

# WORK AND RELATIONSHIPS OVER TIME IN LONE-MOTHER FAMILIES

What makes employment possible for low-income lone mothers? What is it like for children to grow up in a low-income family with a working lone parent? This in-depth research explores these issues through the experiences of 15 families, interviewed four times since 2002.

## Key points

- Between 2002 and 2007 the mothers in this study made multiple job moves as they sought to get established in work. By 2016, they were generally settled into their jobs. Three of the 15 women had well-paid professional jobs. But most did not see much increase in pay over time.
- Close family – children and parents – helped the women sustain work in material, practical, financial and emotional ways. Without such support the women would have struggled to stay in work. But for the children, this also meant often quite demanding responsibilities.
- The experiences of these families show how difficult it can be to embed security. For many, low-paid work made building up resources difficult and the women had little to cushion them from life events, such as health problems, family care needs, and retirement.
- The young people had a strong work ethic, but routes into work were rarely smooth and getting access to housing was particularly problematic. The mothers could not often help their children establish themselves, and few public resources to draw upon for support made the young people's transitions to adult life more precarious.
- The mothers and children were often close and proud of each other, but relationships suffered from low income and demanding work schedules. These had an impact on family time and practices, and there were some regrets about the time and energy involved in sustaining work.
- Former partners were rarely part of the picture, and domestic violence cast a long shadow over many mothers' and children's lives.
- State support, especially the tax credit system, was very important to the families, but there was very little support available to young people in the post-2008 austerity era. This put extra pressure on family relationships.

## The research

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# BACKGROUND

Increased employment rates mean that lone mothers are now almost as likely to be employed as mothers living with their partners. But, as sole earners and sole parents, they face particular challenges in managing work and family, with pressure on both time and money. Between 2004 and 2007 this study interviewed 50 lone mothers and 62 children to explore what working meant for their incomes, living standards and family life.

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The mothers involved had left Income Support to enter employment in 2002, and at that time they were all in low-paid work and receiving tax credits. The analysis showed that sustaining work and care required active input from the children, and often help from grandparents. In 2016, 15 of the families (15 mothers and 17 children) were interviewed again to explore their longer-term experiences, in a changed policy environment of austerity.

## Managing work over time

Between 2002 and 2007 the mothers made multiple job moves as they sought to get established in work. By 2016 they had usually settled into stable employment. Close family – children and grandparents – helped the women sustain work in material, practical, financial and emotional ways.

Three women had followed a very strong upward trajectory at work, with moves to better jobs, seniority, and above average wages for women in general. But the majority of women, while staying in work, did not substantially change their employment positions or wages. Thus incomes were often still low. Instability and financial insecurity in employment had made building up resources difficult and the women had little to sustain them in the face of life events, such as health problems, family care needs, and retirement. These issues were becoming increasingly apparent by the 2016 round of interviews.

The young people interviewed faced some very significant problems and challenges in moving from school to work or further study. All had worked since they left school. Their work ethic was strong but they faced challenging labour market conditions. At the time of interview, half were in secure jobs or in training, although very few had experienced smooth transitions from college or school into employment. Others had experienced a succession of insecure jobs characterised by irregular working hours, zero hours contracts and a lack of job security.

Homelessness and insecure housing were experienced by at least a third of the young people and were particularly challenging for them to negotiate. Problems were further compounded for those who became parents and/or experienced poor health. The mothers did not usually have the means to help their children establish themselves.

## Family relationships

The mothers were proud of their children, and the children of their mothers. Both talked of how they had managed to combine family life and work. But relationships between mothers and children were not always easy, and there was strain at various key transition points. These relationships suffered when there was low income and there were some regrets about the time and energy involved in sustaining work.

