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Aboriginal Single Mothers in Canada, 1996: A Statistical Profile

Jeremy Hull

Introduction

Past research has shown that Aboriginal women in Canada experience lower incomes and are less often employed than Aboriginal men or than other women in Canada. In addition, research has shown that single mothers in Canada are more likely than other women to experience employment and income difficulties. However, little research has been done which focuses on Aboriginal single mothers and their families. In order to begin to address this research gap, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) commissioned a study of Aboriginal single mothers based on custom tabulations from the 1996 Census of Canada.

The study takes a descriptive approach, providing tables and figures that are based on two or three-way cross-tabulations. The study seeks to answer the following questions: What is the prevalence of single mothers and single-mother families within the Aboriginal population? What are the educational characteristics of Aboriginal single mothers? Where do Aboriginal single mothers live? Has the prevalence of single mothers been increasing? What are employment income characteristics of Aboriginal single mothers and their families?

Methods

Almost all of the data presented in this study are based on custom 1996 Census tabulations prepared for the DIAND. The study is based on the population who identified themselves as Aboriginal and/or as Registered Indians or members of an Indian Band or First Nation. This population is subdivided into Registered Indians (including members of First Nations) and others with Aboriginal identity. Throughout the study, the Registered Indian population is compared to others with Aboriginal identity and to the non-

Aboriginal Canadian population. The 1996 Census allowed more than one ethnic identity to be indicated. Where an individual has more than one identity, an Aboriginal identity takes precedence over non-Aboriginal identities, and Registered Indian status or First Nation membership takes precedence over other Aboriginal identities in the categorizations used in this study. In 1996 there were 512,755 adults (aged 15 or older) with Aboriginal identity, of whom 303,130 were Registered Indians or members of Indian Bands, and 202,625 were others with Aboriginal identity, based on the definitions above.

An “Aboriginal family” is one in which the lone parent or either the husband or wife has Aboriginal identity as defined above. As with individuals, Aboriginal families have been subcategorized as Registered Indian and other Aboriginal families. For all lone-parent families the identity of the lone parent determines the identity of the family. If either spouse in a husband-wife family has Registered Indian status then the family is categorized as a Registered Indian family. If only one spouse in a husband-wife family has Aboriginal identity, the family is assumed to have this Aboriginal identity. Using these definitions, there were 231,945 Aboriginal families in Canada in 1996, of which 137,500 were Registered Indian families and 94,445 were other Aboriginal families. The study uses standard Census definitions of family types and family status. This information is often combined with whether or not the family has one or more children (0-15 years old) living with them.

There are a number of possible ways of looking at the proportions of lone parents and lone-parent families within the population. When looking at data for individuals this study has documented lone parents as a proportion of all women and as a proportion of women with children. When looking at families, the study looks at lone-parent families as a proportion of all families, and as a proportion of families with children.

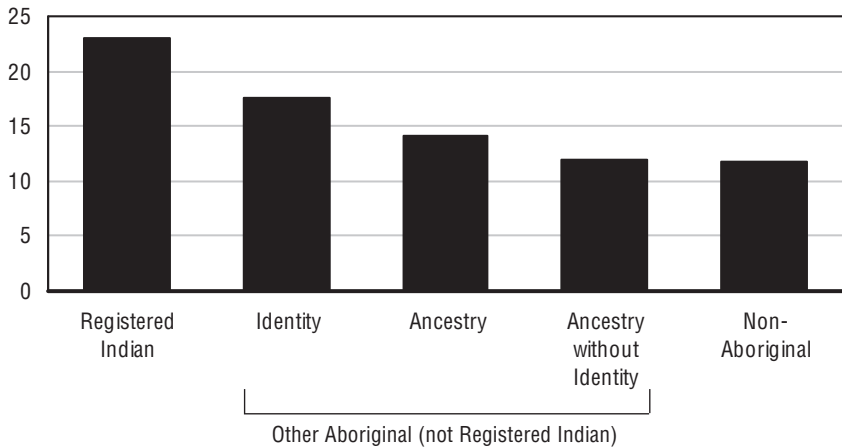
This paper is a shortened version of a longer study, available on the Indian Affairs website at: www.inac.gc.ca. It briefly covers such variables as age, educational attainment, labour force characteristics, occupations, individual income and family income. It focuses on female lone parents and their families, but also includes information on male lone parents for comparative purposes. Those interested in greater detail, including data in tabular form and data concerning the Métis and Inuit populations, will find this type of information in the full study.

