

Singles Study

Improving our Knowledge of
and Responses to Singles on
Ontario Works in Toronto

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Introduction

Background

Shortly after the enactment of the Ontario Works Act in 1997, families with children represented the bulk of Toronto's OW caseload (nearly 60%)



1997

While still considered a fairly self-sufficient group, by 2001 singles began to outnumber the proportion of single parents on the Toronto OW caseload



1999

Singles without dependents in Toronto were characterized as a short-term and self-sufficient group of recipients, comprising just under 40% of the caseload at the end of 1999.



2001



2011

By 2011, the share of singles on the (provincial) caseload grew to the point that singles – largely consisting of young males – were identified as the “new face of social assistance in Ontario” (Stapleton and Bednar, 2011).

Motivation for the Study

- Singles have increased from 38% of Toronto's caseload in 1999 to more than 60% in 2016.
- Despite their growing size on Toronto's caseload and across the province, singles have comparatively limited options for financial support.
- Instead, lone parents have benefitted from federal and provincial child benefits and more generous tax credits.
- In addition to being on the margins of policy discussions, **singles are rarely the focus of research examining social assistance.**

Purpose of the Singles Study

The singles study was designed to address this gap with a deliberate focus on documenting the characteristics and experiences of singles in receipt of OW in Toronto.

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to better understand:

- 1 the characteristics of singles on the OW caseload in Toronto;
- 2 how the singles caseload is changing over time;
- 3 the factors that predict exits to employment; and
- 4 the experiences and needs of singles.

Analytic Approach

Overview of Analytic Approach

The Singles Study was designed as an exploratory study that used a combination of rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative Analysis

- 69,000 observations
- Descriptive statistics of singles on the caseload
- Cluster analysis to identify similar groups of singles
- Advanced regression analysis (competing risks)

Qualitative Analysis

- Extensive interview instrument
- Randomized sample
- 51 semi-structured interviews, lasting between 1-3 hours
- Thematic analysis of interview transcripts plus detailed field notes to distill key themes and develop detailed participant narratives

Both approaches drew on the singles population in receipt of Ontario Works in Toronto in 2016

