible (by metro or bus) areas and are available to low-income women for little or no cost. However, both Sheryl and Amy stated that while they were aware of these services, they had never utilized them.

Neither Sheryl nor Amy was using contraception regularly at the times of their pregnancies, although both explained that they would occasionally use condoms.

Interestingly, when asked who they thought was responsible for initiating contraceptive use during sexual intercourse, both Amy and Sheryl stated that they saw the responsibility to fall solely on the woman. This was not because they believed it to be something that *should* be the woman's responsibility, but rather because their partners expressed very little, if any, interest in practicing "safe sex."

While participating in a conversation that occurred during a meeting of Pathways' Program for Young Parents, the topic turned to a subject that at first appeared peculiar to me. While sitting around a table doing art and craft activities, the mothers attending that day's meeting began to discuss their fears of becoming pregnant again. It struck me during this conversation that the women talked about this fear as if they had no direct control over their fertility. The women were relaxed and somewhat joking, but it was clear that the majority of participants shared these feelings to some degree. I found it surprising that they regularly experienced being "scared" that they had gotten pregnant again.

Many of these women were in heterosexual relationships, and sexual activity was the norm for them. While they presented contraceptive use during all sexual activity as their ideal, Program for Young Parent participants, like the interviewees above, expressed that this was not always their standard practice. One mother, married to her children's father, commented that upon the birth of her second child she had begun to use condoms as her primary method of contraception, but that it was always she who had to instigate the condom use. She said that her husband would "whine" about it, but that once she reminded him of her previous unplanned pregnancies, he grudgingly conceded to using a condom.

Another topic that arose during this conversation was the necessity of consistently taking oral contraception, should that be the preferred method of contraception. Several of the mothers stated that they had trouble remembering to take it everyday, one even saying that this was the reason why she no longer used this form of birth control. All of the women explained that they had used condoms in the past, but that they did not necessarily favour them, and so were inconsistent in demanding that their partners wear

one. While one of the group's members, and several friends of other participants, had used depo-privera<sup>43</sup> in the past, the conversation focused upon this drug's undesirable side effects. All methods of contraception were to some extent found wanting by conversation participants, although they agreed that the difficulty with all forms of contraception was a "price you pay" for sexual activity.

Literature on contraceptive use by single mothers residing in low-income communities emphasizes that, while many of these women characterize their pregnancies as "unplanned," they were not taking any extensive measures to avoid pregnancy (Edin and Kefalas 2005:37, 47). In their study on the prevalence of single motherhood in low-income neighbourhoods, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas explain that, similar to the mothers in Pathways' Program for Young Parents, many of their informants complained about the side effects of contraceptives and stated that they had not found a method of birth control that suits them (2005:38).

Edin and Kefalas go on to discuss other women who were "so deeply engaged in a high-risk lifestyle that they simply [weren't] thinking about where their actions might lead" and that "[d]epression and despondency spawned by difficult life situations sometimes stop[ped] them from caring whether or not they [became] pregnant" (2005:39). This perspective rings true in the case of Amy; when asked whether she was using any contraception at the time of her two pregnancies, she responded that she hadn't because she simply "didn't care." With her drug habit and social circle, Amy was certainly engaged in a "high-risk lifestyle"; much of her behaviour prior to the birth of her first child illustrates just how little she cared about her own safety and future. She stated that while she was aware of free contraceptive services available to her, she had failed to make use of them, as she had no concern for the consequences of her actions.

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<sup>43</sup> Depo-privera is similar to the "Pill" in that it introduces hormones into a woman's system that fool it into thinking that the body is pregnant, thereby avoiding pregnancy. It differs from the pill in the method of administration: while the pill is taken orally on a daily basis, depo-privera is administered in the form of an injection once every three months or so. While oral contraceptives do have side effects, they are much more marked with the use of depo-privera, as the injections provides a huge dose of hormones; often leading to a menstruation period that lasts for over one month.

## **Low-Income Childbearing**

What many members of middle-class society have found most perplexing about low-income single mothers is the preponderance of women who are barely able to maintain their own self-sufficiency, yet who opt to bear and rear children when they become pregnant. Among single women experiencing unplanned pregnancies, it is primarily young women in impoverished socio-economic situations who are most likely to bear and raise the child (Ellison 2003:326).

It should be abundantly clear that the decision to raise a child requires an enormous amount of self-sacrifice. Not only do the mother's desires and goals become secondary, but in addition, the necessity of twenty-four-hour care and nurturance leaves very little time for personal enjoyment. Their time is no longer their own as they put their child's needs before everything else.

During my interview with Amy, she stated that while she was "in love with her kids," she felt that motherhood brought drawbacks. She had "no personal life... never had any money to spend on [herself]," found it impossible to work or to go back to school, and always felt "tired" and "frustrated." While these are certainly the realities of motherhood, it leaves me wondering whether women in precarious social and economic situations have any honest realization of these coming obligations.

During an interview with Carol, the Program Coordinator of Head Start, she related her experiences with young women living at the low-income level during their first pregnancy, who looked to the facility for support. Carol informed me that while discussing with her clients whether or not to bear and keep the child, the underlying theme was much greater than "can I support myself?" According to Carol, there was an observable increase in "confidence" among these women as a result of their pregnancy, that the experience of pregnancy seemed to assuage the young women's feelings of incompetence and to instil within them a sense of self-confidence, with their identity growing "in a positive light." In explaining this trend, Carol suggested that it arose owing to the extra attention often lavished upon pregnant women that resulted in increased self-pride. Others "fussed" over them, she noted, and they were excused from work and everyday chores, and there was a distinct sense of being special. This

observation by Carol has been echoed throughout literature on early pregnancy: “I like it when people notice I’m having a baby. It gives me a good feeling inside and makes me feel important” (Musick 1993:109).

However, such positive personal growth often expires once the child is born. The mother’s special treatment shifts to the new baby, and now the mother not only loses the attention, but she further must begin making sacrifices of self in light of her new responsibilities as a mother. During our interview, Carol stated that several clients had related to her that they “loved being pregnant – that was a wonderful experience – it was everything that came after” that they did not enjoy; that they “wish they could have been pregnant, but that the baby never came out.” This suggests to me that many young low-income mothers have unrealistic expectations of motherhood or that they cannot see beyond the moment to plan for future circumstances.

Yet despite unrealistic expectations, mothers point to the opportunity for enriching and joyful events that children provide them. As mentioned above, Amy stated that she was “in love with her kids,” going on to say that they were “the best thing that ever happened” to her, that “watching them grow and develop” was “the most rewarding job [she] could ever do.” She now had someone “to love and be loved by” unconditionally. This family was her “own,” it was “hers,” something for which she was completely responsible and in which she could take pride.

Interestingly, the language used by both Amy and Sheryl to describe their feelings towards their children are echoed word for word in numerous ethnographic accounts of motherhood: “one friend told me she wanted someone to love and be loved by” (Rowbotham 1989:85);

This sense of pride in identity as a mother has been discussed in literature on low-income childbearing (Meyers, 2000:750; Ellison, 2003:323). Musick, using the approach of “psychological ethnography”<sup>44</sup> when focusing on teenage pregnancy, comments that this sense of creation and pride in ownership may help to build a stronger identity for many women. She notes that in the lives of young low-income women, there is no more direct or accessible pathway to “achievement, identity, and intimacy” than motherhood

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<sup>44</sup> “Psychological ethnography” is an approach that Miller and Sperry have described as “seeking and validating patterns through the use of various sources of evidence.” Commenting on this, they state that each type of data raises questions about the interpretation of the other” (1987:6)

(1993:110). Musick goes on to comment, “when these girls get pregnant, they opt for motherhood because it offers them a ready-made role and ready-made function, a sense of what to be and what to do” (1993:114).