Effect of “Identity” versus “Ancestry” Definitions

In 1996 the Census identified approximately 1,100,000 people who said they had Aboriginal ancestry, but only 800,000 who said they were themselves Aboriginal. As noted above, this study focuses on the population who identified themselves as Aboriginal, as distinct from the population who say they have an Aboriginal ancestor. The definition that is used has an effect on the socioeconomic characteristics of the population, including the proportion who are single-parents. Figure 1 illustrates this by comparing the prevalence of single-mother families for different population groups. Lone-parent prevalence was highest among Registered Indian families at about 23% of all families, and lower among others with Aboriginal *identity* (the second bar) at about 17%. However, if the “other Aboriginal” population includes all those with Aboriginal *ancestry*, the prevalence falls to 14% (the third bar in the figure). If we isolate only those who have Aboriginal *ancestry* but not Aboriginal *identity* the prevalence falls to 12% (the fourth bar in the figure), which is the same as for the general population (the fifth bar in the figure). The decision to focus on the Aboriginal identity population was made in order to focus on the population that is culturally and socioeconomically most distinct from the Canadian mainstream. It was felt that this population was the focus of greatest concern in the realm of social policy.

Figure 1: Aboriginal definitions and the prevalence of single-mother families, Canada, 1996¹

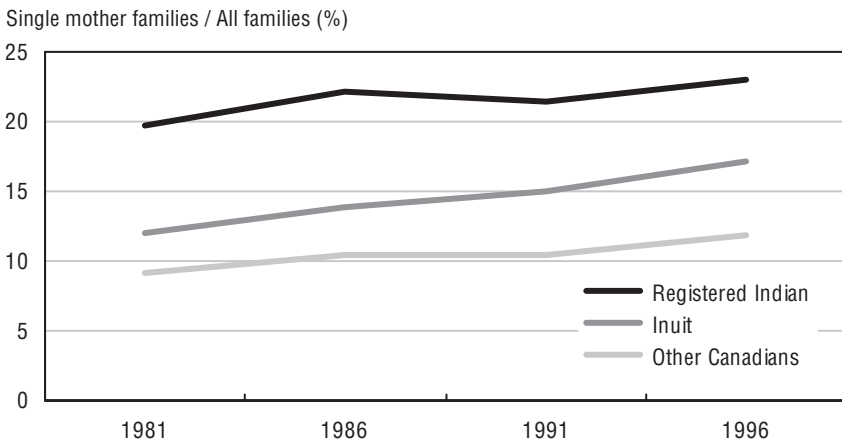
Single mother families / All families (%)



Trends in the Prevalence of Lone-Parent Families, 1981–96

Because of changing Census questions and definitions, it is impossible to compare data on the Aboriginal identity population over the 1981–96 period. However, Census data based on the Registered Indian and Inuit ancestry populations is available, as illustrated in Figure 2 below. The figure shows female lone-parent families as a proportion of all families among the Registered Indian, Inuit ancestry and non-Aboriginal populations. Among Registered Indians this proportion increased from about 20% in 1981 to about 23% in 1996, while among non-Aboriginal Canadians, it increased from 9% to 12% over the same period. Inuit female lone-parent families have also increased as a proportion of all families, from about 12% in 1981 to 17% in 1996. (Comparable data for the non-status Indian and Métis ancestry populations were not available.)

Figure 2: Female lone-parent families as a percentage of all families selected ancestry groups, Canada, 1981–96



Sources: Statistics Canada 1984; Brecher et. al., 1985; Hagey et. al., 1989; DIAND 1996; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, custom tabulation based on the 1996 Census of Canada.

Prevalence of Single-Mother Families in 1996

In 1996 there were 945,230 lone-parent families headed by women in Canada, according to the 1996 Census. Of these families, 31,620 were headed by Registered Indian women, and 16,505 were headed by other women with Aboriginal identity.

As shown in Figure 3, single-mother families were almost twice as common in urban areas as in rural areas among all three identity groups. Among Registered Indians, those living off reserves in urban areas had the highest proportion of female single-parent families (29%), while those living off reserves in rural areas had the lowest proportion (12%). Those living on reserves were in the middle (19%). There was a similar pattern among the other Aboriginal identity population, in that there was a much higher proportion of single-mother families in urban areas compared to rural areas. However, the prevalence of single mother families among the other Aboriginal population was substantially lower in urban areas than among the Registered Indian population. The other Canadian population showed a similar pattern of higher rates of single-mother families in urban areas, but the proportions were lower than for the Aboriginal populations in both urban and rural areas. In short, the differences among the three groups were greatest in urban areas.

The proportion of lone parents among families with children 0 to 15 years of age was higher than the proportion among all families. In 1996, 28% of Registered Indian families with children aged 0 to 15 years were female lone-parent families, compared to 24% among the other Aboriginal identity population and 16% among the other Canadian population. Again, the proportions were higher for those living in urban areas than in rural areas. In 1996, in urban areas off reserves, female lone-parent families made up 38% of Registered Indian families with children 0 to 15 compared to 29% of other Aboriginal identity families and 18% of other Canadian families with children. (See Figure 4.)

