

# 'It Didn't Always Work': Low-Income Children's Experiences of Changes in Mothers' Working Patterns in the UK

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*Underpinning Labour's welfare-to-work policies is an assumption that employment will benefit disadvantaged children and their families. However, the effect of low-income and unstable employment on lone mothers and their children is uncertain. This article draws on interviews with children drawn from a qualitative, longitudinal study of low-income working family life, to explore the accounts of those children whose mother's entry into the labour market was unsuccessful. The article examines how children experienced their mother's employment and the impact of 'failed' work transitions on their well-being and their perceptions of the value of work for them and their families.*

## Introduction

Parental employment is a vital issue for economically disadvantaged children, and although parental employment is seen as a route out of poverty for children, a return to work by a parent who has primary care responsibilities – like a lone parent – can mean significant changes in family life, family practices and family time. In research and policy, employment is generally explored as an issue for parents rather than children, and children tend to be conceptualised as either passive receivers of care or as care burdens. There has been little research carried out looking at children's perspectives on parental employment (for some exceptions see Galinsky, 1999; Nasman, 2003; Baines *et al.*, 2003; Lewis *et al.*, 2008). There has been still less research on the perspectives of low-income children who are some of those most likely to be affected by government welfare-to-work policies. Yet parental employment and the economic and social practices that attend it are key issues for children and particularly salient ones for low-income children in lone-parent households.

In a speech on welfare reform in 2002, Tony Blair argued that for children in one-parent households their 'best chance of a better future is for their parents to find routes into work' (Blair, 2002). Accordingly, increasing lone parent employment through welfare-to-work measures has been the cornerstone of the UK government's policies to eradicate child poverty by 2020 (Cm 4445, 1999; DWP, 2007). Therefore, although there has been some increase in fiscal support for children in workless families, enhanced economic support for deprived children has been mainly provided through in-work policy measures, such as tax credits (Harker, 2006). Consequently, the nature and sustainability of parental employment has come to have a particular resonance in the lives and experiences of many children who are living in poverty.

Although an essential element in Labour's policy strategy to reduce child poverty, the expected economic returns from lone-parent employment are not straightforward, as

many enter unstable and insecure labour market positions and are likely to be in low-paid jobs and work part time rather than full time (Innes and Scott, 2002, 2003; Millar and Gardiner, 2004; Dean, 2007; Ridge and Millar, 2008). While the combined income from employment and in-work tax credits is potentially advantageous, the benefits can be mediated by a range of other factors, including the costs of childcare and transport, work-related expenses and social and economic problems associated with long-term receipt of benefits, including debt and restricted social networks (Marsh *et al.*, 2001; Skinner, 2005; Hoggart *et al.*, 2006; Millar, 2006; Ray *et al.*, 2007).

For children in lone-parent families, the onset of their mother's employment can bring the promise of hope for improved economic and social welfare. However, unstable employment transitions can threaten well-being and result in renewed poverty and disadvantage. Research by Adelman *et al.* (2003) showed that some of the poorest UK children are to be found in families that are cycling between benefits and work.

To explore the impact of movement between employment and unemployment on children's lives, this article draws on findings from a group of children living in low-income lone-parent families. The children are part of a qualitative longitudinal study of low-income working family life in lone-mother households begun in 2003 (Ridge, 2007; Ridge and Millar, 2008; and Millar and Ridge, 2009).<sup>1</sup> The study explored the experiences of children and their mothers over a period of 4–5 years, starting as mothers moved into low-income employment in 2003 following a period of unemployment in receipt of social assistance. This article focuses on those children whose mothers were unable, for a variety of reasons, to sustain employment over time and it examines children's perceptions of their lives and their experiences of changing work patterns.

### The research study

The findings are drawn from three waves of a qualitative longitudinal study involving in-depth interviews with children and their mothers between 2003 and 2007.<sup>2</sup> To gain an insight into working family life that was grounded in children's lives and experiences, the study employed a child-centred approach, which treated children as informed social actors in the context of their own lives and within their families (Christensen and James, 2000). The initial sample consisted of 50 families (50 lone mothers and 61 children were interviewed). The main aims of the project were to examine the impact of paid work, and for some job loss, on family life and living standards over time; and to explore whether and how families negotiated the everyday challenges of sustaining low-income employment over time.

