



March 2013

## First Nations Teenaged Female Lone Parent Families in Canada: Recognizing Family Diversity and the Importance of Networks of Care

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### Recommended Citation

Quinless, J. M. (2013). First Nations Teenaged Female Lone Parent Families in Canada: Recognizing Family Diversity and the Importance of Networks of Care. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 4(1).

**DOI:** 10.18584/iipj.2013.4.1.12

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# First Nations Teenaged Female Lone Parent Families in Canada: Recognizing Family Diversity and the Importance of Networks of Care

## **Abstract**

Using semi-custom data tabulations from the 2006 Census of Population, this article provides a brief statistical description of the socio-economic conditions of female First Nations teenaged lone parents aged 15 to 19 years in Canada. It examines existing formal and informal social and economic support systems available to First Nations lone mother families in multiple family households. These support systems were compared to First Nations lone mothers in single family households as a way to shed light on the varying degrees that informal networks of care may be available to First Nations lone mothers living on reserve, as compared to those living off reserve, who access varying degrees of support from extended family members for the care and nurturing of their children. Despite the dominant Westernized view of the negative impacts that teenaged lone parenting can have on women and their children, this article illustrates that there seems to be a culturally interrelated system, or “networks of care,” available to these women. Such networks of care often have been overlooked in research on lone parenting. There remains much diversity among Aboriginal lone parent families when one accounts for factors such as age of the parent, number of children, living on or off reserve, education, employment, and income. Therefore, the assumption that the social and economic disadvantage of becoming a teenaged lone parent will result in the same circumstances and place all teenaged lone parents at the same “disadvantage” is not necessarily accurate, at least in the First Nation context.

## **French Abstract**

MONOPARENTALITÉ CHEZ LES ADOLESCENTS DES PREMIÈRES NATIONS DU CANADA :  
RECONNAÎTRE LA DIVERSITÉ FAMILIALE ET L'IMPORTANCE DES RÉSEAUX DE SOINS

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## Résumé

Cette étude, fondée sur les données du Recensement du Canada de 2006, examine le nombre d'adolescents des Premières Nations chefs de famille monoparentale vivant dans les réserves et à l'extérieur de celles-ci. Elle examine ensuite les diverses caractéristiques socioéconomiques uniques à ces deux groupes d'adolescents chefs de famille monoparentale. Les résultats révèlent que la monoparentalité chez les jeunes des Premières Nations est une tendance à la hausse et que de nombreux adolescents des Premières Nations chefs de famille monoparentale vivent dans des ménages multifamiliaux. L'étude donne également à penser que les adolescents des Premières Nations chefs de famille monoparentale ont régulièrement accès à des « réseaux d'aide » officiels, même si ce phénomène est plus fréquemment observé dans les réserves qu'à l'extérieur de celles-ci.

## **Spanish Abstract**

FAMILIAS MONOPARENTALES ADOLESCENTES DE LAS PRIMERAS NACIONES EN CANADÁ:  
RECONOCIMIENTO DE LA DIVERSIDAD DE FAMILIAS E IMPORTANCIA DE LAS REDES DE  
ATENCIÓN

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#### Resumen

En este artículo se emplean datos del censo canadiense de 2006 para examinar el número de familias indígenas monoparentales adolescentes que viven en reservas y fuera de ellas. También se analizan las diversas características sociales y económicas exclusivas de estos dos grupos de familias monoparentales adolescentes. Se observa que las familias indígenas monoparentales adolescentes constituyen una tendencia creciente, que muchas familias indígenas monoparentales adolescentes viven en hogares con otras familias y se sugiere que tienen acceso regularmente a “redes de atención” informales, aunque este fenómeno es más frecuente entre las familias en las reservas que fuera de las reservas.

#### Keywords

Aboriginal girls, early parenting, teen pregnancy, lone parenting, networks of care

#### Acknowledgments

Thanks to Marc Fonda, Senior Research Manager at Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada's Strategic Research Directorate, for his valuable insights and editorial expertise.

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## **First Nations Teenaged Female Lone Parent Families in Canada: Recognizing Family Diversity and the Importance of Networks of Care**

There are many different ways to define the Aboriginal population in Canada and selecting a definition can be somewhat problematic because there will be considerable variation in estimates of its population size. While there is no single or “correct” way to define the Aboriginal population, the choice of definition is ultimately based on the discretion of the researcher and should depend on the purpose for which it is to be used. That being said, it is generally contended that the Aboriginal population in Canada is comprised of three main identity groups, which include First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. However, even when these definitions are used, it is still important to recognize that much diversity exists between and within these groups, and even more so when we consider the importance and role of family.