Number of Children in Lone-Parent Families

The number of children in Census families is important for a number of reasons, including the additional income needs of larger families, and the need for child care and educational services. Figure 5 provides data on the average number of children in families for Registered Indian and other Canadian families. Families that do not have any children 0 to 15 years old are excluded from the figure. It can be seen that, for both populations, husband-wife families had more children than lone parent families, and female lone-parent families had more children than male lone-parent families. In addition, for all family types registered, Indian families had more children than those of other Canadian families.

Figure 3: Single-mother families as a percentage of all families by Aboriginal identity and location, Canada, 1996

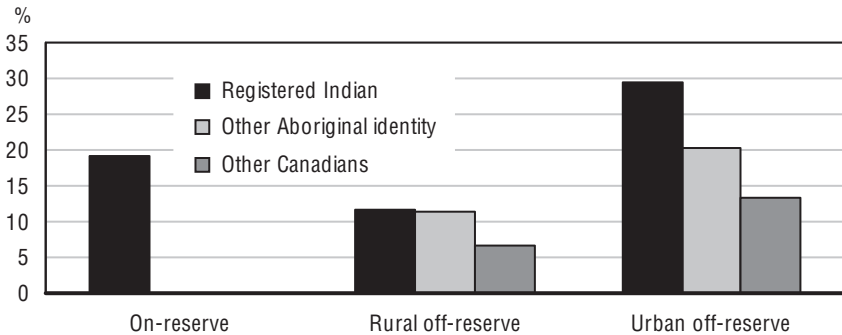


Figure 4: Single-mother families with children 0 to 15 as a percentage of all families with children 0 to 15 by Aboriginal identity and location, Canada, 1996

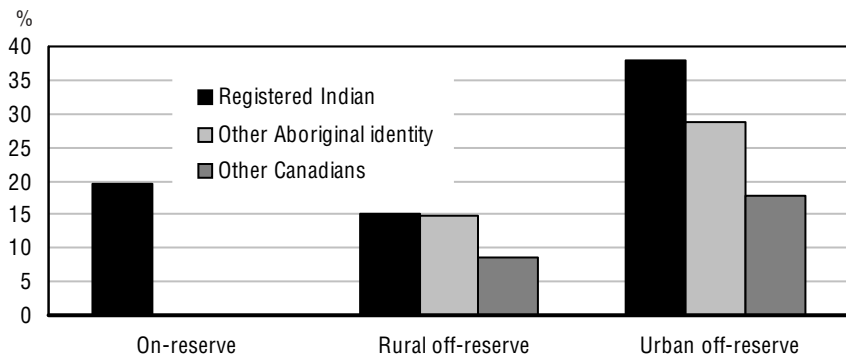
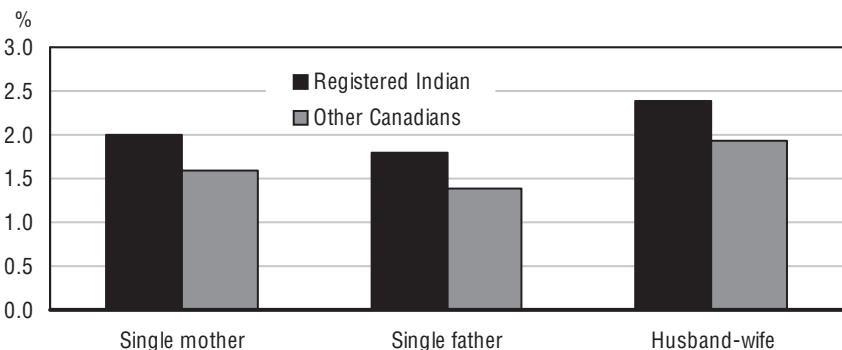


Figure 5: Average number of children by family type, Registered Indian and other Canadian families with children, Canada, 1996



Family Status of Individuals

The proportion of lone parents can also be looked at in terms of individuals. A number of different measures can be used, such as lone parents as a percentage of the adult population or lone parents as a percentage of all parents. Figure 6 is based on the adult female population and shows the proportions of women who are single mothers living with children 0 to 15 years old, other mothers with children 0 to 15, and all other women. In this figure, the Aboriginal identity population is further subdivided between Registered Indians, Métis, Inuit and non-status Indians. Among all of these groups, except for the Inuit, more than half of the women did not have young children 0 to 15 at home. Among Inuit women, about 55% were mothers with children 0 to 15 living at home. All of the Aboriginal identity groups have much higher proportions of single mothers, with the highest proportion (15%) found among Registered Indian women. The proportions among Métis and non-status Indian women were slightly lower, and the proportion of Inuit single mothers was 10%.

We can also look at the proportion of mothers who are lone parents, as opposed to being part of a husband-wife family. Figure 7 reflects this, showing that about one-third of Registered Indian, Métis and non-status Indian mothers are single mothers, compared to about 16% of non-Aboriginal mothers. In other words, twice as many mothers from these three groups are lone parents compared to non-Aboriginal mothers. Inuit mothers are more similar to non-Aboriginal mothers with 19% being single mothers.

