



Briefing: Lone Parents & Poverty

This briefing looks at what works in reducing poverty in the area of one parent families and is aimed at policy-makers and practitioners. It is based on wider research by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) on *Personal Relationships and Poverty* for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

THE EVIDENCE ON LONE PARENTS AND POVERTY:

A large body of international evidence demonstrates a strong and persistent association between lone parenthood and child, parental and household poverty, in terms of both depth and duration. Lone parents can be seen as facing an acute version of the tension faced by all families in trying to reconcile paid employment and caring responsibilities. Due to the caring burden falling onto one parent, lone parents are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be part-time employed and more like to experience unstable employment than members of two parent families.

Most of the financial costs of raising children also falls onto lone parents, and coupled with their demographic and social-economic position, lone parents face on average a higher risk of poverty. Finally national level factors such as welfare approach, social policy and cultural norms all play a significant role in determining the risk of poverty faced by lone parents which, although persistent, varies markedly in extent from country to country. With few exceptions, the disparity in poverty between one and two-parent households is greater in countries where the overall poverty rate is high.



High lone-parent poverty

SUMMARY:

Policies which help reconcile the acute tension between labour market participation and caring responsibilities can reduce the chances of individual and family poverty.

- The provision of generous universal welfare benefits is effective in reducing lone parent poverty and reducing the gap in poverty risk between one and two-parent families.
- Out-of-work benefits reduce the risk of income poverty for lone parents.
- Increasing labour market participation reduces lone parents' poverty.
- **In-work benefits/ tax credits** to supplement low wages increase the likelihood of lone parents remaining in employment by making work pay. Plus more intensive and ongoing **training and support** can support progress into stable work and higher wages.
- **Affordable and good quality childcare** is essential to allow lone parents to work.
- **Sustainable child maintenance** is critical in lifting lone mothers and their children out of poverty.
- Mandatory work for lone parents risks being punitive and counterproductive if not coupled with affordable childcare, education and training opportunities and exemptions for certain groups.





WHAT WORKS IN REDUCING POVERTY:

Lone parents in the UK face increasing pressure to be in paid work but cannot do so without greater support in balancing childcare.

- Provision of generous universal welfare benefits is effective in reducing lone parent poverty and reducing the gap in poverty risk between one and two-parent families. Essentially policies that address poverty more widely are effective at addressing lone parent poverty, as while lone parents represent an acute risk of poverty in many countries, the factors that dictate this are common to many groups in society.
- Mandatory work for lone parents risks being punitive and counterproductive if not coupled with **affordable and good quality childcare** and exemptions for certain groups. Therefore current UK welfare policy where lone mothers must be available for employment will only work if coupled affordable childcare.
- Employment policies need to be responsive to significant differences in characteristics between lone parents and recognise that different provisions may be needed depending on levels of education and employment histories.
- For lone parents employment is often low-paid and insecure. Supplementing low wages **with in-work benefits and tax credits**, and providing more intensive and **ongoing training and support**, are needed to overcome long-term poverty risks by supporting people's progress into stable work and higher wages. The reduction of in-work poverty is particularly notable in lone parents in receipt of tax credits. But the work allowance for universal credit needs to be raised to make work pay and so more can be earned before benefits are withdrawn.

CHILD MAINTENANCE

Ensuring stable child maintenance arrangements are in place is important to ease the risk of income poverty on lone parents.

While formal arrangements through the Child Support Agency are more likely to last than informal ones, new charges for this service may actually prevent its use by low-income families.



FURTHER INFORMATION

This briefing is based on research by Laura Stock, Judy Corlyon, Cristina Castellanos Serrano and Matt Gieve, Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The full report and other briefings in the series are available on the Tavistock Institute website, along with an animation visualising what works in reducing poverty: <http://www.tavinstitute.org/projects/personal-relationship-poverty-evidence-policy-review>



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