Research has consistently shown that Aboriginal families in Canada are different than non-Aboriginal families in terms of marriage patterns, living arrangements, number of people living within the household, and overall family structure (Ambert, 2006; Castellano, 2002; Hull, 2006). However, these differences can be further extended to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit families, and it is, therefore, imperative that researchers are able to contextualize this important aspect of family diversity that exists between various Aboriginal identity groups. While much of the literature aggregates Aboriginal families into a single homogenous group in order to make comparisons with the non-Aboriginal population, it is the intent of this paper to focus exclusively on First Nations teenaged lone parent families. In First Nations communities, there is more emphasis on the importance of extended family, comprised of a larger community, including both relatives and friends (Ambert, 2006; Bianchi, 1995; Burns & Scot, 1994). Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that there is great diversity in terms of the prevalence and socio-economic circumstances of Aboriginal families, and lone parent families in particular, across Canada. This is especially so when we consider factors such as age, gender, number of children in the household, place of residence, and Aboriginal identity group.

Lone parent families have more obstacles to overcome in terms of childcare, increased poverty, and father involvement (Ambert, 2006). Understanding First Nations family structure and organization is important for researchers and social policy makers when considering the development of programs, policies, and services intended to benefit lone parent families. For example, determining where a family resides and how many children live in the household has an impact on employment, educational opportunities, cost of housing, and also a lone parent’s ability to access and utilize various available systems of social support or “networks of care”, such as sisters, brothers, uncles, aunties, grandparents, and even various community services (Ambert, 2006).

It is generally thought that the Canadian Census framework reflects a Western, industrialized notion of “family”. More often than not, it is difficult for researchers to apply such Census concepts in a meaningful way to depict the socio-economic realities of culturally diverse groups of families. This becomes apparent when we attempt to impose Census concepts of families onto the First Nations population. The real issue here is that the Census framework does not adequately reflect the diversity among First Nations lone parent families, but rather creates a particular view by assigning First Nations lone parent families to fixed concepts, which are conceptualized as sharing a common collective identity, irrespective of diversity (Bauman, 1997).

The Census questionnaire dichotomizes lone parent families as belonging to either an economic<sup>1</sup> or census<sup>2</sup> family unit. This classification system imposes a standard definition of family onto First Nations communities, which excludes extended family members by grouping these people into a unique category referred to as a multiple family household (Statistics Canada, 2006). In doing so, we provide a one-dimensional description of First Nations families as belonging either to some variation of a census or economic family unit. While important, this way of categorizing families does not consider the diversity of types of families that exist within the context of “lone parenting,” such as the extended family, based on culturally significant systems or “networks of care,” to aid in the support and care of children. This has important policy implications when we consider the extent to which these data shape our knowledge and understanding of First Nations lone parent families.

### **Lone Parent Families in Canada: A Growing Trend**

Since 1996, the incidence of lone parent families has increased in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in Canada. In fact, this increase has been larger among the female Registered Indian (First Nations) population living on-reserve (Statistics Canada, 2008). The 2006 Census shows that 25 percent of Aboriginal identity families were lone parent families, compared to 16 percent of non-Aboriginal families. The 2006 Census also demonstrates that about one-third of Aboriginal families living on-reserve were lone parent families, with over 80 percent headed by women (Statistics Canada, 2008). This increasing trend in lone parent family rates among all Aboriginal identity groups suggests a need for social policy researchers to gain an understanding not only of the pathways to becoming a lone parent, but also the existing social and economic support systems that benefit lone parents and their families. This paper focuses on First Nations teenaged female lone parent families between the ages of 15 to 19 years, exclusively.

There are several pathways to lone parenthood in general. These include a complex system of interrelated factors, such as widowhood, separation, divorce, childbirth outside marriage, and the changing dynamic of an individual’s family status over time (Hull, 2001; Lindsay, 1992; Quinless, 2011). Research into Aboriginal lone parent families shows that the number of families living in poverty is high when compared to non-Aboriginal lone parent families. More importantly, the degree of poverty and associated substandard living conditions tend to differ when we consider other socio-economic factors,

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<sup>1</sup> Economic family refers to “a group of two or more persons who live in the same dwelling and are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption. A couple may be of opposite or same sex. Foster children are included. By definition, all persons who are members of a census family are also members of an economic family. Examples of the broader concept of economic family include the following: two co-resident census families who are related to one another are considered one economic family; co-resident siblings who are not members of a census family are considered as one economic family; and, nieces or nephews living with aunts or uncles are considered one economic family” (Statistics Canada, n.d.b, Definition, paras. 1 – 2).