Yet one may wonder why low-income women are so willing to embrace this path to identity and worth when gaining a solid education could potentially have led them to endless opportunities in fulfilling employment and personal enjoyment. However, as Meyer notes, the perceptions of young women from economically impoverished neighbourhoods regarding their wants and how to fulfill them are “contorted and cramped by structures of domination and subordination” (2001:738). We would like to think that every human comes into this world as a *tabula rasa*; that within each life there is a potential to succeed professionally, academically, financially, and socially. And yet there are many structural reasons why motherhood may be the most appealing path to achievement and need fulfillment for these women. And in order to understand the rationalization for low-income childbearing, it is necessary to “accommodate the realities of enculturation and unconscious desire” pervasive in the young woman’s background (Meyer 2001:743).

Women raised in low-income households have experienced many barriers to mainstream, middle-class values: surrounded by others in similarly precarious economic situations, they are acculturated into a value-system that differs in many respects to that of the middle class (Ensminger 1995:348, 356). It is likely that their mother and/or father had low educational attainment and worked long hours, and that they grew up in an environment offering plentiful opportunities for risky behaviour: “rampant drug or alcohol abuse, lack of identification with mainstream culture, acceptance of welfare dependency, defeatism about job prospects, tolerance for interpersonal violence, and comfort with sexual or other misbehaviour” are common features of impoverished communities (Musick 1993:32, 37). Unfavourable environmental conditions during childhood have the potential to “trigger variations” in the child’s “life cycle and shift developmental trajectories” as the child adapts to the conditions of its environment (Berezkei and Csanaky 2001:501). Under these conditions, teens are prone to engage in early sexual activity; to adopt opportunistic mating strategies rather than parenting strategies; and to emphasize quantity rather than quality (Berezkei and Csanaky



2001:507).<sup>45</sup> These findings imply that adverse childhood environments create the potential to perpetuate the ‘cycle of poverty:’

The experiences of preadolescence shape the girl’s self-image and concepts about who she is and what she can do. If these experiences teach her that she exists merely to be used by or to do for others, her desire and ability to achieve will be diminished. Instead of an inner assurance that she can make things happen, she will be convinced that she cannot. In place of competence, she will feel defeat before she begins. Musick 1993:47

Particularly for a younger woman who has yet to establish her identity apart from parents or guardians, there is a desire to seek autonomy without sacrificing attachment to the world she knows, the familiarity of her childhood environment.

Processes of identity are psychological invariants, common human qualities. No matter where an adolescent lives or what her social class or ethnic group, she shares with all other humans the need to know who she is in relation to the world of others, to feel a progressive continuity between what she was, what she is, and what she perceives others to see in her and expect from her. Musick 1993:63

When a young woman becomes a mother, it is

because it fits with her internal sense of who she is and what she can do, her externally derived awareness of what else is available to her, and because the ceaseless interweaving of these inner and outer forces tells her that the emotional costs of doing – or trying to do – otherwise are going to be too high... [Young financially impoverished women] fail to make use of options other than motherhood not only because fewer are actually available but also because even those that are may threaten to estrange her from all or most of the emotionally significant people in her life, the people who confer and validate her sense of identity. Musick 1993:65-66

There is an inherent need to be like other “emotionally significant people” in one’s life (Musick 1993:66). A woman raised in a low-income environment can find it comforting to be like her mother, sisters, and friends, many of whom may be pregnant or are already single mothers. By bearing a child, she is able to avoid the risk of change or ostracism. She is avoiding the potentially fragmenting experience of individuation and psychological separation from her primary attachment figure, her mother, while still maintaining a direct path to adult status and societal worth. Through motherhood, she will have opportunities to realize her competence in a “new and highly valued role

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<sup>45</sup> Interestingly fertility is heightened for females who grew up in an unfavourable family environments, though not for males (Bereczkei and Csanaky 2001:505).

around which she can reorganize herself,” with her identity transforming through the process of becoming a parent (Musick 1993:111-112).

Yet this direct path to a valued and socially recognized adult position is not a given; it is still something for which one must “struggle and strive” and “the harder the struggle, the higher the social reward the community bestows” (Edin and Kefalas 2005:65). Should a woman bear a child, yet not adhere to her sub-culture’s norms of parenting, she faces chastisement from her social network and family.

The notion of “being there” is a key element of a ‘good mother,’ invoked during my interview with Amy and documented within literature on low-income childbearing. This appears to be an important component of the valued position of mother in low-income neighbourhoods.<sup>46</sup>

In their work on the decline of marriage among low-income single mothers living in a number of impoverished neighbourhoods of Philadelphia and New Jersey, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas conducted a five-year study consisting of both participant-observation and interviews. Through their conversations with low-income single mothers, Edin and Kefalas built a set of criteria for those who could be deemed “bad” versus “good” mothers within these impoverished communities: A mother who consistently leaves her child with others, including the child’s grandmother, could be considered a “bad mother” (2005:146). During a discussion with their informant Cindi, a mother of two toddlers, she states:

I know a couple of people that they just have kids and their moms take care of them or they leave them [with their moms] all the time and go out.... Someone that’s not there for their kids the way they *need* to be, I think that’s a bad mother. Edin and Kefalas, 2005:145

While a good mother is “there” for her children constantly, meeting necessary obligations, such as employment and education, which take her away from her children are deemed acceptable; what is not perceived as acceptable is consistently leaving a child with others for frivolous reasons, such as “partying” (Edin and Kefalas, 2005:145).

During a discussion with Angela, a low-income single mother who volunteers at Helping Hands, the topic of Quebec’s \$7 a-day daycare program arose. In order for a

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<sup>46</sup> Low-income neighbourhoods can be defined as having more than 40 percent of inhabitants in the low-income category (Statistics Canada 2004).

mother to have access to this service, she must first register on a waiting list because of the limited number of spaces available for children in subsidized daycare. Due to the long period of time it may take for a child's turn to come up on the waiting list (in Amy's case, she was on the waiting list for three years before being able to take advantage of this program), mothers will often apply for the \$7 a-day daycare the moment they learn they are pregnant. However, sending children to daycare may garner accusations of welfare abuse. During my discussion on childcare services with Angela, she asserted that some unemployed mothers utilized the \$7 a-day daycare simply to avoid spending time with their child. From her perspective, these mothers were simply shirking their mothering responsibilities and instead allowing their children to be raised by others. In her mind, this behaviour qualified as abuse of a service only intended for working mothers.

Angela's example of a "bad mother" is quite similar to Cindi's statement above. Mothers who enrol in and use Quebec's subsidized daycare without necessity due to employment or education, may be deemed to have left their child for "frivolous" reasons. They are not "being there" for their children during the early developmental years, something that many other low-income mothers find inexcusable, for the mother is not leaving them for reasons that would in the end be beneficial. She is not earning money or a degree that could one day help to support them, but is taking time off from parenting, her primary responsibility. With the limited number of spaces in Quebec's subsidized daycare system, some considered it to be an abuse of the service if the mother were to be using it as a "babysitting service" so she could "go hang out with her friends."