As can be seen in Figure 8, the proportion of women who are single mothers varies by place of residence. Among all groups, higher proportions of women living in urban areas were single mothers in 1996. This was especially true for Registered Indian women living in urban areas, 25% of whom were single mothers, compared to about 20% of Métis women, 17% of non-status Indian women and 15% of Inuit women. These figures may be compared to the 9% of non-Aboriginal women living in urban areas who were single mothers. In rural, off-reserve locations, about 11% to 12% of Aboriginal women were single mothers, compared to about 5% of non-Aboriginal women. Among Registered Indian women living on reserves, about 14% were single mothers.

Figure 6: Distribution of women 15 or older in private households by marital/parental status and Aboriginal identity group, Canada, 1996

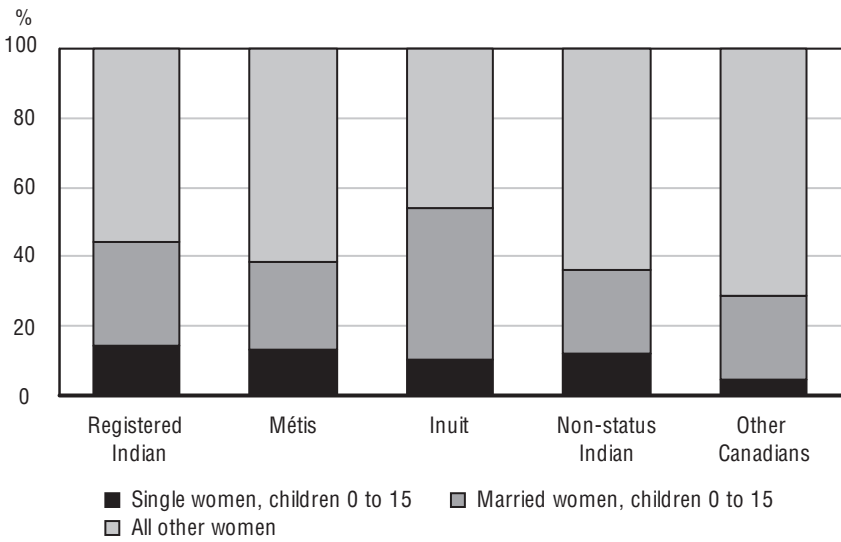


Figure 7: Single mothers as a percentage of mothers with children 0 to 15 years old by Aboriginal identity group, Canada, 1996

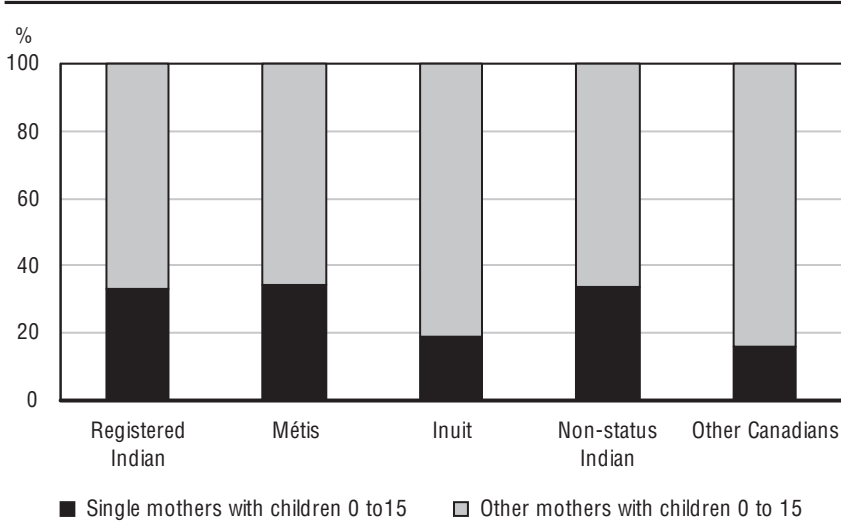
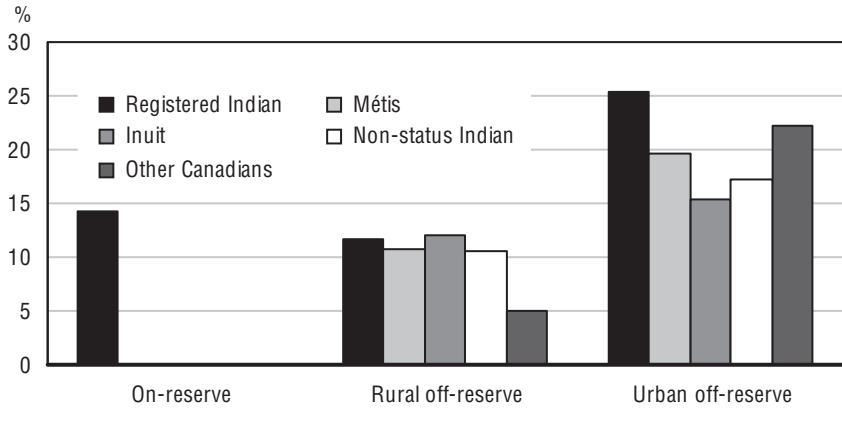


