Lone parents, employment and wellbeing – what does the evidence tell us?

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Reviewing the literature

Remit: a structured critique of both published peer-reviewed literature and grey literature identified from a range of databases and published sources.

- c. 200 studies
- Original empirical research
- Roughly even split:
  - Academic vs. grey
  - Quantitative vs. qualitative, mixed or review
Lone parent families are more likely than couple families to experience poverty

Proportion of children living in a household with an equivalised income of less than 60% of the median (UK)

Source: Households Below Average Income series, Department for Work and Pensions (2013)
Child poverty is lower in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UK Region</th>
<th>Before housing costs</th>
<th>After housing costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Households Below Average Income series, Department for Work and Pensions (2013)
Lone parent families are more likely to experience persistent poverty

Proportion of children experiencing persistent poverty\(^1\) over first five years of life (UK)

![Bar chart showing the proportion of children experiencing persistent poverty by relationship status.]

1 Defined as equivalised parental income below 60% of the median every year

Source: Millennium Cohort Study, Panico, Bartley, Kelly, McMunn, & Sacker (2010)
Living on a low, complex and insecure income

- Low pay and job insecurity
- Income from many sources
- Debt; in and between jobs, non-payment and overpayment of tax credits
- Lack of maintenance
  - 64% of lone parents on benefit receive no maintenance
  - Average payment to those who do is £23 per week

(Source: Survey of Relationship Breakdown, Bryson et al. (2012))
Lone parent households are less likely to have someone in employment

- 36% of lone parent households have no adult in work, compared with 5% of couple households with dependent children
  (Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics (2013a))

- Glasgow has the highest proportion of working-age households with no adult in work in the UK
  - Glasgow: 30.2%
  - Scotland: 20.6%
  - UK: 18.1%
  (Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics (2013b))
Poverty is experienced by lone parents both in and out of work

Proportion of children living in a lone parent household with an equivalised income of less than 60% of the median (UK)

Source: Households Below Average Income series, Department for Work and Pensions (2013)
Lone parents experience a number of barriers to work

1. Finding a job opportunity
   - Employability
     - Skills
     - Confidence
   - Health

2. Reconciling job with caring responsibilities
   - Formal childcare
   - Informal childcare
   - Transport
   - Hours and flexibility
   - Employer Policy
   - Number and age of children
The association between lone parenthood and health is complex

Lone mothers more likely than couple mothers to...

- ...report **less than good health** and **limiting longstanding illness** – effect holds across occupational classes
  (Source: General Household Survey, Burström et al. (2010))

- ...experience **mental health problems** – effect disappears controlling for material circumstances and social support
  (Source: Growing Up in Scotland, Marryat and Martin (2010))

- ...experience **common mental disorders** – effect disappears controlling for financial strain and social support
  (Source: British National Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, Cooper et al. (2008))
The association between lone parenthood and health is complex

Lone fathers...

- ...often dropped from quantitative analyses

- However, studies that include them suggest that the impact of lone parenthood on health is not as strongly mediated by material factors.
  - Interesting avenue for further research...
There *may be* an association between lone parenthood and child health and well-being.

Growing up in a lone parent family is associated with...

- *poorer cognitive and behavioural outcomes* at age 5 – but not significant controlling for poverty
  
  (Source: Millennium Cohort Study, (Kiernan & Mensah (2009); Schoon, Jones, Cheng, & Maughan (2012))

- *poorer physical and mental health* at age 7 – but not significant controlling for poverty
  
  (Source: Millennium Cohort Study, (Pearce, Lewis, & Law (2013)))
There *may be* an association between lone parenthood and child health and well-being.

Growing up in a lone parent family is associated with:

- *...child disability* – persists controlling for social disadvantage
  (Source: Family Resources Survey, Blackburn, Spencer, & Read (2010))

- *...obesity, low activity and screen time* – but disappears in multivariate modelling
  (Source: Growing Up in Scotland, Parkes, Sweeting, & Wight (2012))
There *may be* an association between lone parenthood and adolescent well-being

- **Depressive symptoms** at age 14 associated with father absence in first five years – significant controlling for resources
  (Source: Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, Culpin et al. (2013))

- Family structure associated with adolescent **life satisfaction** – only remains significant for 13 year old boys after controlling for family affluence and parent-child relationship

- Living in lone mother household associated with some adolescent outcomes (**truancy, vandalism, low-self esteem**) but not others (health and subsequent employment)
  (Source: British Lone Parent Cohort, Marsh & Vegeris (2004))
Policy can make a small difference to lone parent employment rates

- NDLP + tax credit reform + increased support for childcare → higher lone parent employment
  - Evaluations put effect at 4 or 5 per cent

- Small impact, ‘at the margin’.
Successful policy initiatives have a number of key features

- Employability support
  - Tailored, holistic, responsive
  - Well-trained and sympathetic advisor
  - Integrated with childcare

- Financial ‘incentives’
  - Retaining income via working tax credits
  - Help with childcare costs
Summary

- Lone parent families more likely than couple parent families to experience poverty, and to have no adult in employment

- Lone parents who are not in work face a number of barriers to finding employment and being able to reconcile it with their caring responsibilities

- Lone parenthood is associated with lower well-being (of lone parents and their children), but this is driven to a great extent by their relative material disadvantage

- Lone parents who are not in work need employability support, childcare and financial support to move into work
References


References