At the first interview stage there were 61 children and young people in the study with ages ranging between eight and 15 years. Their mothers had all left social assistance for employment within 12 months of the start of the study and were receiving Tax Credits.<sup>3</sup> Interviews were carried out in various areas of England, both rural and urban.<sup>4</sup> By the third wave of interviews in 2007, there had been some attrition in the study, largely due to illness or loss of contact with families over time (see Ridge and Millar, 2008). At the third wave, 37 children and young people were interviewed who were living in the 34 families remaining in the study.

*Children affected by their mother's employment over three waves of the study*

Overall, 16 of the children and young people who took part in the study were affected during the course of the study by their mother's movements between employment and unemployment, this paper is based on their accounts. Furthermore, there were also other children living in these families who were not interviewed (because they were not in the age-range of eight to 15), but who were nevertheless affected by their mother's unemployment. Therefore, in total throughout the study 25 children living in families in the study experienced a period of short or long duration during which their mothers were unemployed.<sup>5</sup>

### **Employment and family life**

For the families in this study entry into the labour market and attempts to sustain employment were marked by unstable labour market conditions and flux and change in family life. Therefore, the children in the study had to negotiate, adapt and cope with considerable change in their family lives due in part to the mutability of their mother's conditions of employment. Almost all of the parents in the sample had experienced some change in employment throughout the period of the study, and although most of the mothers managed to sustain some level of employment over time, it was not necessarily in the same job or by being constantly in work (see Ridge and Millar, 2008).

It is against the background of this fluidity that we explore the experiences and perceptions of children whose mothers became unemployed during the period of the study. To understand and contextualise their narratives it is first important to explore the overall findings from all of the children in the study. These include children's accounts of their lives before their mothers entered employment and the experiences and perspectives of children whose mothers had managed to sustain employment over time.

### **Children's experiences of their mother's employment**

When children in the study reflected on their lives prior to their mothers entering employment they recalled a period of severe hardship. These children and young people's accounts of their lives revealed the impact of deprivation across all areas of their lives, including a lack of material and economic resources, severely reduced opportunities for shared peer activities and social participation, and anxieties about stigma, social difference and exclusion within school. These findings closely matched previous research with children living in low-income and deprived families and reveal the powerful and pervasive effect that poverty can have on children's lives (Ridge, 2009). These experiences of deprivation were readily recalled at the time of the first interview and children were very aware of the potential for a return to severe disadvantage if their mother's employment effort failed.

Following their mother's entry into the labour market at the start of the study, the majority of children in the study felt that they had gained from their mother's employment. For families where the mothers had entered relatively secure work, children identified a range of important benefits, including an overall increase in family income and material gain. They also reported more opportunities for social participation – albeit from a low start base – and greater participation at school. There was also an apparent increase in social

status noticed by some children. However, although there were clear benefits identified by children, these were not without costs. Chief amongst these were a loss in family time and changes in family practices. There was also a concern amongst almost all of the children and young people, regardless of the type and quality of work their mothers were doing, that their mothers were getting tired and stressed at work. Children also expressed strong views about childcare and the type and quality of childcare that was available to them (c.f. Mooney and Blackburn, 2003). This revealed a general dissatisfaction with childcare amongst those children who used it and a perception of stigma being attached to after-school and breakfast clubs by children who did not use formal childcare.

In general, employment had also meant an overall increase for children and young people in duties and chores at home and for some this meant new responsibilities for self and sibling care. There were also signs that managing employment within lone-mother households meant that the whole family were engaged in sustaining and supporting employment and this became a 'family work project' (Millar and Ridge, 2009). Children and young people were active in managing and moderating their experiences and had adopted a range of strategies to sustain their mothers in employment. These included trying to reduce economic pressures within the family by moderating their financial needs and demands and trying to reduce tensions within the family by easing care burdens and giving emotional support to their mothers (Ridge, 2007). Underpinning these strategies were evident anxieties about the loss of work and a return to their previous levels of deprivation (ibid.) In general, throughout the three waves of the study, children and young people were keen for their mothers to continue in employment; although in the third wave of interviews, when asked about their ideal work life arrangement, the expressed preference of most was for their mothers to work school hours, indicating in some cases that where mothers had worked longer hours, children missed spending time with their mothers (Ridge and Millar, 2008).