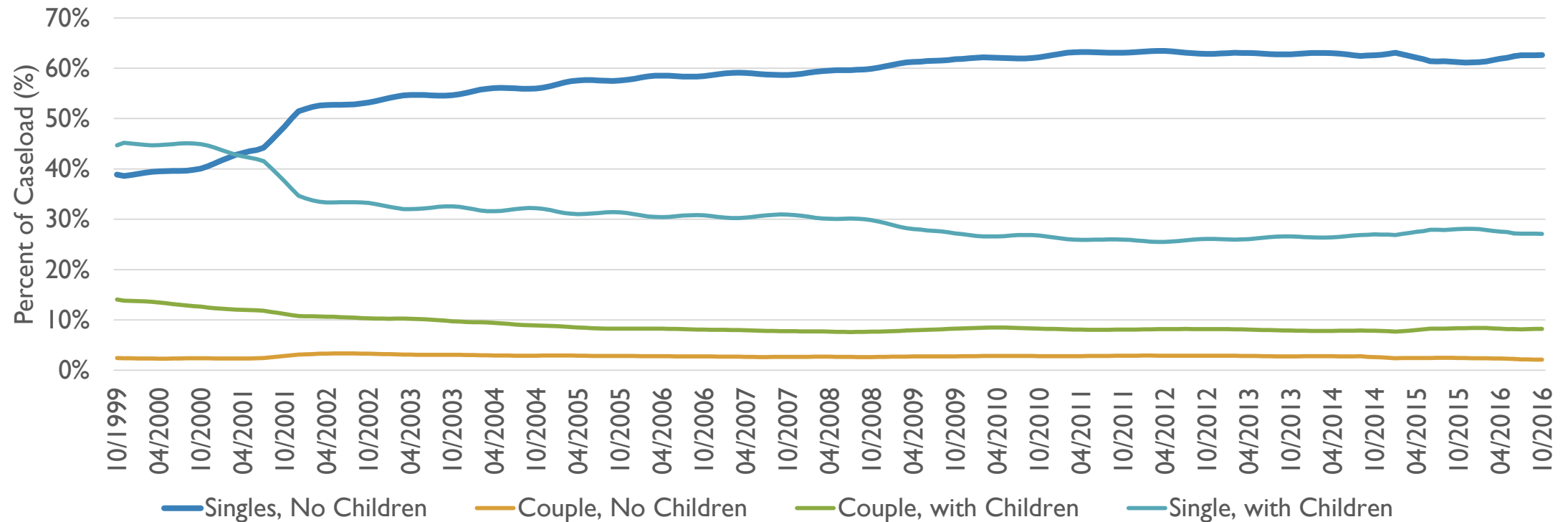
Limitations and Caveats

- The study did not include an analysis of race or ethnicity as data on these variables are unavailable.
- Interviews were primarily done with English-speaking clients.
- The study also was not an evaluation of the effectiveness of employment programs or other interventions.
- The analysis looked at the Toronto OW caseload as a whole (rather than examining differences by neighbourhood or geography).

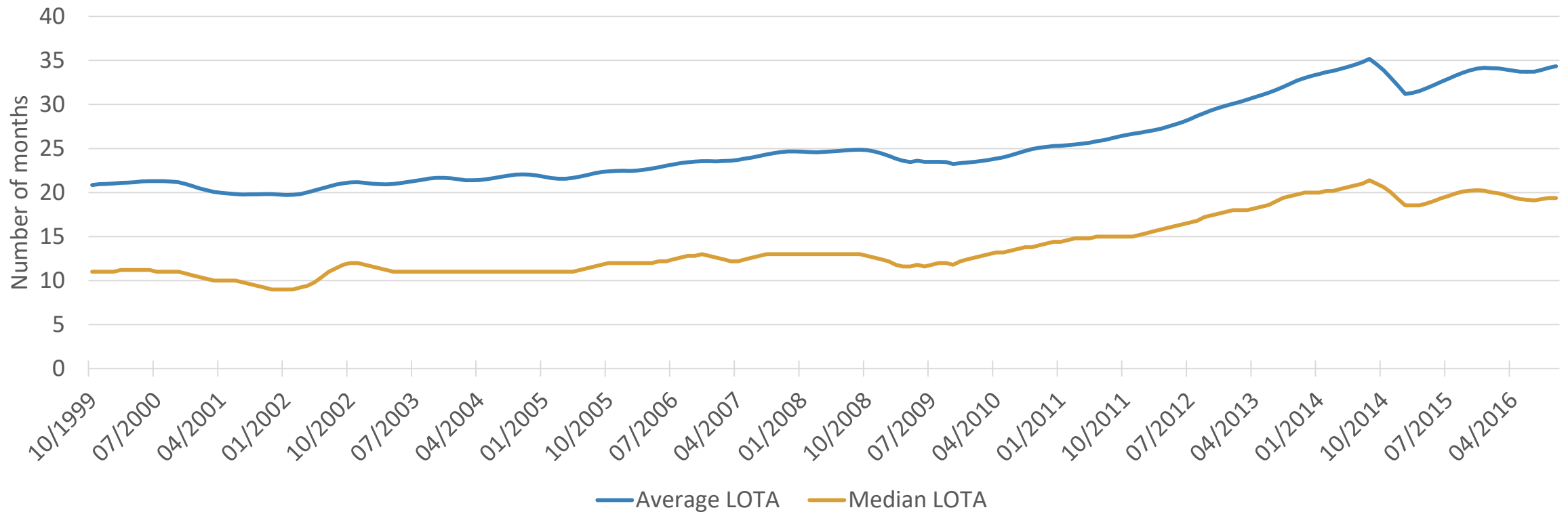
Quantitative Analysis

Singles now make up the largest percentage of the caseload

Figure 1: Toronto OW monthly caseload by case type, October 1999-October 2016 (calculated using five month moving averages)



