

Lone parent families with  
young children:

Findings from the Growing Up  
in Scotland study

October 2008



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## ***Key findings***

GUS finds that children living in lone parent households are more likely to experience disadvantage during their early years. However, it is clear that many lone parents are doing the best they can for their children in the face of great difficulties.

- 20% of children aged just under 2 live in lone parent families.
- 23% of children aged just under 4 live in lone parent families.
- Being a lone parent of children under 5 is more common among younger mothers and those with low incomes.
- Just under two-thirds of children with a non-resident parent had contact with them, with around half of non-resident parents paying regular maintenance.
- Mothers in couple families are more likely to be employed than lone mothers.
- Lone mothers are more likely than mothers in couple families to have no qualifications.
- Lone parent families are much more likely than couple families to live in an area of high deprivation.
- Lone parent families have lower incomes and are much more likely to be dependent on benefits than couple families.
- Lone mothers are less likely than mothers in couple families to attend local groups for parents and children.
- Children in lone parent households consume a smaller variety of fruit and vegetables than children in couple families.
- Children aged just under 4 living in lone parent households were just as likely as those living in couple families to watch TV every day.
- Children in lone parent families are more likely to have a long standing illness or disability and to suffer from short-term health problems more often than those in couple families.
- Lone parents are more likely than couple parents to express concern about their child's development, learning or behaviour, including speech and language development.
- Lone parents are consistently more likely than couple parents to report that poor health affects their daily lives.
- Lone parents are less likely to attend ante-natal classes and to breastfeed their babies.

## **1. Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) – Background**

Growing Up in Scotland is the longitudinal study of Scottish children. Launched in 2005, GUS is following the lives of 8,000 children and their families from infancy, through childhood to adolescence.

The aim of GUS is to collect comprehensive information about the early years in the lives of Scottish children. In time, the data collected will be linked to information about outcomes for children and young adults. This will enable analysis of the impact of early experiences and for the evaluation of policies and services relating to families with young children.

GUS is being used extensively by the Scottish Government in developing policy relating to children and families. The findings are also of use to local authorities, health boards, practitioners such as Health Visitors and nursery nurses, voluntary organisations and others developing policy and providing services. As further rounds of information collection are completed, GUS will become a very rich data resource and will be used by academics to inform their research.

GUS collects a wealth of information about the experiences and circumstances of families with young children including family structure and contact with non-resident parents, housing and community, food and eating, child health and development, activities, parenting styles and support for parents, childcare and work-life balance.

Findings from the first 2 years of GUS have been published and are available to download from the GUS website:

[www.growingupinScotland.org.uk](http://www.growingupinScotland.org.uk)

This paper presents the key findings from GUS for lone parent families. These findings are taken from Years 1 and 2 of the GUS study<sup>1, 2</sup>. The information presented in this report describes the circumstances and experiences of lone parents in the GUS sample, who have children aged under 5. GUS is representative of Scotland as a whole; the figures represent the experiences of lone parents in Scotland with children of this age. However, the figures do not necessarily reflect the circumstances of all lone parents in Scotland. The findings relate to a particular part of the lone parent population – those with very young children. The average age of lone parents taking part in the study with a child aged just under 2 was 28.

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, S; Bradshaw, P; Cunningham-Burley, S; Hayes, F; Jamieson, L; MacGregor, A; Marryat, L; Wasoff, F **Growing Up in Scotland: Sweep 1 Overview Report**. The Scottish Executive 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw, P; Cunningham-Burley, S; Dobbie, F; MacGregor, A; Marryat, L; Ormston, R; Wasoff, F **Growing Up in Scotland : Sweep 2 Overview Report**. The Scottish Government 2008.

## **2. Introduction**

GUS is following 2 groups or 'cohorts' of children – 5,000 born between June 2004 and May 2005 (the birth cohort) and 3,000 born between June 2002 and May 2003 (the child cohort). Families are visited annually until their child is nearly 6 to collect very detailed information about the early years. Families were first interviewed when their child was 10 months (the birth cohort) or 34 months (the child cohort). At the second year of GUS (Sweep 2) the children in participating families were aged approximately 22 months (just under 2) and 46 months (just under 4). At this time, 20% of the younger children and 23% of the older children were living lone parent families, the vast majority of these (99% and 97%) being headed by the child's natural mother.