### **Unemployed at the first wave**

We now turn to the experiences of children whose mothers for a variety of reasons were unable to sustain employment. Ten children in the first wave of interviews were living in seven families where mothers had entered employment at the start of the study, but had subsequently become unemployed. These children's accounts of their lives prior to their mother's employment revealed the same economic and social disadvantages as the other children in the study and in general all had been keen for their mother's to work and hopeful about the prospect of more money and a change for the better in their lives.

'Well like when we used to go to school, don't tell her but, um other people used to have a lot more money than me and it just felt like she should go back to work to get some more money'.  
Angie (11 years old)

The mothers who were unemployed at the first wave of the study had left employment for a variety of reasons, including sickness and ill health, bullying and depression at work, childcare difficulties and unsustainable irregular hours. Two of the mothers had tried to work full time, one had been working at four different part-time jobs and one had been working night shifts.

Overall, these children had been pleased when their mothers got work. Like the other children in the study, they had started to see improvements in their material and social well-being. However, these lone mothers were generally in low-waged work and some of the children were still trying to moderate their needs and demands even while their mothers were in work. For these children, the expected financial benefits from work had not really materialised. The children also expressed considerable concerns about their mothers experiencing bullying, stress and tiredness at work. Furthermore, childcare seemed particularly problematic with children expressing a dislike of their care, and unwillingness to attend arranged care. In each of these families, the mothers were working long hours that meant they were not at home when children finished their school day, so formal childcare, informal care from kin or self care were the main experiences. These disadvantages of work identified by this group of children and young people in many ways echoed those identified by children who had mothers in more secure employment, but they tended to be enhanced by individual circumstances and exacerbated by complex and unstable conditions at work and home.

The loss of work had been felt keenly especially by some of the children. Due to the relatively short durations of maternal employment, these children had found themselves all too quickly returned to their previous low-income situations with all of the frustrations and constrictions associated with it. However, this was now coupled with a sense of the loss of opportunity and dwindling hopes of the improvement that work seemed to promise. Children's narratives revealed considerable anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity. Some children were fearful about their future and anxious about what was going to happen for them.

Carl had been very pleased when his mother managed to find work; he had wanted his mother to work and had been very hopeful about the rewards from work. But since she had become unemployed he was very anxious about not having enough money and was finding it 'pretty frightening'.

*'When she started a job, she went out and then one day I was just sitting here as normal, just laying on the carpet with my granny in here and I was laying here, thinking I hope mum gets back to work. Mum went on the phone about a job, she came in, she was happy, she got a job and I was dancing around because she'd got a new job. But now she's stopped I'm quite worried again and I want her to get a new job and that.'* (Carl, 9 years old)

For most of the children, there had been evident improvements in their economic and social welfare and this was now in retreat. Children reported doing less, having less and cutting down on social activities, events and clubs. Unemployment also meant a loss of status and could be embarrassing. As Louise explained:

*'I felt like poor, but I didn't dare tell my friends cus it'd be embarrassing, cus like all my other friend's mum's have got jobs and they're like, I wouldn't say they're rich, but they've got quite a lot of money compared to us.'* (Louise, 13 years old)

Given the disadvantages attendant on the loss of employment, it could be expected that these children and young people would have been keen for their mothers to return to work as soon as possible. However, there was a noticeable ambiguity in their response to thinking about whether or not they wanted their mothers to return to work.

For some of the children set against the disadvantages there had also been some noticeable gains from a return to unemployment, especially where children had been unhappy about their childcare arrangements or concerned about a loss of family time or anxiety about their mother's well-being at work. For some of the children where there had not been much of an improvement in income in work, there had been less gain to counterbalance the costs. Therefore, when these children talked about their mothers returning to work, although in general they were keen for this to happen as they were extremely anxious about money, they also wanted to change the terms and conditions under which their mothers were working. In particular, there was a desire for mothers to work part time and to be paid more.

### **Unemployed in the second wave**

By the second wave of interviews in 2005, seven mothers were unemployed and eight of the children interviewed were in these families. Of the eleven children whose mothers were unemployed at the first wave, four were now in families where the mother had gone back into work, three were in families where the mother was still unemployed and three had been lost from the study in both cases due to the withdrawal of the mother from the study due to onset of long term ill health.