Figure 8: Single mothers as a percentage of women in private households by Aboriginal identity group and location, Canada, 1996



As illustrated in Figure 9, the relationship between the prevalence of single mothers is different for different age groups, and is also different for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. Among Canadians generally, the proportion of mothers who are single mothers is high for the younger (15-24) and older (55-64) age groups, but considerably lower among the age groups in the middle (25-54). Among Aboriginal women (including Registered Indians and others with Aboriginal identity) the proportion of single mothers is again highest for the youngest age group, but it does not decline as much in the older age groups, remaining at or above 30% of mothers.

Single Mothers and Educational Attainment

In addition to age, educational attainment may influence the likelihood of being a single parent. Figure 10 examines this by looking at the relationship between education and the prevalence of single mothers for one age group—those 25 to 44 years old. As the figure shows, among the non-Aboriginal population in this age group, as educational attainment increases, the proportion of single mothers decreases. This is not true of the Aboriginal population, among whom the proportion of single mothers tends to stay about the same or increase slightly with education. For all educational levels, the proportion of single mothers is much higher among Aboriginal women compared to non-Aboriginal women. In short, the relationship between education and being a single mother is not very clear for Aboriginal women and seems to be different from among non-Aboriginal women.

Figure 9: Single mothers as a percentage of mothers of children 0 to 15 among Aboriginal and other Canadian women, by age group, Canada, 1996

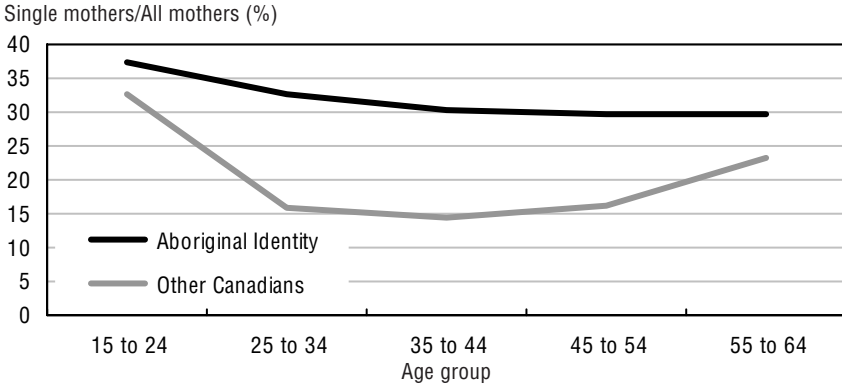
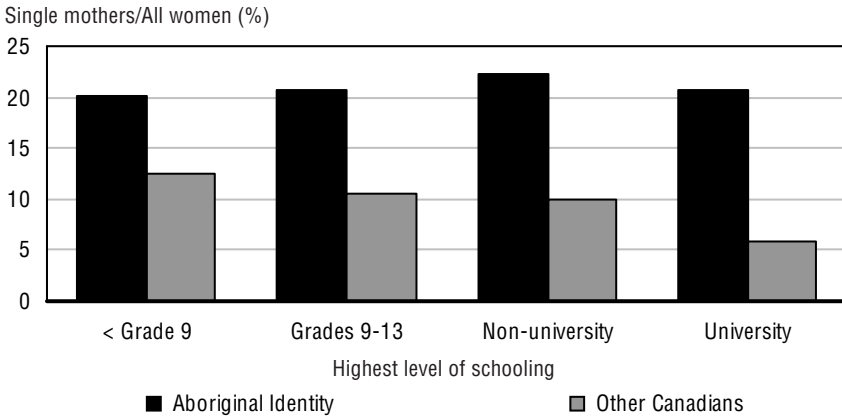


Figure 10: Single mothers with children 0 to 15 as a percentage of all women 25 to 44 years old by highest level of schooling and Aboriginal identity, Canada, 1996



Employment Rates

A number of socioeconomic characteristics may be related to being a single parent, including such things as employment and income. Figure 11 shows the employment rate (percentage of the population that is employed) of four groups defined in terms of gender and parental status: single mothers, married mothers, other women and single fathers. It can be seen that, among the Aboriginal population, single mothers have the lowest employment rates (about 38%) while married mothers and single fathers have the highest employment rates, both at about 51%. Among the non-Aboriginal population the lowest employment rate is found among “other women”—those who are

not mothers—and the highest employment rate is found among single fathers. The result is that the gap in employment rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal single mothers is quite large, a difference of about twenty percentage points, and the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal single fathers is even greater.