Length of Time on Assistance (LOTA) has increased over time



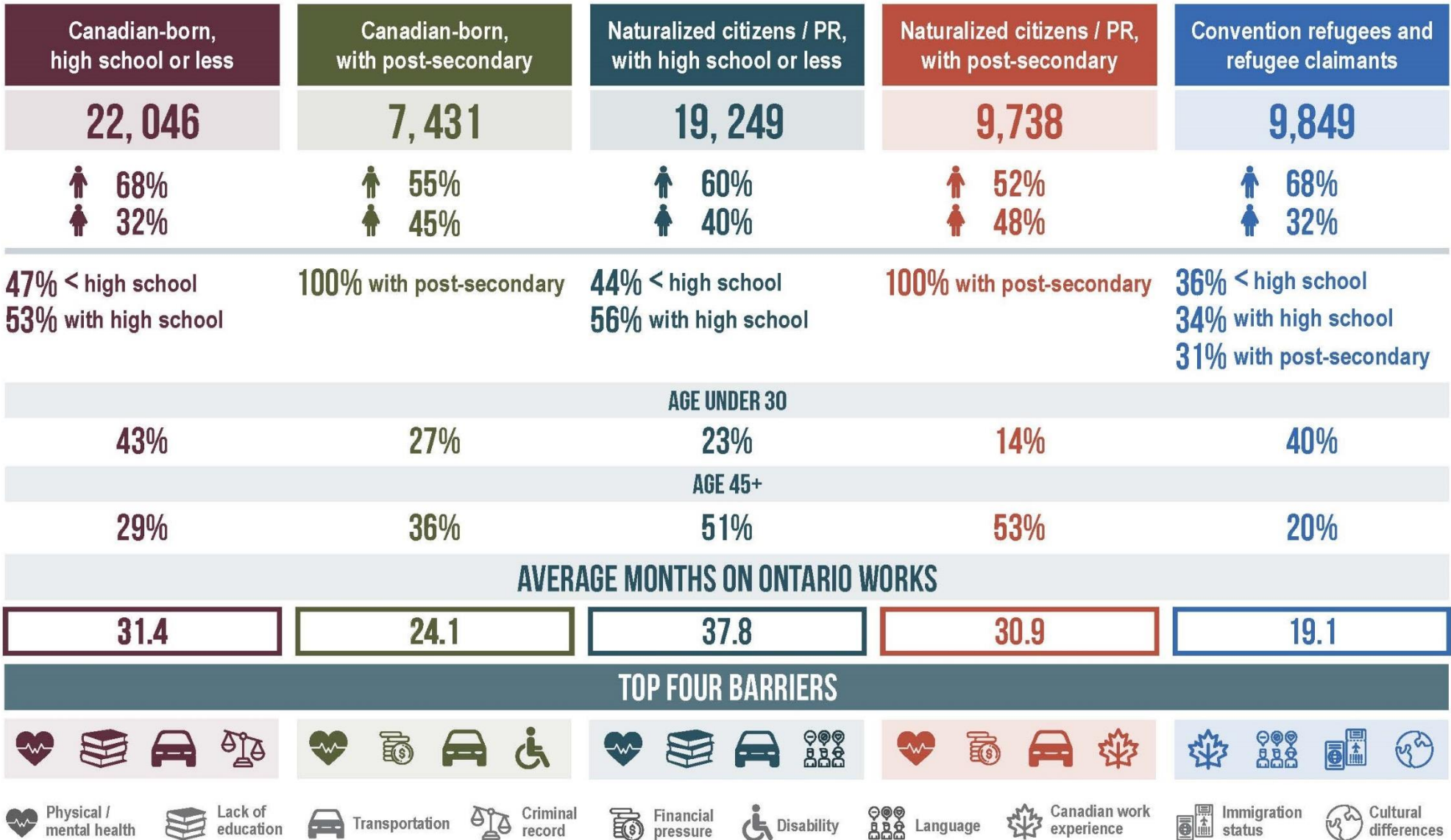
The average length of time on assistance for singles has increased since 1999, increasing from around 20 months to nearly 35 months in 2016.