Similar to "being there," having "clean" and well-dressed children is another hallmark of a good low-income mother. Again, my interview with Amy as well as relevant literature shows that cleanliness for children when in public is a necessary trait for a good mother. Edin and Kefalas interviewed Danielle, a mother of two pre-adolescent daughters, and during their discussion Danielle states that in her view a "bad mother" is

Someone who don't take care of their kids, they don't care if they go to school clean or dirty, with clean or dirty clothes on... I work my *butt* off to give 'em clothes--and new clothes at that. That's why I always make sure that they have

nice clean clothes on [with] no holes. They may not be the best clothes... but they look fair. Edin and Kefalas 2005:146

Building upon the theme of having “clean” children is the idea that if anyone in the household should look dishevelled, it should be the mother: “The norm of self-sacrifice is so strong that a woman risks social censure if she has nicer clothing than her children” (Edin and Kefalas 2005:147). Aleena, a seventeen-year-old single mother of two sons, portrayed in the study by Edin and Kefalas, states:

I can't see my son walking around with Payless sneaker on with me walking around with Nikes or Reeboks or something. My *son* is gonna have Nikes and Reeboks on. *I'll* wear the Payless shoes. My son will always come before me. 2005:147-8

Edin and Kefalas state that the purchase of name-brand clothing and shoes, while beyond the financial provisions of welfare, is a priority in the household budget for the women they studied: A ‘good mother’ understands how “socially potent” name brands can be within school hallways and among their children’s peer groups, and she seldom forgets the “sense of longing and social shame from their own impoverished childhoods” (Edin and Kefalas 2005:146). The mothers expressed the belief that a child who feels deprived of certain things will be more likely to abandon the “righteous path” provided to them through education and hard work:

They are not getting what they want at home, so they go out on the corner [to sell drugs] and then they get locked up... and that's not a life for them... But if they are not getting it at home they say they got to get it from *somewhere*, and so they go on the corner, and they sell drugs, and that is bad. Edin and Kefalas 2005:148

While many middle-class Canadians might wonder why low-income single mothers should spend disproportionate amounts of their meagre household budgets on name-brand clothing, shoes, and accessories (therefore increasing their need for services such as the food bank), they are doing so in order to be acknowledged within their communities as a “good mother.” Furthermore, by foregoing the mother’s own desires in clothing and instead opting to transpose her beliefs about clothing items with status onto her child, she is showing that she is willing to struggle so that her children may be raised “right”:

Chanel, a white mother of three, hold[s] up [her own]... dirty sneakers, worn sweats, and threadbare coats as proof of [her] devotion to [her] children.  
Edin and Kefalas 2005:148

Yet while these mothers perceive themselves as making great sacrifices by buying their children expensive clothing and shoes, many people of the middle class perceive those expenses to be frivolous and yet another example of the backward priorities of low-income people.

In her 1993 work, Musick comments that while transformational experiences, such as early childbearing and “struggling and striving” for one’s children, are an inherent part of personal growth, they become problematic “when they cannot be satisfied in ways that our [middle-class] society values and rewards” (1993:120). Childbearing by low-income single mothers is a prime example of ways in which the value-systems of the middle class and those of low-income persons are at odds: the mere lack of comprehension expressed by the middle class for the preponderance of low-income single mothers exemplifies the discordant views.<sup>47</sup>

While socio-economic factors such as limited opportunities, low income, and unemployment can and do act as barriers to young women who might instead seek forms of need satisfaction other than childrearing, are these factors wholly accountable for this motivation toward motherhood? In order to answer this question, it is important to understand why motherhood appeals to a young low-income single woman. In doing so, it is necessary to take into account the cultural norms, values and behaviours found within a low-income community.

When discussing with a friend the preponderance of motherhood among young low-income single women, I was confronted with the notion that better education (both sex education and academic learning) would prevent the large number of women unexpectedly becoming pregnant at a young age, as it would provide them with a better

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<sup>47</sup> In a 2001 study by Steven D. Levitt and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh the authors investigated the economic and social histories of young males residing in high-rise housing projects of Chicago. In this work the authors come across a puzzling correlation: an individual who is considered a hard worker, serious about school, who stayed out of trouble and was well liked was positively associated with illegal income, in addition to there being a strong negative relationship between the above-mentioned factors and legal income. Opinions of the individual’s behavioural traits were based on the assessments of community workers (teachers, clergy, social workers, etc.) who knew the individual while growing up. In explaining this unusual correlation, the authors suggest that the “assessments of such traits by community members may not correspond to the views of broader society” (Levitt and Venkatesh 2001:82).

understanding of their options and a more concrete path to what the middle class would consider “a successful future.” However, while a resource such as education might be objectively available, there is no guarantee that for the woman it is psychologically available:

Thus, if a girl has been socialized from early in her life to view motherhood as the principle arena in which she can expect to satisfy her basic needs, she may be unwilling or unable to seriously consider other opportunities. Under these circumstances, the psychological costs of the alternate route may be too high, and the journey too lonely. Musick 1993:120

Therefore, if members of a young women’s peer group or social network rebel against the educational system and are unwilling (or unable) to engage in learning that could potentially result in a different life-trajectory, a teen may feel that participation in educational school or youth centre activities is not only undesirable but also an option not open to her.

Furthermore, if resources that could potentially result in upward mobility are not psychologically available to the woman, she may experience no diminished opportunities by opting to rear a child:

Some low-income teenagers actively choose pregnancy and do not experience diminished life trajectories. For some, the choice can be a positive and readily available route to adult status, given the lack of viable education and job opportunities, combined with supportive extended families and community networks. Ginsberg and Rapp, 1991:320

Interestingly, many low-income women who experience unplanned pregnancies and who opt to bear and raise the child believe that if it were not for their pregnancy they would be “dead,” or at least worse-off, and that their children were literally the only opportunity with which they had ever been presented to lead a meaningful life. Amy serves as a perfect example of this phenomenon. When she learned of her pregnancy with Taylor, she had been consistently using cocaine and other narcotics and was “running” with a bad crowd. While she stated that she had always been “good in school,” Amy commented that upon entering high school she was more interested in hanging out with her friends, skipping class, and smoking pot or drinking with them than in the opportunities the education system could offer her. Yet after years of this lifestyle, her seemingly aimless existence was completely reoriented when she took on the role of

mother. It provided her with a worthy reason to “get clean” and something she was willing “struggle” for. Had she not become pregnant, Amy has no idea where she would be today: when she was asked this question she replied, “I don’t know, dead?”

In the study completed by Edin and Kefalas, a twenty-seven-year-old mother of three, Millie, was asked what she believed her life would be like had she not borne her children. Like Amy, Millie believed that her children proved to be much more of a stabilizing factor than a hindrance in her financially impoverished life:

My kids, they’ve matured me a lot. If I hadn’t had them and had gone to college, I probably would have gotten introduced to the wrong crowd, and would have gotten lost because of the drugs and stuff... Maybe I need my kids [to keep me safe]. They come first. I’ve... stayed off drugs for them, and they’ve helped me grow up... I can’t picture myself without them. Edin and Kefalas 2005:169-70

Members of the middle class tend to believe that for women like Amy and Millie, both they and their children would be much better off if the mothers first established a career and a secure economic-base before bearing children. This would not only lessen the burden on the governmental welfare and social services systems, but would allow the women to be better mothers (Edin and Kefalas 2005:171). This conviction exposes a vast gap in the middle class’s understanding of the realities of low-income communities. If education and secure employment were as openly available to low-income women as the middle class appears to believe, this theory would make sense. However, when one investigates the lives led by low-income mothers *prior* to the birth of their first child (when they could theoretically be pursuing a higher education, technical training, or a career that offers opportunity for advancement), it become apparent that these options are not being pursued by the women who eventually opt for early motherhood.