## **3. Circumstances of lone parent families**

Among those taking part in GUS, the average age of lone parents with a child aged just under 2 was 28 years (31 years for those with a child aged just under 4)<sup>3</sup>. However, lone parenthood is more common among younger mothers and those with lower incomes. Over three fifths of mothers aged under 20 at their child's birth are lone parents (63%), compared to 9% of mothers in their thirties. Sweep 1 of GUS reported that teenage mothers are far more likely than mothers in any other age group to be lone parents. 68% of teenage mothers in GUS were lone parents, compared to 28% of mothers in their 20s and 9% of mothers in their 30s. However, mothers who gave birth to a child in their 40s were more likely to be single parents than mothers giving birth in their 30s, with 12% living without a partner. This may be explained by a higher divorce and separation rate for this age group, or by conscious decisions by older women to have a child outside of a long-term relationship.

At Sweep 1 of GUS, the majority of lone parents in the sample (83%) were single and had never been married. A further 11% were separated and 6% were divorced. This differs from the profile of *all* lone parents. It is estimated that amongst all lone parents in Scotland, over 50% have separated from their partner after marriage or cohabitation<sup>4</sup>.

There was little overall change in family type between the first two years of GUS. Among those families that did experience change, the partnering of lone parents was more common than couple separation and in most cases (81% in the birth cohort and 86% in the child cohort) it was the child's natural parents forming the couple family.

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<sup>3</sup> The median age of all lone parents in Scotland is 36. Source: OPFS

<sup>4</sup> Source: One Parent Families Scotland

#### 4. Place

Lone parents are more likely than parents in couple families to live in areas of high deprivation and to rent their home from a social landlord (see Table 1 below). Further analysis from Sweep 1 of GUS<sup>5</sup> found that over half (54%) of lone parents with children aged around 10 months lived in areas of high deprivation, compared to 18% of couple families. Over half of lone parents living only with their children rented their home from a Local Authority, compared to just 13% of couple families. Only 12% of lone parents were owner occupiers, compared to 74% of couple families.

**Table 1 – Tenure and area deprivation by family type (GUS Sweep1, birth cohort only)**

	Family type		
	Couple family	Lone parent living with other adults	Lone parent living only with children
	%	%	%
<b>Housing tenure</b>			
Owns outright or buying with mortgage/loan	74.1	30.5	11.5
Rents from Local Authority	12.8	31.6	50.7
Rents from Housing Association	5.1	11.2	22.9
Rents from a person or company	6.6	4.4	14
Other rent arrangement or rent free	1.4	22.4	0.8
<b>Area deprivation (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation - quintiles)</b>			
5 Least deprived	21.4	6.7	2.3
4	21.7	8.7	8.6
3	21.4	15.6	14.3
2	17.6	26.8	20.9
1 Most deprived	17.9	42.2	53.8
	100%	100%	100%

<sup>5</sup> Bradshaw,P and Martin,C with Cunningham-Burley,C 'Exploring the experience and outcomes for advantaged and disadvantaged families'. The Scottish Government 2008. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/03/12101843/0>

## **5. *Non-resident parents***

Just under two-thirds of children with a non-resident parent had contact with them. 86% of the younger children and 81% of the older children who had contact with their non-resident parent saw that parent at least once a week, including 29% and 19% who saw him every day.

Resident parents (mothers in the vast majority of cases) were asked about the level of interest that fathers show in their children. Around 80% of non-resident fathers were reported to be very or somewhat interested in their child, with only 8% of fathers reported to be 'not at all interested'. This illustrates that, for most non-resident fathers of children in the GUS sample, being a non-resident parent does not mean being a non-involved parent.

In terms of financial support from non-resident parents, around half (48%) were paying regular maintenance (either through the Child Support Agency or some other arrangement) with around 1 in 10 making irregular payments. Around two fifths were reported as making no payments.

Further detail on non-resident parents was collected during the third year of GUS. These results will be published in early 2009.

## **6. *Employment and income***

Around 17% of all children lived in a household where no parent was employed. 60% of lone parents were unemployed compared to just 5% of couple households with no parent employed. Notably, lone parent households were significantly more likely than couple households to become unemployed or remain unemployed between years 1 and 2 of GUS. This may highlight the difficulties faced by lone parent households in finding and retaining employment while dealing with other issues such as childcare.

Mothers in couple families are significantly more likely to be employed than lone mothers. Among mothers of children aged just under 2, two-thirds (66%) of mothers in couple households were employed, compared to just over one-third (38%) of lone mothers.

Table 2 below shows that lone mothers with very young children (10 months) are much more likely to have a low household income and to be solely reliant on benefits than mothers of 10 month old babies living in couple households. Lone mothers living in households with other adult are also much more likely to rely on benefits as their only source of income.