<sup>2</sup> Census family is defined as “a married couple and the children, if any, of either or both spouses; a couple living common law and the children, if any, of either or both partners; or, a lone parent of any marital status with at least one child living in the same dwelling and that child or those children. All members of a particular census family live in the same dwelling. A couple may be of opposite or same sex. Children may be children by birth, marriage or adoption regardless of their age or marital status as long as they live in the dwelling and do not have their own spouse or child living in the dwelling. Grandchildren living with their grandparent(s) but with no parents present also constitute a census family” (Statistics Canada, n.d.a, Definition, para. 1).

including age and gender of the parent, number of children living in the household, educational attainment, employment, and place of residence.

With this in mind, one can begin to appreciate that First Nations lone parent families with pre-school and school age children will have different needs, economic difficulties, and social pressures, when compared to families with older children. This is even more the case when compared to coupled families and families without children. The cost of housing, reduced wages, and the support required to care for young children often results in lone parents, especially lone mothers, living on low-incomes and in poverty. Such living conditions can also lead to severe social and health related problems, such as allostatic load<sup>3</sup>, and a range of stress-related health issues (Quinless, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative for policy makers to recognize that the social and economic circumstances of First Nations lone parent families vary considerably within the Aboriginal lone parent family population.

### **First Nations Teenaged Female Lone Parent Families**

Since 1986, fertility rates among First Nations teenage girls under 20-years-old have been high, as compared to other Canadian teenagers. Guimond and Robitaille (2008) demonstrated that the fertility rate for First Nations girls under the age of 15 is approximately 18 times higher than that of other Canadians. This is of concern because early motherhood can increase the vulnerability of First Nations women, who are already at a socio-economic disadvantage based on a variety of factors, such as age, place of residence (living on- or off-reserve), educational attainment, income, and employment. Thus, having children while in their teens can increase the social and economic challenges facing young First Nations women, including dependence on income assistance, lower earnings, poverty, academic under-achievement, reduced employability, and lone parenthood (Guimond & Robitaille, 2008; Luong, 2008). Consequently, early parenting is an important social policy issue that directly impacts First Nations and other Aboriginal communities.

### **Networks of Care**

It is important to point out that viewing early parenting as a social concern is problematic because it is a value judgement that reflects a dominant Westernized view of First Nations lone motherhood. Arguably, this way of thinking is not necessarily supported by many First Nations communities because it fails to recognize the extent to which teenaged lone mothers rely on culturally significant “networks of care” to support and care for their children. The concept of “networks of care,” as described here, refers to the interrelated cultural and social system provided by extended families members and friends to support female-led First Nations teenaged lone parent families. For the purpose of analysis, this system of support is characterized by factors, such as income support, care and nurturing of children, and participation in unpaid housework, provided to multiple family households by extended family members. These components are essential in the successful day-to-day functioning of these lone parent families.

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<sup>3</sup>The term “allostatic load” was coined by Bruce McEwen (2000) and refers to the physiological costs of chronic exposure to the neural or neuroendocrine stress response.

## Objectives of the Study

The overall purpose of this research is to analyze data from the 2006 Census of Population in order to generate a brief description of an important aspect of the socio-economic conditions of First Nations teenaged lone parents in Canada. The goal is to produce more culturally sensitive findings. This statistical description of First Nations teenaged female lone parent families will shed light on the existing diversity within multiple family census households and show the presence of “networks of care”. Specifically, this paper examines differences between First Nations teenaged mothers between the ages of 15 to 19 years living on-reserve to those living off-reserve, with respect to their relative access to varying degrees of support from extended family members that assist in the caring and nurturing of their children.