It appears that for low-income women, the experience of pregnancy “matures” them, as Millie claimed above. A plausible reason might be that as a woman’s body changes throughout her pregnancy, so do the behavioural cues she receives from her social network. If the expecting mother behaved in a way inappropriate for a pregnant woman, she faced chastisement from her peer group and family (Edin and Kefalas 2005:53). For example, if a pregnant mother were spotted by a friend or acquaintance drinking alcohol, she would likely be rebuked as irresponsible or a bad mother, and word would spread around her social circle: “she must endure the piercing social censure

contained in the disapproving glances and contemptuous whispers of acquaintances and strangers alike” (Edin and Kefalas 2005:53). Prior to her pregnancy, the woman’s risky behaviour might have led to distain and disappointment from *some* members of her social network, but risky behaviour as a pregnant mother definitely elicits distain from *all* members of her social network.

These social sanctions surely play a role in guiding a pregnant woman towards appropriate conduct, “for the sake of the baby,” and provide cues for what she must do to fulfill the role admirably and successfully (Edin and Kefalas 2005:53).

### **Needs Fulfilled Through Motherhood**

In their “value-of-children” theoretical model, Hoffman and Hoffman lay out nine basic values or needs that are fulfilled through parenthood, each based on rudimentary psychological needs, which may be magnified or reduced according to the cultural and socio-economic background of an individual (1973:27). Included in this model is an “alternative hypothesis” that asserts that individuals or groups who have limited accesses to other forms of need satisfaction will value parenthood and childrearing more highly.

The nine basic needs that may be fulfilled through parenthood as presented by Hoffman and Hoffman are as follows:

1. Adult status and social identity. The need to be accepted as a responsible and mature adult member of the community.
2. Expansion of the self. The need to have someone who carries on for oneself after one’s death, as well as the need to have new growth and learning experiences and to add meaning to life.
3. Moral values. Need for moral improvement, including becoming less selfish and learning to sacrifice, making a contribution to society, or satisfying one’s religious requirements.
4. Primary group ties and affection. The need to express affection and attain intimacy with another person, as well as be the recipient of such feelings from someone else.
5. Stimulation and fun. The need to experience the interest and excitement that children provide.



6. Achievement and creativity. The need for accomplishment and creativity that come from having and raising children, and watching them grow.
7. Power and influence. The need to have influence over another person.
8. Social comparison. The need for the prestige that comes through favourable comparison of one's children with the children of others.
9. Economic utility. The need to have children to help with the parent's work or to contribute to the family income. 1973:29

While none of the women with whom I interacted so clearly articulated the role of children in satisfying their needs, this model rings true upon reflection of their narratives. Sheryl recounts her feelings towards her first child:

It was just this thought of another human being and, I don't know, I was just amazed by it all. And like what I could offer this child. And I was... *very* amazed by this thing.

Interestingly, Sheryl had no desire to bear children prior to learning of her first pregnancy, yet she verbally articulated that her children were "the best thing that ever happened to me."

When Sheryl experienced her first pregnancy, she was eighteen years old, still living in her parental home, and unmarried. Amongst school friends she had flatly stated that she would never have a child:

I didn't want kids, I didn't want anything to do with kids. Nope. No. And then when I got pregnant, it all changed. (Laughs).

It "all changed" to such a great extent that when I asked her what her ideal number of children was she replied:

Ten... I wanted my own baseball team... Well, I don't believe in that still now, but see back then... You could always, I don't want to say scrounge up a meal, but you could always find food.

Sheryl, a life-long resident of Montreal, experienced her first pregnancy in the late 1970's, bearing five children by the mid 1980's. She reflects that the social services available to her while she was mothering young children were not as extensive as they are today:

I think there's more offered to people on social assistance now than there was when I was a mother.

This may appear contradictory to her prior statement about always being able to find food while mothering young children, but from her experiences, Sheryl believes that communities in Montreal have changed a great deal over the last twenty years. A similar sentiment was expressed by informants participating in a study on low-income single mothers in Ontario:

When asked how the conditions of women living on welfare have evolved during the last decade, all respondents answered that prejudice, racism, discrimination and the deterioration of living conditions have increased, as has the demand for food, money and housing.... directly affect[ing] the services and practices of many community organizations. Michaud 2004:280

The increased need has increased the demand on community organizations and NGOs, so that even though more services are offered today than were ten or twenty years ago, the larger number of people accessing them has decreased the quality of services and their ability to meet recipients' individual needs.

The neighbourhood in which Sheryl was raised and where she raised her own children has undergone a transformation; not especially in a visual sense, but in feelings of community ties. Sheryl recollects that as a child her mother and father lent money, sugar, or eggs to their neighbour; that everyone knew their neighbours; and that there were communal feelings of camaraderie and togetherness among those living on her street. While she recalls that social welfare recipients lived in her neighbourhood, her locality did not yet have the stigma of being a "poor" area that it does today: "Thieves and robbers and all that, is what [this neighbourhood is now] known for." People then felt safe in the vicinity of their homes and were not suspicious of those surrounding them. However, Sheryl feels that this is no longer the case for this neighbourhood:

Hey, we were able to go to sleep with our doors unlocked back then... I mean and in the summer we were able to go to sleep and leave our doors *open*... Try that now!

In a conversation prior to our formal interview, Sheryl had related to me that towards the end of her marriage (during the late 1990s) she had found her neighbours unwilling to lend her even a cup of sugar or a loaf of bread. At this time, her husband had descended

into rampant alcoholism, was no longer employed, and was frequently abusive. Ironically, if she had gone to a neighbour asking for a “king can” of beer for her husband Peter, they would have consented; something that may be attributed to the prevalence of alcoholism in this neighbourhood. Sheryl recalls that if Peter didn’t have his “eight king cans a day” there was a possibility that things would become loud and potentially violent at her house. She believes the neighbours were aware of this and would therefore appease the cravings of an alcoholic, but not the needs of his hungry wife and children:

Go and ask ‘I want money for milk and bread’ – No. Go and ask them for money for Petey. Petey needs a king can... They knew if he didn’t get his king can, they knew how he would be. And he would take it, he would take it out on me, yellin’ and screamin.’

I believe that this account is representative of the weakening of community ties and growing distrust experienced in many low-income urban areas (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991:320). In discussing the apparent breakdown of supportive extended families and community networks, Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp assert:

The socio-economic crises currently threatening many low-income communities with increased unemployment, poverty, homelessness, as well as AIDS and drug epidemics, have severely disrupted these support networks. 1991:320

In the void where community cohesion and extended family support once stood, it has now fallen to both governmental and private social service to sustain the low-income family.