Quantitative Highlights: 2016 Caseload Profile

Contrary to common belief, singles are no longer just young and male. In fact, the caseload profile illustrated that there is no one “type” of single person on OW in Toronto.

- 38% of singles caseload were female
- 38% of the singles caseload were also aged 45 and over
- Women age 45+ made up a sizeable share (16%) of the singles caseload
- Men under age 30 represented less than 19% of the singles caseload
- 30% of singles had completed post-secondary training of some kind
- 35% identified physical and mental health needs during service planning (real need may be higher)

Five Archetypes of Singles



Factors that impact exiting OW for employment

*While only 14% of singles left the caseload for employment in 2016, singles faced a number of compounding barriers. These issues related not only to personal challenges, but also to **wider systemic hurdles** that make finding and securing stable employment difficult.*

Factors influencing leaving OW for work

Individual Factors

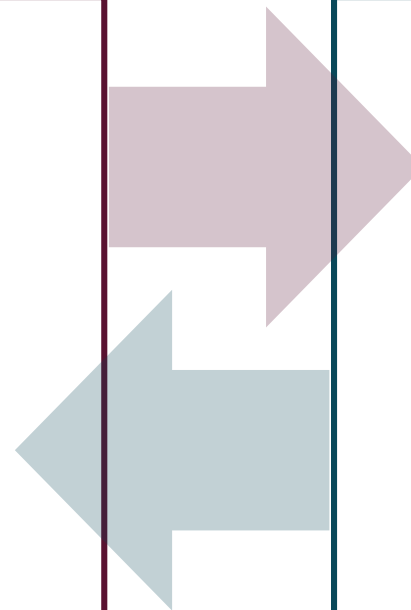


Poor physical/mental health
Loss of motivation
Disability
Addictions
Educational attainment

Systemic and Policy Barriers



Neighbourhood unemployment rate
Need for record suspension
Transportation barriers



Qualitative Analysis

Why Detailed Interviews?

- In-depth interviews complement quantitative analysis by bringing rich, detailed insight into the daily realities of clients lives and their journeys onto and through assistance.
- Most importantly, this approach is highly valued by clients. It provides an opportunity to tell their story in their own words, highlighting what is important to them.
- We are grateful to the 51 people who participated. The vast majority were appreciative of the opportunity and were hopeful that their experiences would help improve services for others and positively influence decision-making.

*“Thank you for the \$100, now I can go buy some food.”
(Vania)*

“I don't want the money, I really want to voice my opinion. Hopefully you guys can fix something.” (Michelle)

“I'm grateful for everything that you've done in my life and for all the help that you've given me ... The fact that you are sitting here trying to address how you can be better speaks a lot.” (Patrick)

Interview Highlights:

Deep Poverty and the Struggle to Make Ends Meet

“They're giving me enough not to die ... I've got to stay home. Where am I going to go? If I go out, I've got to spend money ... I go out, I spend \$2 to buy a coffee ... I stay there a couple of hours, home on the couch, laying down, all day long, every day. All day long. Come on, this is no life. It's worse than being in jail. At least in jail, you don't pay rent or food. It's a nightmare.” (Tony)

- With minimal living costs far exceeding their income, the vast majority of participants described a number of survival strategies to make ends meet, which included setting priorities, seeking out deals, turning to family and friends, and finding ways to earn additional income.
- More worryingly, participants described making difficult trade-offs between basic needs and other living expenses, and as a consequence, experiencing malnourishment, deteriorating physical and mental health, combined with feelings of isolation.