## Methods

### Data Sources, Terms, and Concepts

Data presented are based on semi-customized tabulations prepared by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) using the 2006 Census of Population. According to Statistics Canada, in 2006 about 98 percent of households were enumerated using the self-enumeration method. The 2006 Census provides data that are based on the definitions of ethnic origin (ancestry), Aboriginal identity, Registered Indian Status, and band membership. The Aboriginal identity population includes all those who identified themselves in the 2006 Census as Aboriginal and/or identified themselves as Registered Indians or members of an Indian Band or First Nation. This chapter uses the concept of Registered Indian (that is women who indicated that they were a Treaty or Registered Indian and are, therefore, registered under the Indian Act). These women were classified as First Nations to provide a statistical description of select socio-economic characteristics of this population of teenage lone mothers. Women who self-identified with more than one Aboriginal identity group or who reported being Métis, Inuit, or non-Status Indian were excluded from the current analysis. Registered Indian women were further subdivided into those living on- and off-reserve, based on the variable “place of residence”.

### Teenage Lone Mothers

This analysis focuses on those First Nations teenage mothers, between the ages of 15 and 19, living in lone parent Census families with one or more children (0 to 14 years of age) residing in the household.

### Socio-Economic Characteristics

**Income.** Income was measured at the household level for both one census family and multiple family households. Household income was the sum of individual incomes of each person aged 15 and over living in the household.

**Multiple-family household.** A multiple-family household refers to a household in which two or more census families occupy the same private dwelling.

**Hours spent doing unpaid housework.** Hours spent includes the number of hours that the person spent doing housework, maintaining the house, or doing yard work without getting paid. For

example, this includes time spent preparing meals, mowing the lawn, or cleaning the house for oneself, relatives, friends, or neighbours.<sup>4</sup>

**Hours spent looking after children without pay.** The number of unpaid hours that the person spent looking after children includes time spent taking care of one's own children or looking after the children of relatives, friends, or neighbours.<sup>5</sup>

**Selected census family characteristics.** This variable refers to the actual number of people residing in the multiple census family household.

## Findings

### First Nations Lone Parent Families: A Snapshot

While examining the results of this study, there will be comparisons made to non-Aboriginal teenaged lone parents to provide context. In setting the stage, a more general description of the distribution of female First Nations lone parent families in Canada in 2006 will be presented by age group and place of residence. Lone parenthood varies according to age and place of residence. Approximately 47,950 female First Nations lone parent families reside in Canada, of which slightly more (56% or 26,825) lived off-reserve (urban and rural settings) than lived on-reserve (44% or 21,125). In addition, 5.4 percent of the total female First Nations lone parent families living on-reserve were led by women under the age of 24 years, compared to 2.8 percent living off-reserve.

When considering the proportion of First Nations lone parent families that were headed by males or females and lived on-reserve or off-reserve in 2006, it was not surprising to find that females headed the majority of First Nations lone parent families, regardless of place of residence. More specifically, when compared to coupled families and other census family types, female-headed lone parent families accounted for just over 24 percent of all First Nations census families. Male-headed lone parent families accounted for roughly 6 percent.

While we know that there is a higher proportion of First Nations lone mothers in Canada, it is equally important to recognize that their social and economic circumstances are different. When we consider differences in employment income, we see that in 2006 the proportion of Registered Indian lone parents living on-reserve whose major source of income came from employment income was lower compared to lone parents living off-reserve. For example, in 2005, 58 percent of First Nations lone parent families headed by women had family incomes of less than \$20,000, compared to 57 percent of lone parent families headed by men, and 20 percent of two-parent families. In addition, in 2006, roughly 30 percent of First Nations lone mother families living on-reserve had three or more children living at home, compared to 20 percent of First Nations lone father families (Quinless, 2011).

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<sup>4</sup> The time spent on this activity is divided into blocks of hours (none, less than 5 hours, 5 to 14 hours, 15 to 29 hours, 30 to 59 hours, and 60 hours or more). Only the hours spent on the activity during the week before Census Day (May 7 to 13, 2006) were counted.

<sup>5</sup> The time spent on this activity is divided into blocks of hours (none, less than 5 hours, 5 to 14 hours, 15 to 29 hours, 30 to 59 hours, and 60 hours or more). Only the hours spent on the activity during the week before Census Day (May 7 to 13, 2006) are counted.



## Recognizing Family Diversity: First Nations Teenaged Female Lone Parent Families

The way the data was presented for this analysis allows for comparisons of female First Nations lone parent families by both one family households (referring to a single census family occupying a private dwelling) and multiple family household (referring to situations where two or more census families occupy the same private dwelling). This information is particularly useful in determining the extent to which teenaged First Nations lone mothers live with other family members, as compared to First Nations lone mothers of other age groups. These findings are discussed next in considering the number of female First Nations lone parent families by age, household type, and place of residence.