### ***Tree of Problems***

As mentioned above, Amy presented me with the opportunity to attend and participate in the concluding “learning circle” of a series of focus groups organized around themes of poverty by the NGO KARE. Consisting of members of Pathways’ Program for Young Parents, these learning circles offered participants the opportunity to contribute to the national dialogue on issues faced by young parents.<sup>48</sup> After preliminary introductions by all participating members, the learning circles took a format addressing one sub-theme of poverty at each meeting. The themes discussed were: mental illness,

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<sup>48</sup> A report is being written by KARE based on these learning circles and will be presented to Parliament in Ottawa. Several participants of the learning circles have been asked to accompany KARE in the delivery and discussion of this report.

the cost of healthy eating, affordable housing, education, and ways in which welfare prevents recipients from “getting ahead.” While all of the above topics are pertinent to the plight of single mothers, I will only elaborate on the latter three as those are specifically related to the theme of this thesis.

During each learning circle Stephanie, the organizer from KARE, would draw a tree, with the “problem” to be discussed labelled on the trunk: this is what was called a “Tree of Problems.” She would then ask each of the participants their thoughts on the issue at hand. Examples of problems would be labelled on the leaves, supposed “root causes” of the problems would be labelled on the tree’s roots, and potential solutions would be drawn around a watering can. The results were extremely illustrative of the ways each of the learning circle’s participants perceived the issues discussed.<sup>49</sup>

## **Affordable Housing**

When discussing the Affordable Housing Tree of Problems, participants brought up issues that were in many cases related to the “ghettoization” of subsidized housing (known in Quebec as low-rental housing). While rents are increasing throughout the city of Montreal, income support payments are not increasing at the same rate. As a result, a growing number of single parents find it difficult to obtain affordable housing.<sup>50</sup> For some, the only option has been to get on the waiting list for low-rental housing, which in Amy’s case proved to be three years long. This long waiting list was discussed by the participants of the learning circles,<sup>51</sup> who agreed that ideally there should not be a waiting list, that qualifying for welfare should be criterion enough for public housing. They expressed the concern that most of the establishments offering subsidized housing are in “ghetto” areas that are dangerous places to be raising children, and also that the dwellings are quite “run down” (structural damage). This opinion mirrors that of single mothers living in “housing projects” in Northern Florida: “The women who lived there

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<sup>49</sup> While I would have liked to provide readers with copies of the original “Tree of Problems,” they are the property of KARE and Stephanie asked that I not use their images as KARE has not completed its report on the learning circles nor had the opportunity to take them to Ottawa.

<sup>50</sup> Montreal is the only city in Canada where a single mother with one child, working at minimum wage, can afford average-priced apartments (National Council for Welfare 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Amy was a participant in all of these learning circles.

characterized the projects as noisy, lacking in privacy, in disrepair, full of loiterers, and breeding grounds for drug use and other illegal activities” (Seccombe et al. 1998:857).

Participants also noted that, given the low amount of income support payments, they feel that they have no choice but to occupy housing that is sub-standard, making them feel even more “inferior” or further marginalized. By residing in these shoddy residences, they believe they garner additional stigma as welfare recipients, drawing great disdain for the unkempt and haphazard appearance of their dwellings.

Participants attributed the roots of this problem to lie in the lack of understanding the middle class has for their situation:

The Government doesn’t see poverty like we do... they live in Westmount.<sup>52</sup>  
Come and see where we live for a change!

They believe that “the government doesn’t care,” that “tax payers are angered” by the notion of paying for the needs of low-income single mothers, and that there is a mainstream belief that welfare recipients should “Be happy with what you’ve got.”

These sentiments are not unique to learning circle participants:

It’s so bizarre that the people who make the decisions regarding how we manage, you know, like... we live at a level of such survival.... The people making the decisions that dictate our lives, have lives that we can’t even imagine. They go on vacations every year and they have pensions. They make policies but they don’t have to live with them. Doe and Rajan 2003:65

The lack of comprehension exhibited by policy makers concerning the realities of raising a child in a low-income community is compounded by the fact that while there may be additional services available to single mothers, legislated by well-meaning politicians, these programs can sometimes be completely inaccessible, simply because potential applicants have little or no awareness of them (Doe and Rajan 2003:63). Learning circle participants explained that they felt there was “a lack of education and resources” on low-rental housing and its alternatives<sup>53</sup> and that many did not have the “energy” or “self-esteem” necessary to untangle the bureaucracy that could get them immediate low-rental housing.

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<sup>52</sup> Westmount is an upper-class neighbourhood of Montreal that is relatively close to the downtown area.

<sup>53</sup> One of the single mothers participating in the learning circle was a member of a housing cooperative. Once she had joined the cooperative and paid the accompanying fees, this cooperative provided her with an apartment at a much lower rent than is typical in her neighbourhood.

In proposing solutions to this problem, learning circle participants suggested “mix us up with others” – intersperse low-rental housing with regular housing; possibly by having apartment buildings, owned by the government, providing low-rental housing *as well as* leasing to full-paying tenants. This would remove the “ghetto” stigma of many low-rental housing recipients as well as allowing them to feel safe in their residential neighbourhoods. Another potential solution proposed was that the government directly subsidize individual landlords for a certain number of apartments that would be mandated to house those who qualify for low-rental housing (possibly offering the landlord some form of a tax break). In addition, the mothers believed that it was their responsibility to be proactive; they favoured further education offered to those in similar situations on issues such as tenant’s rights. They suggested a number of means: through participation in workshops, accessing information on the Internet, and information-sharing among themselves and other like-minded people. Other options that were discussed were protesting and sending pictures and letters to government officials so that Parliament and the public might gain a better understanding of their lives and situations.

## **Education**

Tied to the problem of low-rental housing and the ghettoization of low-income neighbourhoods is the issue of public education. In Montreal the school one’s child attends is determined by the parent’s area of residence. Should a parent not be able to afford the costs of private school, their only option is for the child to attend the school zoned for their area. Learning Circle participants expressed the firm belief that “good education costs too much money.” As a result, many expressed dissatisfaction with the education available to their children.

One of the problems related to education that participants cited was the low pay of teachers, which, the mothers felt, led them to lose any sense of dedication. This is a belief also expressed during my interview with Sheryl:

It’s gone downhill. The teachers don’t care anymore. The parents and volunteers are takin’ over... you have volunteers, like lunch monitors, yellin’ at kids, screamin’ at kids... [sic]

Children most everywhere tend to find the stringent regiment of education unappealing, yet many middle-class schools and parents have the means to put the spark of enjoyment and creativity back into the process. However, within low-income communities there is much less of a chance that teachers or parents are able to offer their children creative and fulfilling activities alongside the basic subjects of math, science, English, French, and social studies (Doe and Rajan 2003:65). It is more likely that the school works within a meagre budget and is thus unable to provide the more exciting and creative art and physical education activities, while also being unable to afford hiring more teachers. Sheryl believes that with an insufficient number of teachers and an ever-growing student body, classes are so large that teachers spend much of their time simply maintaining order within the classroom. It is for these reasons that participants in the learning circle believe that “we are continuing to educate the educated:” that is, those who have shown a propensity for education will continue to succeed, while children who show any aversion to schooling will be left by the wayside (Seccombe 1998:209). Faced with this dilemma, members of the middle class might opt to enrol their child in after-school arts or sports programs, perhaps hiring a tutor should a school subject become a difficulty; however, these options are only open to those who have the money to pay for them and the time necessary to deliver and pick up their child from such facilities.

