

Employment Mobility and Family Gentrification in Montreal

Steven High, Lysiane Goulet Gervais, Michelle Duchesneau, Dany Guay-Bélanger



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Vanier Institute of the Family
94 Centrepointe Drive
Ottawa, Ontario K2G 6B1
613-228-8500
www.vanierinstitute.ca

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Employment Mobility and Family Gentrification in Montreal

Steven High (Concordia University)

Lysiane Goulet Gervais (Concordia University)

Michelle Duchesneau (Concordia University)

Dany Guay-Bélanger (Carleton University)

As Canada's economy evolves, along with the opportunities and constraints it provides, family members adapt to fulfill their responsibilities at home and at work. For many family members, this can involve travelling long distances for work and being away from home for days, weeks or even months at a time. Since 2012, the *On the Move Partnership*¹ has been exploring this phenomenon of employment-related geographic mobility (E-RGM) and has found that more Canadians than ever before are regularly commuting to work over longer distances in "complex and nuanced" patterns.²

Most people think of rural work environments such as northern gas and oil or mining worksites when examining the impact of mobile work and rarely consider Canada's inner-city regions, yet these emerging labour patterns are shaping the social and economic environments of communities of all kinds.

As part of the *On the Move Partnership*, we have explored the impact of mobile work in urban centres through extensive interviews over the past two years with Canadians engaged in mobile work, which ranged from extended daily commutes to extended travel across Quebec and around the world. The workers and families in this study were living in Montreal's Southwest neighbourhoods of Little Burgundy, Saint-Henri and Pointe-Saint-Charles. Once heavily industrialized, these inner-city areas experienced social and economic change as a result of the rapid deindustrialization and out-migration that occurred during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This was followed by a period of *family gentrification*, as middle-class people moved into the areas with their loved ones.

Families "localize" resource access to manage responsibilities despite absences

Our interview findings suggest that there is a connection between employment mobility and family gentrification. Families with sufficient financial resources are choosing to live in inner-city neighbourhoods in order to "localize" other aspects of their lives. This *localization* includes (but is not limited to) ensuring that community resources such as neighbourhood daycares and schools, playgrounds, stores and public transportation (especially the city's metro system and the airport express bus) are readily accessible to households in which a family member is engaged in mobile work.

Proximity to the central city serves to counterbalance the prolonged absences of family members resulting from work-related mobility. Among two-parent families, since this mobility results in an absence from the family home, one parent's mobility often leads to the relative *immobility* of other family members, who then often become more dependent on proximity to community resources.



New condominium complexes now line Montreal's Lachine Canal.
Photograph by David W. Lewis.

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Mobile work adds complexity to family life and relationships

In this study, interviewed parents shared their reflections on the impact of mobile work on their children and on family life. One mother, Imane,³ expressed concern about the impact of the work-related mobility on her children's physical health: "The funny thing is that young kids tend to stress without letting you know. And the only way that they let you know is that they get sick. So, when he travels a lot, they get sick a lot. It is their way of saying that they are not happy about this situation."

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Family members engaged in mobile work expressed concerns about managing their *parenting roles* when they are often away from home. Some shared feelings of sadness and a longing to be more involved in their children's lives and frustration around having to schedule their children's activities according to their travel plans – something that surfaced repeatedly in the interviews.

One mobile-working mother, Kate, told us that returning home after being away for weeks at a time made her feel as though she had missed large chunks of her son's development and growth. With both Kate and her partner, Russell, being mobile workers, even when one is home, the other is frequently away. Life is not quite the same in those moments, she says, "Whether it is Russell or whether it is me, we are always waiting a little bit to live."

Among our interviewees, Imane had the most to say about the impact of mobile work on family life. If her interview had a recurring theme, it would be that her family life in the context of mobile work is "complicated." Asked about the effect of her husband's travels on the family, she replies, "That's kind of complicated, because we need help with the kids. I have to get the girls ready." The eldest is sent to school with friends, while Imane takes her youngest to daycare. She picks them up at the end of the day and prepares dinner without her partner being there. "It's not just taking care of the kids, it's doing everything like taking care of the home yourself, doing groceries, meals, plus the activities, the school and daycare. Life gets complicated." Her husband's absence leaves her with little flexibility and a significantly increased family workload. "I can't even get sick," she says.

Parents who stay "back home" adapt to accommodate their partners' mobility

As she is self-employed, Imane usually has to work after the kids are asleep: "But when he's away, I am so tired that I can't really work when the girls sleep." As a result, her own work is often left undone, something she finds stressful. Luckily, Imane's mother lives in Montreal and helps manage family roles and responsibilities, such as cooking, laundry or picking up the girls. She stressed the importance of maintaining a routine, even when her husband is away for extended periods: "Life doesn't change when he is away... [so] we continue living our life as usual." Summing up things, Imane says, "You continue the routines and the busy schedule of having kids."