Interview Highlights: Key Challenges & Concerns

- Recurring Themes
 - Deep poverty and social isolation
 - especially for older singles, those with poor health and newcomers/refugees
 - Housing instability
 - Food insecurity
 - Poor and deteriorating health
 - Debt and predatory lending
 - Criminal records and access to suspensions
 - Stigma and discrimination

“You get sicker because you’re not eating properly. I just was eating one samosa, one soup a day. How could you not get sick? How could your mind function when you’re not eating anything properly...” (Maria)

“It’s bad when Pay Day Loan companies won’t qualify you for a loan. But I had Pay Day loans on Pay Day loans on Pay Day loans.” (Mark)

“It means everything. Now I’ve got a place and I’m comfortable with it. It feels like a home... Now I can focus on my health. I can sit down and write what I’m going to eat, what I’m going to make. It changed a lot.” (Marco)

Interview Highlights: Multiple Layers of Disadvantage

“We don’t have anyone to turn to in the sense of [getting] help. People look at us like we have it easy because we don’t have anybody to support. But in reality we have it just as hard as everybody else.” (Jennifer)

“They think you have no dependents so the amount that you get should be lower ... That’s a form of discrimination ... Each case is different and should be treated differently.” (Gabriella)

- Singles have access to less financial support inside and outside assistance than other family types which impacts every aspect of their lives.
- More subtly, some felt that they received less empathy, and less targeted information and guidance inside assistance because they were single.
- This fed into a feeling of being overlooked in some areas and provided with less support in others.

Interview Highlights: Positive Impacts

- For some participants, specific case workers, programs or simply access to financial assistance (albeit extremely inadequate) helped them stabilize their lives or make progress.
- Many described caring and knowledgeable workers going "the extra mile" to help at critical moments in their lives.

“The fact that they're willing to help me a single young male at 19 years old versus telling me to just go and get a job ... They basically implemented everything that they could to actually help me. So in regards to me actually having somebody to kind of fall back on when it comes to financials and funding, I don't. OW is basically it.” (Patrick)

“She was different because she treated me like a human being when I needed to be treated like a human being ... First of all she was a great listener and listened to everything that I had been through and was currently going through. Second of all, she apologized for everything I had been through in the system. And third of all, she gave me a list of places and resources to help me get a job. She gave really good advice and just treated me like one, a human being and two, like I was her only client.” (Felecia)

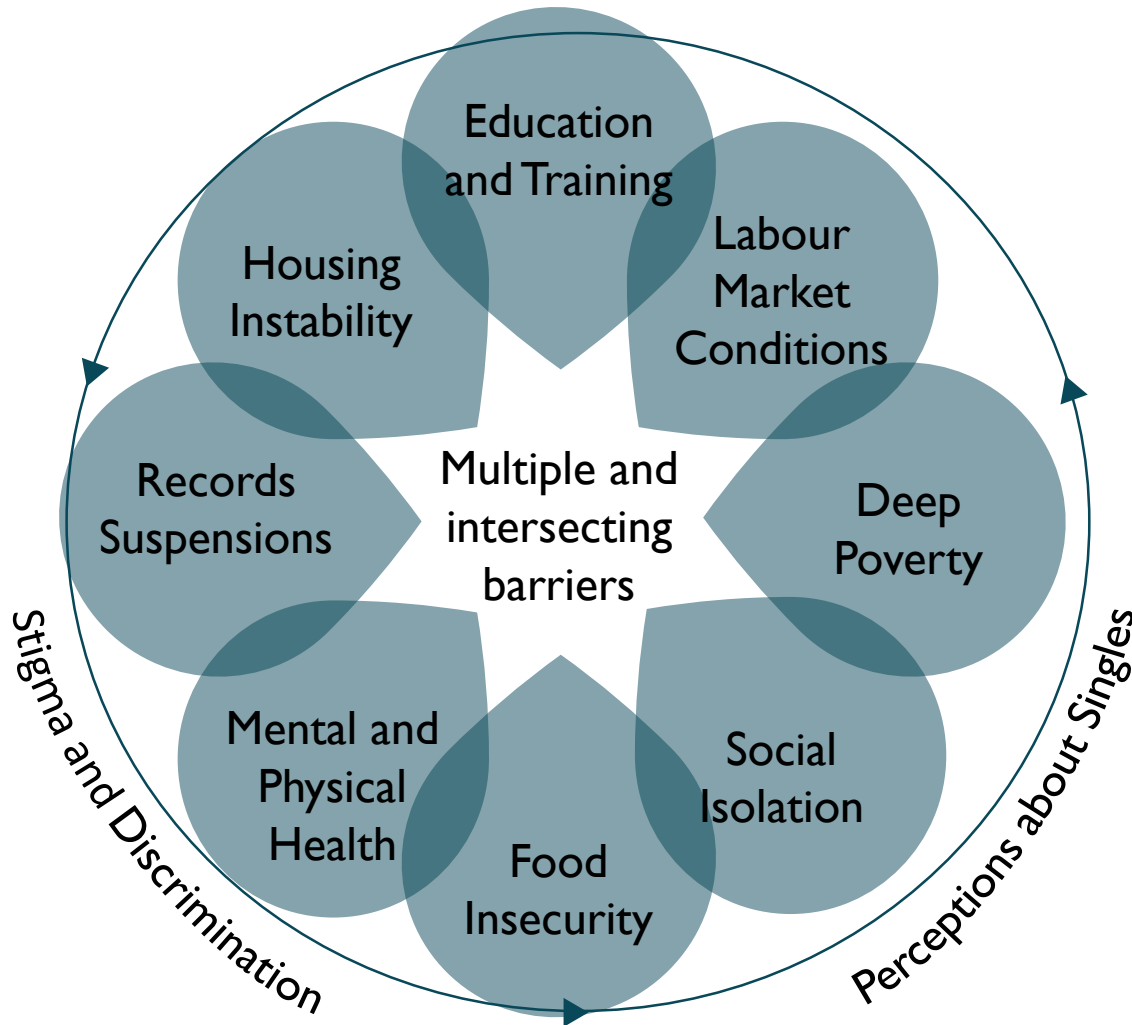
Participant Narratives: No one single and no one path onto or off assistance