Learning circle participants attribute the insufficiencies of the educational system to “who makes the decisions.” They believe that only a fraction of the people introducing and voting on education in the provincial and federal legislature actually have children in the public education system. This is the reason why it is so under-funded and appears to be going “downhill”: because the voices of those who actually use and rely on the system remain unheard. While one of the goals of the learning circles has been to bring these voices into the public domain, the participants also had additional suggestions. One was to find a “host family” whose address they could give as their own so that their child might be registered in a preferred school zone. Another was to promote legislature granting parents the ability to choose their child’s school zone. Their final suggestion was that teachers be paid more, although they are aware that much greater attention needs to be drawn to the issue to make this feasible.

## **You Can “Never Get Ahead on Welfare”**

Echoing throughout all fieldwork and interviews conducted for this project was the frustration of welfare recipients at not being able to “get ahead.” During the learning circles, one of the most common topics was the paltry amount paid by income support – providing only for bare necessities – and then the immediate reduction or total cancellation of income support payments once the head of household found employment.

Participants commented that while on welfare, the money paid to them was too little to permit savings and building a financial safety-net; that it is “not even enough to consider saving.” This sentiment was echoed in a 2001 study focusing on the impact of available employment on single mothers in Canada: one informant stated that in relying on welfare for household income “It’s a situation of survival – not of living” (Stephenson and Emery 2003:1). In response to the concerns voiced regarding the paltry amount provided by income support, policy-makers argue that welfare payments must remain below wage rates in order to provide an incentive for recipients to move into the paid workforce (Harris and Manning 2005:36).<sup>54</sup> Yet as soon as recipients found employment and could potentially have started to save money, payments were reduced or revoked owing to the increased household income (Doe and Rajan 2003:53). The mothers commented that the jobs for which they left welfare were frequently undesirable and paid little more than income support payments, so that they never had an opportunity to save money:

One worry that I have... being a single mom and being on welfare and working was the need to put a little money aside for when I’m old, and that’s still hard... and now I’m working, there’s not enough money to put away. What’s going to happen? You know, where am I going to.... By the time I get to 65 there’s nothing in the pension plan. Doe and Rajan 2003:69

Learning circle mothers expressed exasperation with the fact that many of the jobs they were able to attain paid the same, if little more, than welfare, and expressed the notion that it was “pointless to work – [one earns the] same amount [as that provided by income support] when working.” While this statement appears telling as to the work-ethic of the learning circle’s participants, it is important to note that more than half were employed at

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<sup>54</sup> “Welfare rates are far, far below... the poverty line” or LICO (National Council of Welfare 2004).



least part-time. In stating this they were not saying “this is why I don’t work,” but rather “I bust my ass and look where this gets me!” It is not that receiving income support encourages laziness or dependency, but rather that the welfare system has built-in disincentives or penalties for work; particularly in relation to minimum wage labour and the additional social benefits that are lost once one returns to the workforce (Seccombe et al. 1998:859).

In addition, learning circle participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy of the welfare system. They felt there were “too many rules” and that the “need to report everything [in the household’s income]” was a huge drain on their time, not to mention the condescension they experienced from government employees and social workers (Nelson 2002:584). Another complaint voiced during this learning circle was that one can’t be on welfare and go to school. One young single mother, studying for her Bachelors at Concordia, explained that in order to receive social assistance payments as a student, she had to re-qualify for a completely different program.<sup>55</sup> This meant that should she drop to part-time from a “full-time” academic schedule, she will once again have to reenroll for welfare. Frustration was also expressed with “Emploi-Quebec,” as this provincially funded job-searching database contains listings only for certain occupations. The final criticism stated by participants was that should one have an outstanding financial debt, the money would be deducted directly from their already inadequate welfare payments.

Members of the learning circle attributed these problems to the idea that the “government likes people being down and out.” This viewpoint is reflective of the “social-structural” perspective on poverty, social inequality, and welfare use stated in the opening chapter of this thesis. Moreover, this theory suggests that “poverty is an inherent feature of capitalism” (Marx and Engels 1968 in Seccombe et al. 1998:851) and that furthermore “the subsequent control over other social structures, such as education and polity, is designed to serve the interests and maintain the dominance of the wealthy class” (Foucault 1980 in Seccombe et al. 1998:851). And so, while the above quotation from learning circle participants may appear on par with conspiracy theories, there is validity

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<sup>55</sup>While the provincial student assistance program was initially designed for those pursuing a higher education, a 1996 reform now lumps both adults pursuing vocational training or those earning their high school equivalency under this program (Harris and Manning 2005:29)

to it. To some extent the Canadian economy depends on cheap labour (in order to compete with its neighbour, the United States) and should the minimum wage be lifted, the cost of goods and services would go up, potentially restricting the abilities of the middle class to maintain their lifestyle (Feder Kittay 1998:39). Though there would be more money circulating in the economy and purchasing power might rise, business owners and corporations might at the same time be hard-hit by a slump in profits,<sup>56</sup> which is one reason why they are resistant to better working wages. Furthermore, while the federal and provincial governments have concerned themselves with luring new industries to regions affected by deindustrialization, they have not replaced the type of jobs offered by previous employers, which would have been accessible to those with little education or training. Rather, they have replaced them with either highly specialized technological work or with service-industry employment that pays little more than the minimum wage. This is why participants believe that “the government doesn’t care – they don’t have to [try] and produce jobs [that pay a living wage]” and that furthermore, bureaucrats “don’t want to change.”

Learning circle participants promoted several strategies that could alleviate this problem of “getting ahead.” Possible only through activism, two solutions voiced were “changing the rules” of welfare to “be more considerate” of recipients and their lived realities, and increasing the meagre financial allotment provided by income support payments.<sup>57</sup> Another suggestion was for the government to investigate which demographic population occupies the welfare rolls to the greatest extent: the participants believed that the category of able-bodied males under the age of twenty-five was one of the largest collectors of welfare,<sup>58</sup> and they agreed that an effort should be made to force

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<sup>56</sup> Since the economic boom of the 1990s the percentage of wealth held by the top five percent of the population has increased and has not “trickled down” to the middle class, let alone those of low-income (Frank 2007).

<sup>57</sup> According to learning circle participants, the approximate monetary amount of income support payments to a single mother with two children is \$553. A respondent in a 2002 study by Margaret K. Nelson commented that: “asking a family of three to live on \$550 a month is ridiculous, and it’s asking people to lie cheat and steal” (602). This is a sentiment voiced by respondents in other studies (Kingfisher 1996:150-51 in Cassel 2000:616).

<sup>58</sup> 2001 Canadian Census data supports this assertion to some extent. Males between the ages of fifteen and nineteen in Montreal have a slightly lower labour-force participation rate than do females of this same age group. However, after the age of twenty there is a reversal and there becomes a greater number of women not participating in the labour-force than men. For all other age groups, females have lower labour-force participation rates than males (Statistics Canada 2001). A possible reason for this is that the childrearing

these men into employment. The final, and most dynamic suggestion, was that those interested could “start their own business” through the use of government grants for small-business owners. Amy commented during our interview that she had attended several free seminars on opening a small business and that she had not only found this information helpful, but also believed there to be support – and enough of it accessible to her that this was something she could feasibly do – in fact it was one of her goals for the future.

It is important to note that the single mothers who contributed to these learning circles illustrate the extent to which being a “victim” and being an “active participant” are *not* mutually exclusive (Michaud 2004:282). While in some regards they may be at the mercy of structural factors and stages of a woman’s lifecycle, such that they cannot equally compete for resources, they are nevertheless exercising agency by taking action. Through participation in programs such as those offered by KARE and Pathways, these women are exploring potential opportunities that may lead them out of their current economically impoverished situation. They are informing themselves on all resources available to them, as well as attempting to heighten the public’s awareness of the reality of their lived situations.