The four children whose mothers had returned to employment between the first and second interviews reported that life had generally improved, although there were still some concerns expressed about in-work income adequacy and mother's well-being at work. In line with the fluidity seen across the whole of the study, there had been changes in children's lives, not just with regard to employment, but also in family life. Three of the children had moved house, with one going to live with her father, one mother had reduced the numbers of jobs she was doing from four to one and another had taken work only in school hours.

At wave one, Adele had been unhappy with her mother's working hours and her childcare; however, at the second wave her mother had returned to employment but was working school hours and she considered this to be a better option for her.

'It weren't really good because it was the summer holidays, I had to go to this childminding place and I never really got to spend any time with my Mum, except on the weekends.' (Adele, 11 years old)

Billy's mother who worked in temporary jobs had found more work and things were improving financially. As he was older, the hours that she worked were not an issue for him.

'I can go out a lot more now, like, and not just like go out and have money to do things and not just going round someone's house. I can go to the cinema a lot more and stuff.' (Billy, 14 years old)

The children with newly unemployed mothers in the second wave were now feeling the loss of the extra income from work and were anxious about money. Although most had experienced employment over a longer period than those in the first wave, this was

generally low-income work and their families were already experiencing a reduction in economic and social well-being. There were signs that children and young people were moderating their needs and trying not to put pressure on their family's budgets, and hard-won benefits like increased participation and activities were being rolled back as families tried to manage again on reduced incomes.

However, as before, employment had brought costs as well as benefits for children and the return of unemployment for some meant that they no longer had to attend childcare that they did not like and in particular were spending more time with their mothers and their friends. Karen explains some of the ambiguity she felt about her mother not working.

'When she's not working, I love it, it's great. It's absolutely great because I just love spending so much time with her. When she was at [work] she come in real late and rush cooking tea and stuff like that and then she'd get a bath and then it was time for bed already and then she'd do it the next day, and the next day and the next day and then she'd work about six days.' (Karen, 15 years old)

In Maia's family, her mother had been working very long and often antisocial hours and this meant that Maia (nine-years old at first interview) had been involved in a very dense network of care arrangements. Although at the first interview she appeared to be coping well with this, since her mother had left work she felt she had seen much more of her mother and was able to have her friends over to stay the night and especially weekends. Maia did want her mother to go back to work because she was concerned about having money, but she also felt that she did not want her mother to do such irregular hours – no late or early shifts.

For those children whose mothers had been unemployed at both waves, there were signs that they were more resigned to their situation and more ambivalent about whether their mothers worked again. Life had seemingly settled down albeit at a severely restricted economic and social level. Experiences of employment were receding and with them it would seem children's expectations that their mothers would return to work. Working was 'up to her' now, but when the possibility of their mothers returning to work was explored there were still tensions between a strong resistance to the idea of work that required them to attend childcare and a deep need for more money in the family.

### **Unemployed in the third wave**

By the third wave of the study in 2007, there were 35 families and 37 children. Of these five children (three families) were living in families where their mothers were unemployed. All of these children's mothers had been unemployed at the second wave and all but one at the first wave. There were no new children experiencing unemployment and these five children now constituted a group who had long-term experience of their mothers not working. Of the other four children whose mothers were unemployed at the second wave, three had mothers who had re-entered employment and one family was lost from the study.

The five children who had experienced their mother's unemployment over a sustained period lived in three families. In each of these families, significant changes had affected their lives and new factors, including poor health, family change and upheaval, had such a profound impact on everyday family life and family practices and to a large extent had superseded expectations and concerns about work.

In Louise's and Angie's family, the mother had developed a severe disability and was unlikely to try and re-enter work in the foreseeable future. She was receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and her children were helping with care, although one had left home. Like children in previous studies, these children were now playing a key role in providing care within their families (Becker and Becker, 2008). They felt a little better off because disability benefits were more generous than Income Support, but they were still concerned about money and were missing out on material resources and social and school activities. In Colin's family, there had been significant changes when his mother's new relationship broke down and she was left caring for two new babies in addition to him and his brothers. His mother was not likely to try to re-enter employment until she was able to manage everyone's childcare needs. Colin expressed concern about family income, but also felt that when his mother was working there had been little financial reward and they suffered as a family from lack of time together. Maia's family had experienced considerable upheaval and had been made temporarily homeless. She had experienced several attempts by her mother to enter and sustain employment, often experiencing intense periods of work accompanied by dense care schedules. By the third interview, she was disinterested in whether her mother worked again or not. In many ways her life had moved on from the intense period when her mother was working and she now had other things to occupy her mind, including regularly seeing her friends and also enjoying a new family situation as she and her mother had moved back in with her father.