- Stories hold incredible power and play a critical role in understanding singles as unique individuals with rich, complex and sometimes contradictory life stories.
- Building on the interviews, we created 30 narratives that describe the rich lived experiences of singles, highlighting multiple trajectories onto, within, and sometimes, off assistance.
- Single Study Videos
 - [Resilience and Hope](#)
 - [Pathways and Barriers](#)
 - [Poverty and Isolation](#)



Key Takeaways & Areas of Application

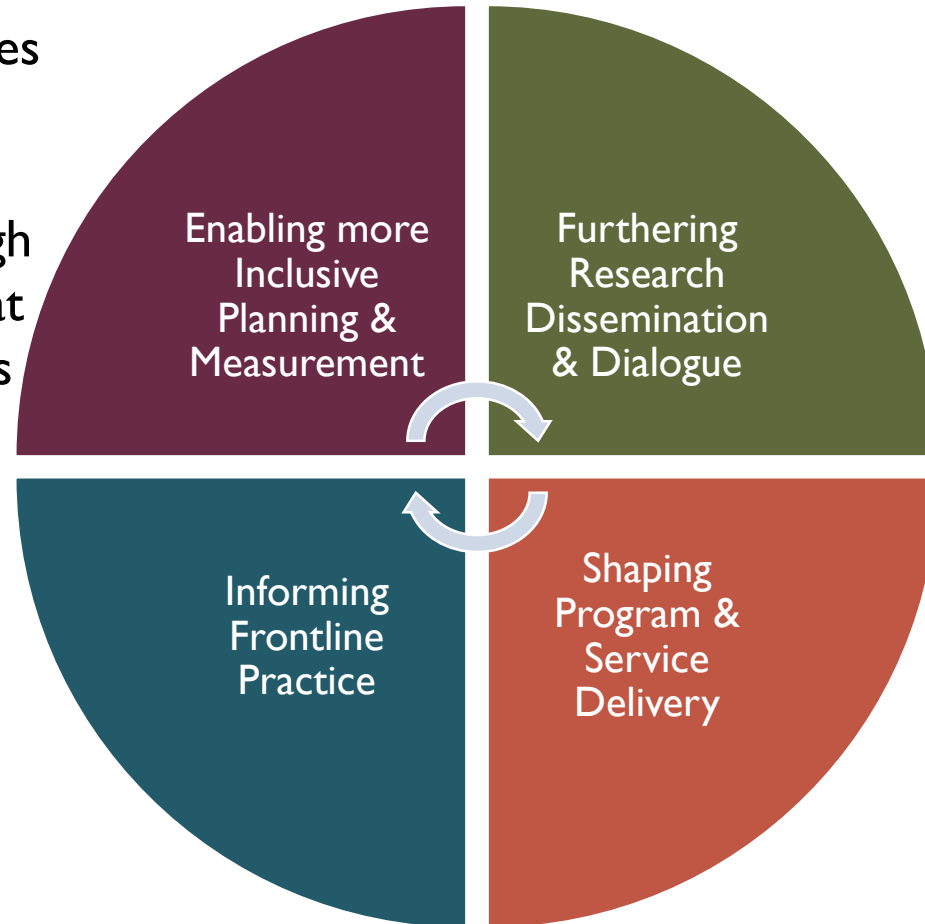
Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research