In 2006, there were 21,125 on-reserve households headed by female First Nations lone parents. Approximately two-thirds of them ( $n = 14,215$ ) were single family households, and just under one-third ( $n = 6,915$ ) were multiple family households. Approximately 5 percent ( $n = 1,145$ ) of these female lone parent households were headed by a teenager. Of these families, 135 (just under 12% of the total teenage-led households) resided in one family households, while 1,010 (88%) were multiple family households.

Comparatively, in 2006, around 25 percent of female-headed First Nations lone parent households lived ( $n = 26,825$ ) off-reserve, of which 88 percent were one family households ( $n = 25,590$ ) and 12 percent were multiple family households ( $n = 3,235$ ). Just under 3 percent of these off-reserve households were headed by a teenager ( $n = 770$ ), and there was an even split in the numbers of one family and multiple family households ( $n = 385$ ). Table 1 offers more details related to female-headed First Nations lone parent families by age category and place of residence.

The above description of teenaged First Nations lone mothers living both on- and off-reserve is interesting for several reasons. For instance, lone mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 years who live on-reserve are more likely to live in multiple households, compared to those who live off-reserve. This finding suggests that a significant percentage of teenaged First Nations lone mothers on-reserve are not living in independent census families. Rather, they rely on some system of support, whether social or financial, of extended family members, as defined above, to assist them in their experience of teenaged lone motherhood. However, we find a different pattern with regard to First Nations lone mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 years who resided off-reserve in 2006. A high proportion of First Nations teenaged lone mother households contained multiple families, but an equal proportion (50% or 385 for both types) were single-family households.

While the pattern may be different off-reserve, it suggests the possibility that a significant number of teenage-led lone parent households off-reserve may rely on informal support systems to complement more formal supports, ranging from salaries to social programming to childcare assistance. What these findings may further suggest is that at least one in two First Nations teenage lone mothers, living off-reserve in either rural or urban settings, live with extended family members, as defined above, and, in some capacity, may rely on some informal network as a system of support for the care and nurturing of their children.

**Table 1: Number of Female First Nations Lone Parent Families by Age Categories, Household Type, and Place of Residence, Canada 2006**

Household Type	Total Age	15 - 19 yrs	20 - 24 yrs	25 - 29 yrs	30- 34 yrs	35- 39 yrs	40- 44 yrs	45+ yrs
<b>On-Reserve</b>								
All households by age <sup>1</sup>	21,125 100%	1,145 5.4%	2,455 11.6%	2,580 12.2%	2,605 12.3%	2,780 13.1%	2,590 12.2%	6,970 33.0%
One family households <sup>2</sup>	14,215 67.3%	135 11.8%	925 37.7%	1,610 62.4%	1,995 76.6%	2,265 81.5%	2,015 77.8%	5,260 75.4%
Multiple family households <sup>2</sup>	6,915 32.7%	1,010 88.2%	1,525 62.1%	975 37.8%	610 23.4%	510 18.3%	570 22.0%	1,710 24.5%
<b>Off-Reserve</b>								
All households by age <sup>1</sup>	26,825 100%	770 2.9%	2,970 11.1%	3,825 14.3%	4,355 16.2%	4,010 14.9%	3,835 14.3%	7,055 26.3%
One family households <sup>2</sup>	23,590 87.9%	385 50%	2,365 79.6%	3,405 89.0%	4,075 93.6%	3,620 90.3%	3,505 91.4%	6,225 88.2%
Multiple family households <sup>2</sup>	3,235 12.1%	385 50%	600 20.2%	420 11.0%	280 6.4%	390 9.7%	325 8.5%	830 11.8%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages calculated using total age for all households as denominator to show distribution of First Nations female lone parent families across age groups.

<sup>2</sup> Percentages calculated using all households within each age group as denominator to show distribution of household type within age group.

Interestingly, there also appeared an inverse relationship between age and whether a lone mother lived in a multiple familial arrangement. This implies that First Nations lone mothers 30 years and over were more likely to live in one family households and, therefore, less likely to rely on the immediate support of extended family in the care and nurturing of their children. This might be a result of higher education and income levels, enabling these lone mothers to financially and socially provide for their children somewhat more independently, when compared to the teenaged group of lone mothers.