As shown in Figure 12, employment is also related to place of residence. This figure shows that Aboriginal single mothers living on reserves or in rural areas had higher rates of employment than those living in off-reserve, urban areas. In all locations there was a large difference in employment rates between Aboriginal single mothers and other single mothers, especially in urban areas where there was a difference of more than twenty percentage points.

Figure 11: Employment rates among the population 15+ not attending school full-time by Aboriginal identity and parental status, Canada, 1996

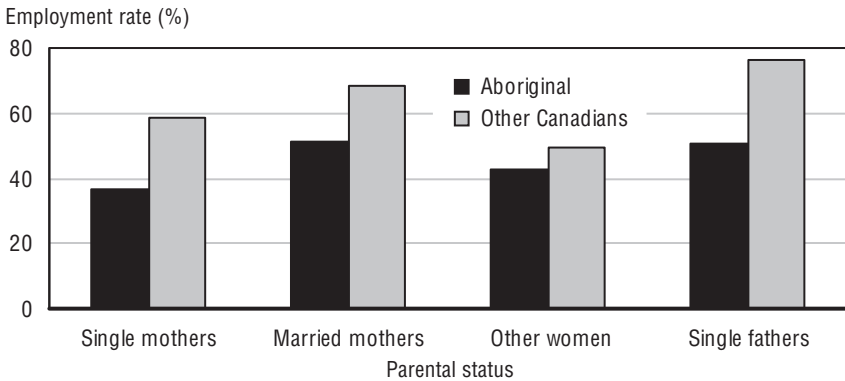
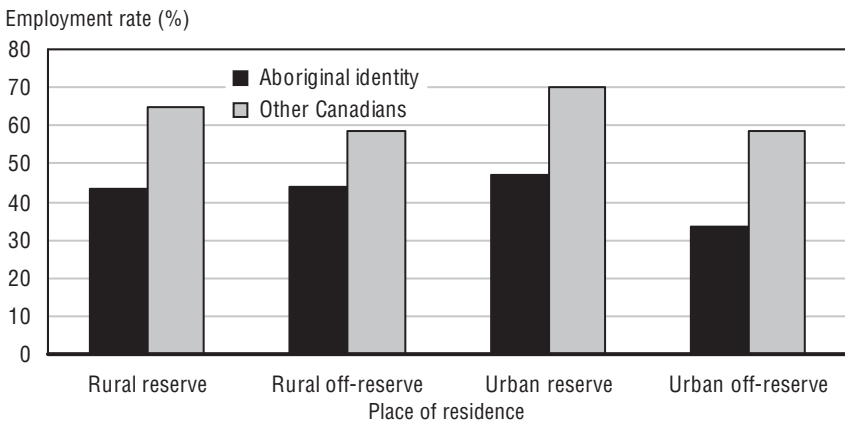


Figure 12: Employment rates among single mothers with children 0 to 15 not attending school full-time by Aboriginal identity and place of residence, Canada, 1996



Individual Income

Figure 13 compares the 1995 average incomes of Aboriginal and other single mothers and single fathers across the various age groups. Aboriginal single mothers had the lowest incomes for each age group, followed by Aboriginal single fathers, other single mothers and other single fathers. For all groups incomes increased with age through the 45 to 54 age group. Among Aboriginal single fathers, incomes continued to increase for the 55 to 64 age group, but for the other populations, incomes decreased for this age group. The gaps in average incomes between groups also increased with age so that among the 45 to 54 age group Aboriginal single mothers had incomes which were more than \$5,000 less than Aboriginal single fathers and more than \$10,000 less than other Canadian single mothers.

Aboriginal single fathers tended to have relatively lower average incomes when compared to those of other Canadian single fathers. For most age groups, Aboriginal single fathers had average incomes that were between 60% and 65% of other Canadian single fathers in both urban and rural areas.

Figure 14 focuses on the educational attainment of different Aboriginal parental/marital groups and the relationship to median income. As the figure shows, in 1995 Aboriginal single mothers' median incomes were lower than those of Aboriginal single fathers, and higher than those of Aboriginal married mothers at most educational levels. Aboriginal married mothers median incomes, however, increased more rapidly with education, so that the incomes of married mothers with a university education surpassed those of single mothers and equalled those of single fathers. Aboriginal married fathers' median incomes were substantially higher than any of the other groups, also increasing rapidly with education.

Figure 15 focuses on the proportion of single mothers whose major source of income is government transfer payments. This figure also compares the various Aboriginal identity groups and on-reserve, rural and urban locations. In general, the figure shows that dependence on government transfer payments is high among single mothers. Almost half of non-Aboriginal single mothers, and 60% or more of Aboriginal single mothers, identified transfer payments as their major income source in 1995. Among the various identity groups, Registered Indian single mothers were most likely to depend on transfer payments. Among Registered Indian women living in urban, off-reserve locations, about 75% identified transfer payments as their major source of income.