## Conclusion

The narratives of the women with whom I have worked for this project indicate that economic considerations have played very little role in their childbearing decisions. Assertions by conservatives touting neoliberal rhetoric - that were there a monetary increase in welfare assistance for single mothers, there would be an increase in single mothers bearing and rearing children while receiving welfare payments - appear to have been discredited by on-the-ground accounts of factors that have influenced childbearing decisions in Montreal.

However, the seeming lack of concern for economic provisions expressed by the single mothers in this project may be unique to the current socio-economic climate: they are aware at least subconsciously that social and welfare services are available to them

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responsibilities tend to fall to females and the percentage of women with young children is likely to increase after the age of 20 (Stephenson and Emery 2003:34).

and therefore fail to hold economic considerations as a barrier to their survival. Should the above-mentioned provisions be removed from the equation, it is possible that economic considerations would become a factor consciously taken into account when low-income women make their childbearing decisions.

While there may not be a direct cause-and-effect relationship between welfare generosity and pregnancy outcomes for low-income single mothers, I do believe that the economic environment has some bearing. If women are socialized within an environment lacking welfare and social services, then it is possible poor women would be acculturated with a different array of values and socially acceptable behaviours. There would then perhaps be fewer single mothers successfully “struggling and striving” for their children, and thereby lacking role-models for young women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy; and therefore the option to bear and raise a child might appear less accessible, or at least less appealing.

## ***Recommendations***

Within the current economic climate of Montreal, I perceive the present state of social services to be creating a feedback loop in which low-income women are socialized into a value-system at odds with that of the middle class. It is therefore more difficult for them to compete for resources that provide them with an opportunity to rise above the LICO. Below are recommendations that I propose, which might alleviate much of the marginalization I have found, thereby removing barriers faced by low-income single mothers.

## **Employment**

It is apparent that without access to employment that pays a sustainable “liveable wage,” low-income single mothers will never be able to achieve self-sufficiency. I find it ironic that neoliberal philosophy has targeted low-income single mothers as the problem that is in need of reform, rather than the economic structures that have influenced their survival strategies.

While there appears to be no direct cause-and-effect relationship between welfare generosity and pregnancy outcomes for low-income single mothers, I have found a

blatant cause-and-effect relationship between the insubstantial pay and benefits offered by employers and the pay and benefits available to welfare recipients: the less the pay and benefits of employment, the greater reliance there is on social services and welfare. I find it puzzling that economic theorists have not drawn this correlation before and that this has received little attention in literature pertaining to welfare use.

By raising the minimum wage, the government would essentially be decreasing the attractiveness of welfare reliance, without penalizing those who are desperately in need of welfare services. Due to the value-system of the women studied, and their feelings towards abortion and adoption, there is no way to guarantee that an unplanned low-income pregnancy will be terminated or resolved with adoption, regardless of disincentives for bearing and rearing a child. Low-income childrearing by some single mothers is therefore unavoidable, particularly in light of the difficulty low-income women have controlling their fertility. If this is a population that is here to stay, the best way the government could support those in such situations is by providing these women the opportunity for "liveable" employment.

The federal and provincial governments could achieve this by offering tax breaks to employers providing full-time "standard" employment to its employees. Currently, the recent economic boom in Canada has only lined the pockets of large corporations who have benefited by reducing the quality and pay of the employment they offer. By providing employers with an incentive to create more, or only, full-time positions, the government would be fostering single mothers' potential for financial independence. Furthermore, should the position offer standard hours (weekdays 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.), some of the need for out-of-hours childcare, not provided by Quebec's \$7 a-day daycare system, and therefore quite expensive, would be alleviated.

Similarly, the provincial government could introduce a program offering incentives in the form of tax breaks to employers if they were to provide their employees with benefits such as prescription subsidization and dental care.

Finally, the government could implement an employee-rights procedure that would allow single parents time off work to care for their sick children, without fear of retribution. The alternative to this would be to provide \$7 a-day childcare specifically for

sick children, either through the provincial government or by mandating that employers provide childcare for these children.

## **Housing**

Learning circle participants demonstrated their agency in proposing several alternatives in light of the current “ghettoization” of low-rental housing. The idea to “mix us up with others” suggests a government program that would invest in standard apartment blocks, with a certain number of residences for those in need of low-rental housing *as well as* leasing apartments in the same building to full-paying tenants. This would give the government an opportunity to earn back some of the money necessary to invest in new low-rental housing, as well as providing low-income families a residence not marred by the stigma of welfare.

Also proposed during the learning circle was that the government directly subsidize individual landlords for low-rental housing. This could be made attractive to landlords by offering tax breaks and guaranteed rent-payment. In doing this, recipients of low-rental housing would similarly be able to obtain residence in safe neighbourhoods with good schools.

Yet another solution, not discussed during the learning circle, would be to designate some blocks of low-rental housing as only for families. This might not completely alter the dangerous environments in which subsidized housing tends to be located, but it might provide a haven for like-minded low-income single mothers, permitting them to exercise their agency more directly by allowing them to take control of their residential environment.

## **Longer Transition Time Before Welfare Benefits are Cut Off**

In response to learning circle participants’ exasperation at “never [being] able to get ahead” on welfare, I propose that the transition time for which a woman is allowed to receive welfare benefits as well as employment income be extended. By allowing a one-year period in which single mothers may earn employment income without having their welfare benefits revoked *or reduced*, they would be given the opportunity to create a financial safety net. While this would require significant expenditure from the

government, the funds could lessen the burden on future taxpayers. Were these women to construct a financial safety net, any temporary drop in household income would not automatically force the family back onto welfare. It would also help a low-income mother realize that she is moving forward and out of her impoverished situation, providing her with greater strength to persevere in light of the barriers she must face and the sacrifices she must make to raise her family out of poverty.

## **Better Coordination of Services**

This thesis has shown that there is a “tangled web” of social services available to low-income single mothers. They often find it difficult to discover eligibility requirements or even what array of services are offered by community NGOs. Single low-income women have expressed exasperation at their inadequate knowledge of existing services, whether it be low-cost creative activities or tutoring help for her children, French and English language classes, or low-rental housing. The women find that neither their social workers nor other social service personnel seem to hold a comprehensive knowledge about such programs.

I do not believe that individual NGOs have an obligation to compile an all-encompassing list of services available to low-income families. My own experiences working with NGOs, however, has shown me that at least some are trying to do just that. Nevertheless, I believe that it is the responsibility and duty of the provincial government to provide to all welfare offices, community centres, and social service outreach facilities a comprehensive list of governmental *and* community social services. The budget of most NGOs and the time of their employees is already stretched so thin that in trying to figure out what services are available (especially those out of area), an undue burden is being placed on such organizations.

By providing access to extensive information on social services through a directory service that offers contact information by telephone as well as brief descriptions of the services offered at each facility, hours of frustration and fruitless searching would be erased from the time constraints faced by service providers and low-income single mothers alike.

## **Greater Support for Community-level Organizations**

Participants in Pathways' learning circle have demonstrated that low-income single mothers have and are willing to exercise their agency; however, there is a need to foster this type of proactive behaviour to a far greater extent, to empower women to take control of their situation and their own lives. By fostering such agency, the system grants them full citizenship.