When considering the proportion of time spent by First Nations teenaged (15 - 19 years) lone mothers doing unpaid housework, the type of family household, and place of residence in 2006, it was found that teenaged First Nations women living in multiple family households off-reserve were much less likely to have spent time preparing meals, mowing the lawn, or cleaning the house for oneself or for relatives, friends, or neighbours when compared to their on-reserve counterparts. That is, teenaged lone mothers living on-reserve spend significantly more time participating in household activities than those living off-reserve. This difference might be due to competing factors that are more “available” in off-reserve settings, such as time spent working for pay outside of the home or attending post secondary training. In this way, it is reasonable<sup>1</sup> to propose that, in many cases, off-reserve First Nations teenaged lone mothers are relying on extended family members for additional support in day-to-day household activities.

With regard to the proportion of hours First Nations teenaged lone mothers aged 15 to 19 years living off-reserve spent doing unpaid housework, those residing in one family households spent considerably more time doing unpaid housework, as compared to those women living in multiple family households. For example, we found that, across all time categories (ranging from less than 5 hours to 60+ hours), teenage mothers living in one family households spent nearly double the amount of time doing unpaid housework, when compared to those women residing in multiple family households. This observation is an important clue that lends support to the idea that First Nations teenaged lone mothers rely on the support of family members for day-to day-household activities.

When analyzing the proportion of hours spent by First Nations teenaged lone parent mothers living in multiple family households doing unpaid childcare by place of residence, it was found that mothers living on-reserve spent more time looking after children, when compared to their female counterparts living off-reserve in 2006. This may be due to the fact that female teenaged lone parents living on-reserve generally tend to have more children in their household, as compared to their counterparts living off-reserve (Hull, 2001; Hull, 2006; Quinless, 2011). In this case, unpaid childcare includes time spent taking care of one's own children or looking after the children of relatives, friends, or neighbours.

The preceding observations are not meant to imply that the children of First Nations teenaged lone mothers living off-reserve are not receiving adequate childcare or these women are spending less time looking after children without pay. Rather, it could be that many off-reserve First Nations teenage mothers have children that are of school age and attending preschool and elementary schools or these women may be involved in paid employment or educational pursuits outside of the home. Nonetheless, these findings are important because they further suggest that some informal “network of care” is in place and perhaps is playing a more critical role in the range of social support systems available to these women. In essence, these women may be relying more on their extended family for support in the nurturing and care of their children than do their on-reserve counterparts.

Income is often used as an indicator to understand the relationship between levels of poverty and inequality, as well as a measure of an individual's socio-economic status and social location. The following section examines the relationship of First Nations teenaged lone mother's total household income in 2005 by household type and place of residence. First of all, it was found that for all age groups considered the average total household income for First Nations lone mothers is significantly higher for those living in multiple family households than those living in one family households, as one might expect due to multiple incomes. For example, there was a \$25,000 average household income difference between First Nations lone mothers of all age groups living in single family households, compared to those residing in multiple family households. What is interesting here, however, is that it might suggest one of the reasons as to “why” First Nations lone mothers may choose to live within multiple family households, often with extended family members is for economic support.

In digging deeper into the 2005 incomes of teenaged lone mother households both living on-reserve and off-reserve, significant differences were found between the average household incomes of one family and multiple family households, regardless of teen mothers' place of residence. For example, for those First Nations teenaged lone mothers living on-reserve, there was a significant difference of \$34,000 in total household income between one and multiple family households. Similarly, for those women living off-reserve, there was a difference of \$26,000 between those women living in one family households and women residing in multiple family households.

Finally, while investigating the average total 2005 household income for First Nations lone parents, aged 15 to 19 years, by number of persons in multiple family households and place of residence, it was learned that the average multiple family household total income tends to increase with the number of persons residing in the household. This suggests that there are more adults living in the house with incomes that contribute to the overall reported household income. With the two exceptions (i.e., an income difference of \$300 for 2 person households and \$5,000 for 5 person households for lone mothers living on-reserve), the average multiple family household total income tends to be slightly higher for those First Nations lone mothers living off-reserve. This finding lends further support to the notion that First Nations teenaged lone mothers may tend to live with extended family members, whether they live on- or off-reserve, as a way to obtain financial support.