Earlier interviews had revealed the many ways children contributed to supporting their mothers in work. The engagement of children in this 'family-work project' was thus a key feature of the childhoods of these young people. For some this worked well and in many ways enhanced their independence and confidence. But there were more negative consequences for others, only now becoming apparent, and this was especially true for those who grew up in families with long-term low income. Some young people had experienced significant responsibilities for self-care and sibling care while their mothers were working. Low and insecure income from work created financial pressures within families. The stresses and demands on family life of maintaining work, and for some managing unsocial hours, had led to periods of estrangement and discord between some mothers and their children as they got older.

Relationships between children and their mothers were also put under pressure when children reached the age where social security or tax credits were no longer available to support them within their homes (usually in the August after the child reaches 16, but up to age 20 for some in approved education/training). In these low-income families this somewhat arbitrary cut-off point created financial tensions and relationship stress. As a result, some young people were pushed early into independence, and struggled to find security in housing and employment.

Abusive or controlling relationships with former partners had long-term consequences around feelings of confidence and trust. One effect for the mothers was caution in managing their own subsequent relationships. Young people with a violent father felt their lives had been shaped in a negative way and this resulted in a lack of trust and security in the development of their own intimate relationships.

Relationships were fluid over time. Even where there had been periods of discord and estrangement between mothers and their children as the young people became independent and left home, families could reconcile at a later date especially when grandchildren arrived.

The study shows how important secure relationships were for sustaining families trying to manage work and care. There were close and supportive relationships between mothers and their children, although these could become strained as children grew older. Former partners were rarely part of the picture, and these fathers were more absent than present. Current partners, wider family members and friends were sometimes sources of material support but more often were valued for companionship and rapport. The nature of these relationships was not static but changing over time, sometimes more and sometimes less important as circumstances changed.

## Conclusion

The experiences of these families show how difficult it can be to find security. Events that can happen to anyone - children leaving home, ill health, accidents, and so on - are particularly challenging for those without resources to call on. For the women the need to manage immediate needs meant that they struggled to build up reserves - pensions, secure housing and savings - to safeguard their futures beyond their working lives. And, as their children became young adults, these lone mothers often did not have social and financial resources to help them. There is a clear need for long-term financial support from the state, to provide the sort of secure base that people can build on.

In many of the families, abusive or controlling relationships with former partners cast a long shadow, affecting confidence for many years and for some creating caution in approach to relationships. The long-term effects of domestic violence should make prevention and support for victims high priority areas for policy.

This study also found long-term effects of working and caring on a low income. Poverty imposed pressures on relationships, generating stress and concerns about debt, security and adequate income. For the children the experience of financial insecurity in childhood created tensions and worry that stayed with them into young adulthood. Their concerns about their future income security were very real. Understanding and addressing the impact of childhood poverty over time remains a key policy challenge.

Over the years the children contributed significantly to sustaining their mothers in employment. But as these children grow into young adulthood they face difficult challenges in negotiating their independence. Lacking financial support from their families and without better resourced services and opportunities to return to college, to find housing, to leave bad relationships and live independently, disadvantaged young people can quickly find their lives unravelling. The low priority currently given to support for young people from low-income families makes this a policy area that needs fundamental reappraisal and a more holistic approach.

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## About the project

This research project started 15 years ago, with 50 lone-mother families. Analysis explored various issues, including the transition to work, the 'family-work project', the importance of social relationships and state support in sustaining work. This analysis draws on material from four rounds of interviews with 15 lone mothers and 17 young people. This longitudinal qualitative approach enables us to examine issues from the perspective of the participants and explore their reflections on their lives, choices and opportunities.

See also:

Millar, J. and Ridge, T. (2013) 'Lone mothers and paid work: The 'family-work project', International Review of Sociology, 23 (3), pp. 564-577.

Ridge, T. and Millar, J. (2008) 'Work and well-being over time: lone mothers and their children', Department for Work and Pensions Research report 536, London: HMSO.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report, **Work and relationships over time in lone-mother families** by Jane Millar and Tess Ridge is available as a free download at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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