Figure 13: Average individual income among single parents by Aboriginal identity, gender and age, Canada, 1995

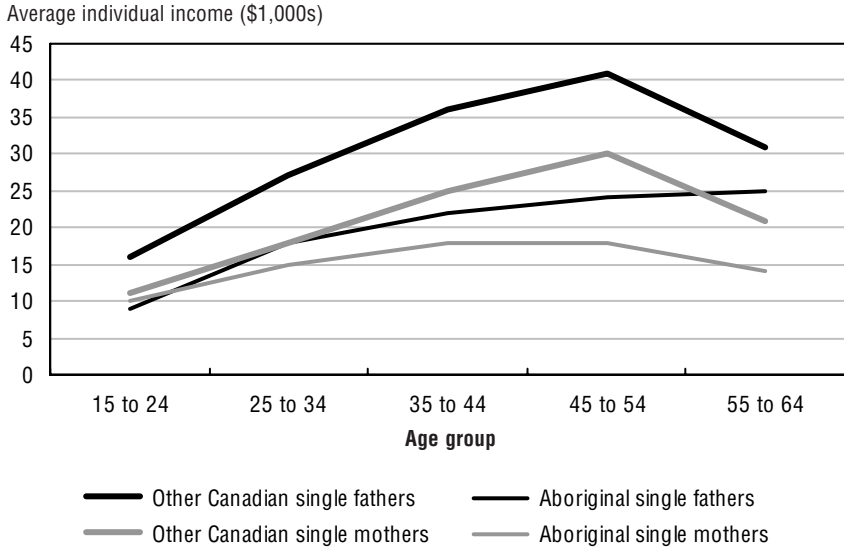


Figure 14: Median annual income among the Aboriginal population with income by parental status and educational attainment, Canada, 1995

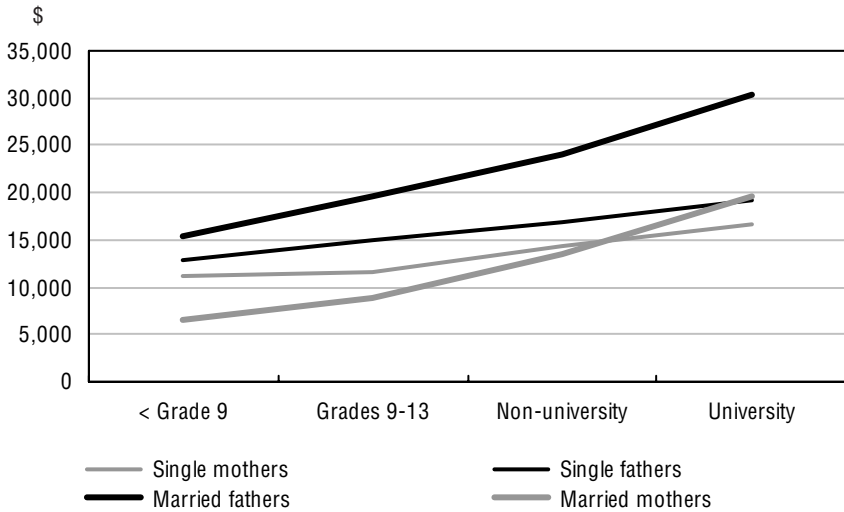
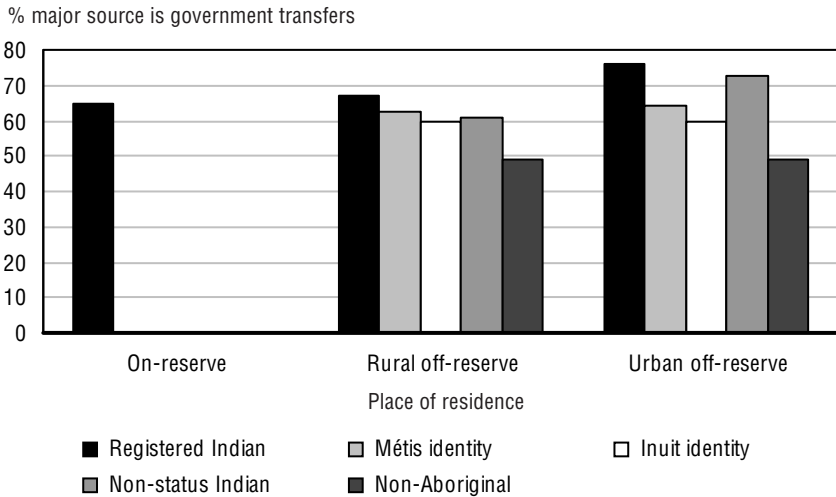


Figure 15: Proportion of single mothers with children 0 to 15 whose major source of income is government transfer payments by Aboriginal identity and place of residence, Canada, 1995