### Discussion

Since 1996, the incidence of lone parent families has increased among both Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. This increase, however, has been much greater among the female Registered Indian (First Nations) population living on-reserve (Statistics Canada, 2008). Lone parent families with pre-school and school age children have different needs, economic concerns, and social pressures, compared to families with older children. This is even more the case when compared to families without children. Research shows that the high costs of housing, low wages, irregular child support, and caring for young children often results in lone parents, especially lone mothers, living with low incomes and in poverty (Johnser, 2007; Mulroy, 1995). Several studies support the viewpoint that early motherhood can increase the vulnerability of First Nations women, who are already at a socio-economic disadvantage based on a variety of factors, such as age, place of residence (living on- or off-reserve), educational attainment, income, and employment (Castellano, 2002; Cunnington, 2001; East, 1999; Galarneau, 2006).

Using data from the 2006 Census of Population, this paper provides a brief statistical description of the socio-economic conditions of female First Nations teenaged lone parents in Canada. More specifically, it examines existing social and economic support systems, formal and informal, available to First Nations lone mother families in multiple family households, compared to First Nations lone mothers in single family households. This sheds light on the varying degrees that informal "networks of care" may be available to First Nations lone mothers living on-reserve, compared to those living off-reserve, who can access varying degrees of support from extended family members for the care and nurturing of their children.

Despite the dominant Westernized view of the negative impacts that teenaged lone parenting can have on women and their children, this paper illustrates that there seems to be a culturally interrelated system, or "networks of care," available to these women. Such "networks of care" have often been overlooked in the research on lone parenting. There remains much diversity among Aboriginal lone parent families, when factors, such as age of parent, number of children, place of residence (on- or off-reserve), education, employment, and income, are taken into account. Therefore, the assumption that the social and economic disadvantage of becoming a teenaged lone parent will result in the same circumstances and place all teenaged lone parents in the same "disadvantage" is not necessarily accurate, at least in the First Nation context. Many factors contribute significantly to the social and economic experiences of female First Nations teenaged lone parent families and their children based on social location, which is

comprised of gender, age, number and age of children, place of residence (on- or off-reserve), income level, educational level, labour force participation, and the type of “network of care” that is in place.

This paper does not intend to dismiss previous research findings that have consistently shown that many First Nations female lone parent families in general are disproportionately unemployed, are less likely to have a university degree, rely on government transfer payments as their major source of income, live in low income, and have more children when compared to other Aboriginal identity groups and also to the non-Aboriginal population (Beckert, Strom, Strom, Darre, & Weed, 2008; Castellano, 2002; Hull, 2001; Hull, 2005). Rather, this paper suggests that it is important to apply Census concepts, terms, and definitions from a less conventional lens and, thereby, make a concerted effort to consider research findings that are more culturally appropriate to diverse family situations and structures that exist within the First Nations community and, in particular, lone parenting.

With this in mind, researchers and experts have, at least, sufficient information to identify general trends in various First Nations teenage lone parent family structures and organizations. By acknowledging that additional factors, such as father involvement and social support networks, do exist among First Nations teenaged lone parent families, social policies will be better able to focus on improving the programs and services offered to First Nations teenaged lone parents and their children. Extended family relationships are networks that many First Nations teenaged lone parents depend on. There is emerging research examining the role and importance of Aboriginal fathers in Canada. Studies are currently indicating that, while there are increasing levels of participation of Aboriginal men in their children’s lives, both as non-custodial parents and as lone parents, these men still remain on the margins of mainstream society. The real issue is that there is often little social advocacy or help for men to become good fathers (Ball & George, 2005). Factors that have been identified as affecting First Nations children’s well-being in lone parent families include the father’s involvement in the child’s upbringing, which has a direct impact on their health, development, and even survival (Ball, 2008; Ball & Moselle, 2007), and residual effects of the residential school system that have led to generations of First Nations parents who lack the proper role models and upbringing to positively parent their children (Ball, Roberge, Joe, & George, 2007; Morrissette, 1994). Lone mothers require higher incomes and employment equity (Ambert, 2006), subsidized good quality childcare centres are necessary to remove barriers to single parenting (Ambert, 2006), and fathers need more support and available resources to encourage their involvement in parenting. The Fatherhood Involvement Research Alliance also suggests that policy and program changes could support fathers’ efforts to be more effective in their roles (Ambert, 2006; Ball et al., 2007).