1. Singles face multiple layers of disadvantage requiring new ways of defining and measuring success
2. Singles desire to be served based on individual realities and specific needs, rather than by family type
3. Increasing complexity of client needs requires more collaborative and integrated service approaches
4. Singles face significant financial hardship requiring improved financial supports inside and outside assistance

Multiple Layers of Application

- Senior managers applying a “singles lens” to planning conversations
- Capturing broader suite of client outcomes and experience through a range of evaluation projects that focus on other population groups
- Using the Single Study videos as poverty awareness pieces in training for frontline staff
- Sharing study findings with Toronto Employment and Social Service staff



- Sharing study findings with public sector stakeholders, community organizations, policymakers, researchers, and other key groups
- Contributing to ongoing policy discussions focused on social assistance improvements
- Sharing research lessons with others interested in doing applied research
- Including resources for singles in development of Reception Area videos to increase knowledge about available services
- Using the singles archetypes to help shape the design of innovative case management pilots

Innovative Case Management Examples

Findings from the Singles Study validates the approach of supporting individuals as a whole person.

Life Coaching and Tools for Positive Change

- Single women 45+
- Goals were to strengthen resilience and develop strategies to overcome obstacles including experiences with trauma by applying principles of positive psychology
- 15 group sessions + 15 individual life coaching sessions with a registered social worker

Trades Connex

- A cohort of Black youth (18-29), some with experience in justice system
- Goals were to increase knowledge and experience in the skilled trades while providing wrap-around supports in a culturally sensitive manner
- Job-specific skills training (3 months training + 4 month work placement)

Next Steps

1

- Continue to engage relevant stakeholders in furthering policy and practice responses to support the needs singles on OW

2

- Conduct large scale telephone survey (800 participants) of people who leave OW to better understand their characteristics and circumstances and the kinds of services and supports that helped them leave

3

- Develop divisional indicators to enable a better, more nuanced understanding of client progress and outcomes that will in turn inform everyday service planning with clients

Singles Study Working Reports & Videos

- 1 **Working Paper #1** documents the demographic characteristics of the 69,000 singles on the caseload in Toronto in 2016 and identifies trends in the singles caseload in Toronto over time.
- 2 **Working Paper #2** details the key themes and issues that emerged through the in-depth interviews with 51 research participants.
- 3 **Working Paper #3** presents 30 narratives that describe the lived experience of singles in rich detail through the respective lenses of Pathways; Supports; Experiences and Journeys.
- 4 **Working Paper #4** identifies the factors associated with leaving assistance for employment among singles in Toronto in 2016.

Report and Video can be accessed here: <https://ocwi-coie.ca/project/improving-our-knowledge-of-responses-to-singles-on-ontario-works-in-toronto/>

Acknowledgments

OCWI

We wish to acknowledge the partnership with the Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation (OCWI), a leading-edge centre of research and innovation, which enabled Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) to undertake this project.

Participants

We are grateful to the 51 individuals who agreed to participate and share their insights. They welcomed the chance to tell their own story, and hoped that their contributions would lead to changes that both reflected and respected their lived experience.

Thank you! For more information about the Singles Study please get in touch with us.

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