## Conclusions

The issue of time is an important one in this study, as children grow and change over time their expectations, needs and responsibilities also develop and change. The four to five years that children were involved in the study represent significant periods of time in their lifeworlds and the relationships between children and their mothers, fathers, siblings and peers evolved and transformed over time. Children's needs and expectations were influenced by a complex array of social and individual factors, including widening social expectations, key transitions between schools, changes in family life and family structure and changing responsibilities, expectations and needs in relation to family practices, childcare, sibling care and self care. Employment was clearly a key factor in children's lives, especially in relation to income and security, but it was also one factor among many which shaped and influenced their lives, including and particularly the persistent shadow cast by poverty and disadvantage.

Key policy issues emerge from these children's accounts: first, the importance for children of an adequate income regardless of their mother's work status. The experience of poverty for children is a damaging one and the fear of a return to poverty and the loss of income and status that accompanies employment is a very real one. There is evidence overall from the study that this fear of unemployment and the return of severe poverty is an underpinning factor driving many children to negotiate and accommodate some of the unwelcome costs of their mother's employment in terms of wage adequacy, maternal stress and changes in family time and care practices. For the children whose mothers cannot sustain employment, movement between work and unemployment has profound economic and social consequences.

Second, whilst paid employment continues to be disproportionately rewarded in relation to the unpaid caring work of mothers, then cycling between work and



unemployment will remain highly precarious for children and their families. The downward move from work supported by tax credits to unemployment supported by Income Support is clearly detrimental to children's lives and well-being.

Third, encouraging lone mothers into unstable and insecure labour markets runs the risk of alienating children from the values of employment. For these children work had held out the promise of something better and that promise had not been kept, so they also experienced disappointment and for some an apparent loss of confidence in the value of work. Like other children in the study they had experienced some concerns about employment, including a dislike of formal childcare, anxiety about maternal stress and changes in family time and family practices, but these were initially balanced by positive returns from work, including some financial reward, increased social participation and increased status. However, negative concerns became more salient when the expected rewards from work did not materialise or were not sustained. Then the challenges and costs of being in work were thrown into sharp relief by the accompanying uncertainty and insecurity of work.

When work was recommenced after a period of unemployment, some children were instrumental in influencing their mother's engagement in employment. In particular, they changed the terms and conditions of employment, they strongly resisted their mothers working long hours and in some instances they opposed the use of formal childcare. This meant that mothers were more likely to try and find employment restricted to school hours. This has consequences both for the type and quality of employment undertaken by women and for the future employment prospects of mothers after child rearing. In addition, when employment failed to deliver over time, the children's interest and commitment to sustaining work appeared to ebb away. Instead, they settled back into the relative stability of life on benefits without the roller coaster of uncertainty and upheaval that moving in and out of work had brought into their lives, even though this meant a return to greater impoverishment.

Finally, UK welfare-to-work policies for lone mothers are increasingly characterised by compulsion, with recent policy changes meaning that from 2010 mothers are expected to actively seek employment when their youngest child is aged seven years (DWP, 2007). The mothers in this study had wanted to work, but for many of them work presented considerable challenges and as a result some children experienced repeated attempts by their mothers to enter and sustain employment. The detrimental effects of these transitions indicate that the type and quality of support provided for lone mothers and their families both in and out of employment is essential for family well-being. Many lone mothers enter unstable, unrewarding and insecure labour markets. Enhanced in-work support, increased reward from work coupled with adequate support when employment fails, flexible employment conditions and improved childcare options based on children's own identified needs and preferences are important pre-requisites for successful lone-mother employment and work life balance. Otherwise, increasing compulsion may result in greater uncertainty, stress and instability for children and their families.

## **Notes**

1 The first and second waves were funded by the ERSC (Reference RES-000-23-1079), the third wave by the Department for Work and Pensions.

2 Carried out in collaboration with Jane Millar at the Centre for Analysis of Social Policy, University of Bath.

- 3 The sample was drawn from Inland Revenue records and we are very grateful for their help in this.
- 4 For further details of the sample see Ridge and Millar (2008)
- 5 It is possible that over the lifetime of the study more children from the original 50 families experienced unemployment, but due to attrition in the study we cannot know who or how many.

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