By understanding the social and economic conditions of First Nations lone mother families according to factors, such as age, place of residence, number and age of children, income levels, and access to social networks, we can gain some further insight into the cultural complexity of their unique living circumstances. From here, more effective programs and policies can be implemented that actually meet the needs of First Nations teenaged female-headed families.

### **Study Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, while the objective of the Census of Population is to provide a snapshot of detailed socio-economic characteristics of the population on Census Day, inevitably segments of the population are not included. Under coverage is an important issue to consider especially when interpreting and analyzing Census data for the First Nations population. It can be difficult to

delineate an accurate portrait of First Nations lone parent families, and First Nations teenaged female lone parents in particular, who reside in urban centres due to the high degree of mobility. Research has shown that a significant proportion of the First Nations population are transient and frequently move between on-reserve and off-reserve locations, as well as within census metropolitan areas and out of province (Galarneau, 2006; Haskey, 1991; Hull, 2001; Hull, 2006).

In addition, it is important to consider the magnitude of undercounted First Nations people and how this impacts the population counts. For example, some Indian reserves and settlements did not participate in the Census because enumeration was not permitted or it was interrupted before completion. For example, in 2006, there were 22 incompletely enumerated reserves. Data quality rules require these non-enumerated areas be excluded from Census based data tabulations and, therefore, these areas and their teenaged female lone parent population are not included in this analysis.

Second, the standard definition of “motherhood” derived from Census data is a woman living in a household with her children at the time of the Census. This definition does not consider the fact that children may be absent from the household on the Census day for various reasons, such as shared custody arrangements, children given up for adoption, or those who were placed in foster care. A portion of the First Nations teenaged female lone parent population that should have been included in this analysis may be missing.

Third, the Census does not ask for details on the biological association of other Census family members residing in the multiple Census households to the female lone parent family member. For this reason, this study was not able to examine the identity of the other census family members in the household, and, therefore, we can merely speculate as to their relationship to the lone mother (i.e., sister, brother, aunt, uncle, grandmother, etc.). Data that focuses on the relationship to the lone parent would be extremely valuable in order to examine and describe in greater detail the multiple census family household structure.

Fourth, while the total multiple family household income data was a useful way to examine combined incomes of the female lone parent family and other family members, it does have limitations. It is difficult to determine with accuracy the extent to which other family members contribute to the overall economic functioning of the lone parent household.

Fifth, the definition of both hours spent doing unpaid housework and childcare pertain only to those spent on the activity during the week before the Census day (May 7 to 13, 2006). This may provide an underestimate of the hours spent at various points throughout the year when families are in transition, such as with the birth of a child, relocation, children entering the school system, and even the start of a new employment opportunity for the mother. This makes it difficult to accurately capture the amount of support that is provided by extended family members to First Nations teenage female-headed lone parent families. In future research it would be beneficial to examine the extent to which teenaged lone mothers, First Nations or otherwise, are engaged in educational pursuits and/or paid employment outside the home and compare this to varying degrees of time spent doing unpaid housework and childcare for both one family and multiple family households.

## **Appendix A.**

### **A Note on Data**

Data presented in this paper are based on semi-customized tabulations prepared by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada using the 2006 Census of Population. According to Statistics Canada, in 2006 about 98 percent of households were enumerated using the self-enumeration method. In this case, 70 percent of households were mailed a Census questionnaire and 30 percent of households received their questionnaires from a Census enumerator. Completed Census forms were either returned by mail or completed on-line. In addition, about 2 percent of households in remote communities, northern areas of the country, and in large urban downtown areas with transient residents completed their (2D) Census long form using the canvasser method, which uses a personal interview conducted by a Census enumerator. All on-reserve households received the long form (2D) and completed the questionnaire with the aid of a Statistics Canada interviewer.

### **Interpreting Results**

Statistics Canada applies a confidentiality procedure of random rounding to all Census data to avoid the possibility of associating statistical data with any identifiable individual. With this method, all data, including totals and margins are randomly rounded either up or down to a multiple of 5 or in some cases 10. As a result, the sum of a set of data may not add up to the total, and percentages, which are calculated on rounded figures, do not necessarily add up to 100 percent.

The impact of this procedure is particularly noticeable on small counts. In effect, small numbers may lose their precision, and percentages calculated based on these numbers may not represent the proportion of the population indicated. This is especially important when interpreting findings for smaller population sizes. In such cases, the percentages in a table may add to more than, and in some instances less than, 100 percent. Again, the reader is advised to proceed with caution when interpreting the findings.

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