

Brock-led research team gets \$2.5-million SSHRC grant to study policies impacting diverse Canadian families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents working from home while caring for children or struggling to support their families while facing a job loss are challenges that have become achingly familiar to many Canadians.

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on services and policies that support, or constrain, parents as they care for and provide for their families, an area Canada Research Chair in Gender, Work and Care Andrea Doucet has been researching for decades.

With a \$2.5 million grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Brock University professor will be heading an international team of researchers to study how childcare services, parental leave policies and employment policies impact diverse Canadian families.

The seven-year research program, “What is the Best Policy Mix for Diverse Canadian Families with Young Children? Re-imagining Family Policies,” will explore four key questions:

- How are current Canadian childcare, parental leave and employment policies structured, financed and delivered, and what can we learn from national and international research?
- What impacts do Canadian policies have on how diverse families live, work and care for their children and what can we learn from their lived experiences?
- What approaches and data are needed to measure the effectiveness and inclusiveness of these family policies?
- What is the best policy mix for Canada’s diverse families with young children?

“This partnership aims to create cutting edge and accessible knowledges about these three key family policies in Canada: childcare services, parental leave policies and employment policies,” said Doucet, Professor of Sociology and Women’s and Gender Studies at Brock.

The team will also develop innovative approaches to assess and measure “how these policies are designed for — and experienced by — diverse Canadian families,” including Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, single parent, LGBTQI2S and low-income families.

“This research program was developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic,” Doucet said. “At that time, the development of inclusive care-work policies were deemed as urgent, in the midst of a socio-political epoch marked by ‘care crises’ and rising employment precarity, which have profoundly altered how people live, work and care for significant others, especially young children.”

Doucet said the team’s project is even more relevant with the arrival of COVID-19.

“The pandemic has revealed how intertwined our working and caring lives are; how important and ‘essential’ care services and care workers are,” she said. “Childcare has emerged as one of the critical issues to economic recovery in Canada and in many other countries.”

Doucet notes that parental leave benefits, which are already marked by social class differences outside of Québec, may have to be re-envisioned in a post-pandemic world, which will be a focus for Doucet and team members with expertise in parental leave and employment policies.

“Pre-pandemic, we acknowledged that there was a widening gap between families who had, and families who did not have, access to affordable childcare services, leave benefits and workplace supports,” she said.

“In this COVID-19 context, we are now asking: What will the ‘new normal’ be for families’ work and care lives? Who is struggling, and in what ways, and what are possible long-term consequences for families — and for mothers and fathers? And could this pandemic, in spite of all that’s negative, actually generate a reimagining of care and work policies in ways that support sustainable and habitable family lives?”

With Doucet as Principal Investigator, the research team is made up of 53 people (29 co-investigators and 24 collaborators), including Brock’s Kate Bezanson, Associate Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean of Social Sciences, as one of the co-investigators. It also

includes 34 partners from Canadian universities, non-profit organizations, international organizations, government departments, unions and a private sector company.

The team's lead community partner is the Childcare Research and Resource Unit [4] led by co-investigator Martha Friendly, "who has championed childcare for nearly a half century," said Doucet. In addition to Doucet and Friendly, the co-founders of the partnership are Donna Lero (University of Guelph) and Susan Prentice (University of Manitoba). Doucet's Canada Research Chair (CRC) Project Coordinator, Jennifer Turner, will take on the role of Project Manager.

The interdisciplinary research team includes four of Doucet's current or former postdoctoral fellows: Sadie Goddard-Durant and Sophie Mathieu (Brock), Lindsey McKay (Thompson Rivers University) and Eva Jewell (Ryerson University), as well as one former PhD student, Karen Foster (Dalhousie University). The project will train more than 70 undergraduate and graduate students and several postdoctoral fellows.

"This will be Canada's first large scale research initiative to produce an integrative analysis of family policies, their intra-actions and intersectional impacts, and recommendations for reimagined approaches," said Doucet.

Vice-President, Research Tim Kenyon said the SSHRC award amplifies Doucet's international reputation as being an expert in parental leave and care-work policies, as well her contributions to methodological, epistemological and conceptual debates on how to do research on and with diverse families.

"The project is the culmination of three years of research consultations building upon three decades of team research and advocacy on childcare, and a decade of collaboration on parental leave and employment policies," Kenyon said. "With Doucet's leadership, this research will contribute to Canadian policies that will support Canadian families' caring and working lives, ultimately resulting in a stronger and more just society."

The seven-year project is being funded by SSHRC's Partnership Grant program which supports formal partnerships between academic researchers and a range of community, non-profit, public sector, and private sector partners.

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