Family life moves on even when a parent is away at work. One mobile worker, Pierre, explained that travelling for work wasn't an issue before his daughter was born. Now, he is concerned about spending time with her, since his long commutes mean that when he leaves and arrives from work she is usually asleep. He is also worried that travelling for work will affect his capacity to take on his share of familial responsibilities. Several interviewees also said that they used to travel as a family when one of them had to work away from home, but that they stopped once their children reached school age. Imane's family used to travel together but didn't want to take the children out of school too often, so they now only rarely accompany their father when he travels for work.

Families use technology to maintain and manage family relationships

Families are increasingly using technology and new media to bridge the distance and remain present in family life. While not all families have access to these tools, these "virtual intimacies" are a growing reality and can help provide continuity in family rituals and relationships in the context of family absences.⁴ A number of study participants spoke of the importance of FaceTime, Skype and other social media in maintaining a connection to home while away. For example, while he's away, Russell "continues to participate in some of the rituals of life

with a child, such as bedtime stories and goodnight songs via Skype.” His partner, Kate, elaborates, “This didn’t exist before, 12 years ago, let’s say. It wasn’t possible – it was phone bills through the roof [laughs]. Nowadays, it is possible to communicate for a small charge or no cost at all; it really, really, really helps to save the day.” Imane says that when her husband travels internationally, communication can be difficult. If he is in India or Pakistan, there is a 10- or 11-hour difference, which can make it hard to find the right time to connect. Also, she says that “the girls don’t like the phone so much, so yeah, it’s not easy.” Her eldest would “barely say ‘Hi, I’m good, everything’s good. Here’s Mom.’” At only 3 years of age, her youngest child doesn’t really speak on the phone yet.

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Children notice routine changes resulting from mobility

In order to gain an intergenerational understanding of how work mobility affects family life, we interviewed four children ages 5 to 7 as part of the study. Much of what these children shared reinforced what the parents said, while other elements of the interviews revealed a different perspective. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the children mainly recall the *disruptions in their routine*.

They fondly remember staying up late or eating certain foods as joyous occasions when the travelling parent is away. June talked about being sad that her mom, Laura, was away but also appreciates the extra time with dad and the extra privileges she receives, “I’m sad when mom is gone, but I am also happy because I get to stay up late.” Some of the children remember receiving and giving gifts upon return and other people caring for them: grandparents, family friends and others.

Families adapt to fulfill their responsibilities

By focusing on three different locations, our place-based approach to the issue of employment mobility allowed us to view mobility from another perspective. This approach highlighted some of the impacts on family life while considering the *full spectrum of mobile work*, from extended daily commuters to regular travellers who leave home for extended periods. It also encouraged us to consider the relationship between *employment mobility* and *family fixity* (aspects of family life that are geographically bound or fixed), particularly as it plays out in “local” processes of urban gentrification. Our research highlighted that while families experience a number of impacts resulting from mobile work, they evolve and adjust in diverse ways – including living close to community resources, adapting family relationships and using technology – to manage their multiple responsibilities.▼

Steven High is a Professor of History at Concordia University and co-founder of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling.

Lysiane Goulet Gervais recently graduated from Concordia University’s art therapy program with a master’s degree.

Michelle Duchesneau is a graduate student at Concordia University’s School for Community and Public Affairs.

Dany Guay-Bélanger is currently working toward a master’s degree in the public history program at Carleton University.

¹ *On the Move* is a cross-sectoral partnership involving 40 researchers from 17 disciplines and 22 universities across Canada and around the world that is funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

² Michael Hann, Deatra Walsh and Barbara Neis, “At the Crossroads: Geography, Gender and Occupational Sector in Employment-Related Geographical Mobility,” *Canadian Studies in Population*, 41:3-4 (2014), <http://bit.ly/2nrVuyd>.

³ First names have been changed to ensure privacy.

⁴ Raelene Wilding, “‘Virtual’ Intimacies? Families Communicating Across Transnational Contexts,” *Global Networks* 6:2 (February 28, 2006), doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00137.x.



The Vanier Institute of the Family
94 Centrepointe Drive
Ottawa, Ontario K2G 6B1
Canada

Tel.: 613-228-8500
info@vanierinstitute.ca
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L'Institut Vanier de la famille
94, promenade Centrepointe
Ottawa, Ontario K2G 6B1
Canada

Tél. : 613-228-8500
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