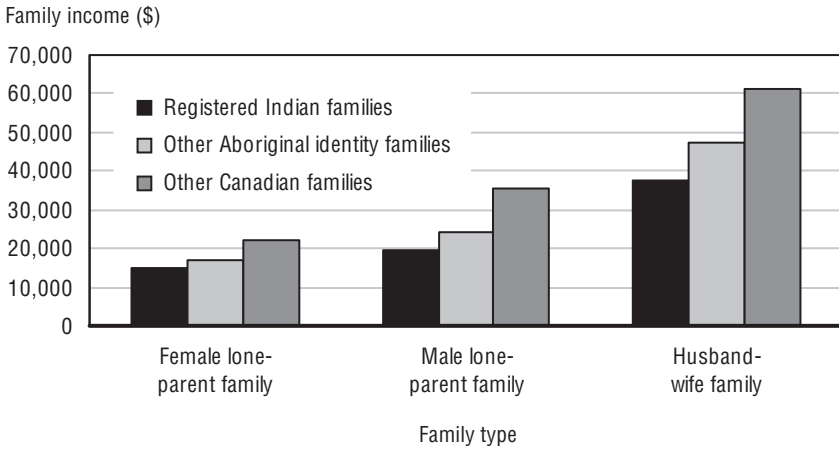
Family Income

The previous tables and figures have been concerned with individual incomes. Family incomes, however, provide a better indication of relative income and disparities among groups because the family tends to act as an economic unit. In addition, lone-parent families are likely to have fewer income earners than two-parent families and have more dependants than childless couples or unattached individuals.

Figure 16 compares the average incomes among the three identity groups and among three family types in 1995. The figure shows that there were large gaps in incomes between lone-parent families and husband-wife families as well as between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population groups. In 1995, Registered Indian single-mother families had an average income of about \$15,000 and other Aboriginal single-mother families had an average income only slightly higher at about \$17,000. By comparison, non-Aboriginal single-mother families had an average income of about \$21,000.

As the figure shows, the income differences between different family types were much greater. Husband-wife families with children had the highest incomes, and these were about three times the average incomes of single-mother families. It can also be seen from the figure that the differences among identity groups are larger for male lone-parent families than for female lone-parent families, and larger still for husband-wife families.

Figure 16: Average annual income of families with children 0 to 15 by identity group and family type, Canada, 1995



Conclusion

It is clear from the above that Aboriginal women are more likely to be mothers and much more likely to be single parents than other Canadians. In addition, there are differences among various Aboriginal identity groups that show it is a mistake to consider all Aboriginal single mothers as having the same needs. These differences are apparent when comparing Registered Indian, Métis, Inuit and non-status Indian single mothers and when looking at geographic differences, such as comparisons between urban and rural areas.

All Canadian single mothers tend to experience economic disadvantages, including problems in the labour market and low family income, but Aboriginal single mothers experience these problems to a greater degree than do others. The low incomes of single-mother families and high rates of dependency on government transfer payments among Aboriginal single mothers are clearly identified in the data reviewed above.

One of the themes of the study is the high proportion of Aboriginal single mothers in urban areas and the high level of need among them, as shown by their employment characteristics and dependence on transfer income. This is particularly true for Registered Indian single mothers. Urban-rural differences are also found among other Canadian women, but because of the higher proportions of single mothers and their higher levels of need, it is a more significant issue among the Aboriginal population.

The findings of this study point to some preliminary policy-related implications. The relatively large and increasing number of young Aboriginal single mothers suggests a need for housing, parenting support and education. Due to their lower educational and occupational levels, Aboriginal single mothers may have greater difficulty than other single mothers in attempting to enter the labour market and gain employment. Programs that enable Aboriginal single mothers to enter the labour market need to be designed specifically for those with low educational levels who spend longer periods caring for pre-school children.

One of the strengths of Aboriginal single mothers is their willingness to upgrade their education by attending school as mature adults. It appears that existing programs and policies have been effective in helping Aboriginal single mothers pursue post-secondary (university and non-university) education at various age levels. However, there may be a need to do more to improve basic education or to provide educational upgrading for this segment of the population.

Given recent research findings, growing numbers of children living in Aboriginal single-parent families are likely to experience more educational and health problems than other children. These risks seem to be related both to income levels and parenting styles, suggesting that parenting education and support programs are important, in addition to income supports.

The findings also suggest the need for further research in a number of areas. Further work is needed to identify the effects on children of living in single-parent families, particularly for Aboriginal children. A better understanding is also needed concerning how Aboriginal single-parent families are formed, and whether these processes are different from those among the general Canadian population. It seems likely that further analysis will identify distinctly different types of single-parent families based on such things as education, income levels, cultural characteristics, how they were formed, and how long they remain single-parent families. Different types of single-parent families are likely to face different issues. A better understanding of these and other questions will need to go beyond cross-sectional studies to longitudinal research designs.

Endnotes

Presented at the Aboriginal Policy Research Conference, Ottawa, November 2002.

1. Unless otherwise stated, the data source for all figures in this article are from the customized 1996 Census tabulations prepared for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

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