As it stands now, economics largely determines the status of these single mothers. They are second-class citizens: rebuked for not being able to provide their children with access to enjoyable educational and recreational activities and shown disdain for their lack of self-sufficiency; while at the same time, the jobs that would provide them with an adequate income to provide things for their children are simply not available. Therefore, when young low-income women experience an unexpected pregnancy and evaluate their life course anew, they perceive that opportunities for achievement lie in motherhood rather than employment.

I believe that an increased investment in community-level programs such as Pathways would alleviate some of the paralysing anxiety associated with low-income subsistence, as well as providing the women with opportunities for stronger social support networks for themselves and their children. Pledging to invest in community-level programs would offer an opportunity to replace the support that was once received from the now obsolete extended family, allowing single mothers to share the burden of childrearing and freeing up some of their time for other, perhaps educational, pursuits. Furthermore, with a greater investment in community-level organizations, programs could be implemented that would alleviate some of the barriers low-income children face in gaining exposure to middle-class values.<sup>59</sup> Examples of such programs could be tutoring, arts and craft activities, field trips to museums and theatres, and sports and recreation groups; all of which could serve to raise the potential for goal achievability and broadening the spectrum of ways in which these youths can meet their needs.

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<sup>59</sup> This is not to say that middle-class values are preferable or better, but rather that the dichotomy would be less enhanced and therefore there would be less stigmatization and a better potential for upward mobility.



While at first increased governmental spending would be necessary for such services, the opportunities from these programs hold the potential to enhance access to employment; therefore increasing the desire for self-sufficiency among low-income youth and future low-income women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy.

## **Appendices**

## **Appendix A**

### **Ethics Certificate**

## Appendix B

### *Informed Consent Form for Mothers*

**Please read this consent document and the attached list of interview questions carefully before you decide to participate in this study.**

**Project Title: Women with Children Living in Poverty in Montreal: the role of reproductive decisions in economic survival strategies.**

Hi, my name is Elise Adams and I am a graduate student in anthropology at McGill University. I am doing research on women who have children and who live below the poverty line here in Montreal. I am interested in how women like you have made childbearing decisions and ways in which having children affects your life. I hope that by doing this research I will be able to help other people understand the problems you face and make the social services better able to help you.

**What you will be asked to do in the study:** Once you return this signed consent form to me, we will have a private interview that follows the provided list of questions at a location you choose. Questions will be related to your family background, your children, your friends and boyfriends, your employment, and your living situation. You may refuse to answer any question and I will not ask why. You may choose to stop the interview at any time, and it will be up to you whether you want to continue.

**Time required:** The time the interview takes is up to you, depending on the questions you are willing to answer. Interview sessions will be kept to a three hour maximum. If it's okay with you, and if it's necessary, we can meet more than once for the interview.

**Risks:** You may experience emotional distress in answering some of the questions. However, you may refuse to answer any question, and I will not ask why. You may also choose to stop the interview at any point, with the option to continue the interview later.

**Benefits/Compensation:** There is no compensation or other direct benefit to you for participation.

**Confidentiality:** Your real name will not be used in any notes or publications; you will be given another name (a code name) to hide your identity. If you agree to be audiotaped, I will write down everything on the tape, but will use the code name for you and shall destroy the tape once I write down what is on it. I will keep a list of your real name and the code name given to you, which will be kept in a locked file only I have access to. When the study is finished I will destroy this list. By law, I must report any information that indicates a child is being physically or sexually abused. This is the only situation that I will tell someone who you are, otherwise your real name will never be told to anyone.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in this study is voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. This will not affect any services you are currently getting or prevent you in using other services in the future. You can change your mind and stop participating in this study at any time without penalty. You can choose not to answer any question you like and I will not ask why.

**Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:** Elise Adams (Me), Graduate Student, Anthropology Program at McGill University, (514) 849-1349 or Dr. Andre Costopoulos, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Anthropology at (514) 398-4299 or by email at [andre.costopoulos@mcgill.ca](mailto:andre.costopoulos@mcgill.ca).

**Whom to contact about your rights in the study:** Research Ethics Board for Human Subjects (REB-1) Officer, Ms. Lynda McNeil, James Administration Building, Room 419, 845 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec H3A-2T5. The telephone number is: (514) 398-6831.

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Date

I agree to be tape-recorder. Yes / No

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator Date

## Appendix C

### *Client Intake Survey - English*

Name of Client: \_\_\_\_\_ Date : \_\_\_\_\_

Language(s) Spoken : English ☐ French ☐ Other(s) : \_\_\_\_\_

1. How long have you been living in the area? \_\_\_\_\_ Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months

2. Where are you originally from? Country : \_\_\_\_\_ Region/City : \_\_\_\_\_

3. How long have you been using the food bank? \_\_\_\_\_ Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months

4. How often do you use the food bank? \_\_\_\_\_ Per Month / \_\_\_\_\_ Per Year

5. Do you know why we charge our clients \$1? Yes ☐ No ☐

6. Do you know of the other services offered by Share the Warmth? Yes ☐ No ☐

7. Do you need help with anything? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, with what? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(We will look into requests and get back to the person via telephone.)

8. How long have you been on Social Assistance? \_\_\_\_\_ Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months / \_\_\_\_\_ Weeks

9. Are you interested in employment? Yes ☐ No ☐

10. What would you like to see Share the Warmth help you with?

Reading ☐ Writing ☐ Finding Work ☐ Getting You Information on Something ☐

Other: \_\_\_\_\_ Just the Food Bank ☐

11. Do your children need help with anything? Yes ☐ No ☐

If so, what? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Client Intake Survey - French

Nom du client : \_\_\_\_\_ Date : \_\_\_\_\_

Langue(s) parlée(s) : Français ☐ Anglais ☐ Autre(s) : \_\_\_\_\_

1. Depuis combien de temps vivez-vous dans ce secteur? \_\_\_\_\_ années \_\_\_\_\_ mois

2. Quel est votre lieu d'origine? Pays : \_\_\_\_\_ Région/Ville : \_\_\_\_\_

3. Depuis combien de temps utilisez-vous les services de la banque alimentaire? \_\_\_\_\_ années \_\_\_\_\_ mois

4. À quelle fréquence utilisez-vous les services de la banque alimentaire? \_\_\_\_\_ par mois/ \_\_\_\_\_ par année

5. Savez-vous pourquoi les frais sont de 1 \$ ? oui ☐ non ☐

6. Connaissez-vous les autres services offerts par Partageons l'espoir ? oui ☐ non ☐

7. Avez-vous besoin d'aide pour quelque chose ? oui ☐ non ☐

Si oui, expliquez : \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Nous examinerons votre demande et nous vous téléphonerons.)

8. Depuis quand bénéficiez-vous du programme d'aide sociale?  
\_\_\_\_\_ années \_\_\_\_\_ mois/ \_\_\_\_\_ semaines

9. Êtes-vous intéressé à l'emploi ? oui ☐ non ☐

10. Quelle aide aimeriez-vous recevoir de Partageons l'espoir ?

Lecture <input type="checkbox"/>	Écriture <input type="checkbox"/>	Recherche d'emploi <input type="checkbox"/>	Recherche d'information <input type="checkbox"/>
Autre : _____		Banque alimentaire seulement <input type="checkbox"/>	

11. Vos enfants ont-ils besoin d'aide ? oui ☐ non ☐

12. Si oui, expliquez : \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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