**Table 2 Household income and receipt of benefits  
(natural mothers in the birth cohort at Sweep 1)**

	Family Type		
	Couple family %	Lone mother living with other adults %	Lone mother living only with children %
<b>Equivalised annual household income</b>			
Less than £8410	10.0	71.3	62.7
Between £8411 and £13,750	20.1	16.8	25.3
Between £13,751 and £21,785	20.8	6.4	8.8
Between £21,786 and £33, 571	25.8	4.6	2.6
More than £33,572	23.2	0.9	0.6
<b>Receipt of income support</b>			
Yes	4.4	46.6	62.5
No	95.6	53.4	37.5
<b>Receipt of housing benefit</b>			
Yes	6.5	12.6	65.1
No	93.5	87.4	34.9
<b>Solely reliant on benefits for income</b>			
Yes	6.5	45.3	64.8
No	93.5	54.7	35.2
	100%	100%	100%

Source: 'Exploring the experience and outcomes for advantaged and disadvantaged families' Bradswaw, P; Martin,C; Cunningham-Burley, S. The Scottish Government March 2008

As would be expected, change in income for lone parent families is closely related to a change in the structure of the household. Three-quarters of lone parents who had partnered up between Years 1 and 2 of GUS reported a higher income, while three-quarters of lone parents who had separated reported a decrease in household income.

## **7. Housing, neighbourhood and community**

Lone parent families were more likely than couple families to have moved home between Years 1 and 2 of GUS. One quarter of lone parent families had moved home in the past year. Among lone parents who had moved home, just over a third had moved because they wanted a place of their own, reflecting the number of young lone parents who lived with their parents when their child was born. One quarter of lone parents had moved because they wanted a larger home while one fifth moved because of a relationship breakdown.

In terms of involvement in local groups, lone mothers are less likely than mothers from couple families to attend local groups for parents and children, such as parent and toddler or parent and baby groups. 18% of mothers in couple families were active members of a local

group, compared to 7% of lone mothers. Lone mothers and younger mothers were more likely to say that they felt shy or awkward about attending groups. This fits with wider evidence that there is a greater level of formal community involvement among those with higher levels of education living and in higher income households. Lone parent families and those with low incomes appear to have a more limited range of support networks. They are more likely to draw on advice and support from friends and families than through involvement in groups<sup>6</sup>.

## **8. Food and eating**

During the second year of GUS, the parents of children aged just under 2 were asked a series of questions about their child's eating habits and the family approach to mealtimes.

Most parents found it easy to feed their child and most were eating a variety of fruit and vegetable every day. 21% of toddlers in lone parent families were eating four or more types of fruit on a typical day, compared to 27% of toddlers in couple families. Children in low income families were less likely to eat four or more types of fruit each day, but it is worth noting that mothers who said the cost of food had a big impact on what they were able to give their child to eat gave their child the same variety of fruit than mothers who said that the cost of food had no effect at all.

Children in lone parent households consumed a smaller variety of vegetables than those in couple households. They also ate sweets, chocolates and crisps and drank sugary drinks more often than children in couple households. 55% of children in lone parent households ate sweets or chocolates every day, compared to 40% of children in couple families.

Younger mothers were more likely than older mothers to report difficulties in controlling the amount of sugary snacks and drinks their children had. Of those who reported difficulties, 38% said that grandparents giving their child the sugary snacks was often the problem. Lone parents were less likely than couple parents to give their child fruit as a snack.

In terms of accessing advice about healthy eating, lone parents were much less likely than couple parents to have looked at books, magazines and newspapers to get advice about feeding their children.

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<sup>6</sup> Bradshaw, P with Jamieson, L and Wasoff, F 'Use of Informal Support by Families with Young Children' the Scottish Government 2008  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/03/12110018/0>

## **9. Activities**

All parents were asked about the types of activities they did with their children.

Visiting and being visited by other families with children was a frequent activity for most families. However, lone parents appeared to fall into two groups; some children in lone parent families seem to be quite isolated, 10% never visiting other people with children, while other lone parents have very active social networks, 27% visiting other families almost every day (compared to 14% of toddlers in couple families).

Children in lone parent families were less likely than children in couple families to have looked at books every day (68% compared to 82% for the younger children). Mothers with educational qualifications are more likely to read to their children more often and more likely to play at recognising letters, shapes, or numbers. There are some differences in the range of activities, such as painting and singing, undertaken by children from different socio-economic groups. However, by the time children are nearly 4, attendance at pre-school nursery appears to narrow this gap.

84% of all children aged nearly 4 watched TV every day. Children of this age in couple families were just as likely as children in lone parent families to watch TV every day. However, children aged nearly 2 born to a teenage mother were more likely than children with older mothers to watch TV every day. Children with younger mothers and those in low income households are less likely to play outside every day most likely because they are less likely to have access to a garden.

Most children in lone parent families had visited a range of places in the past year. Over half had visited a library and 78% had been to a swimming pool. 69% had visited a zoo, aquarium or farm while just over half had been to the cinema. 30% had been to an art gallery, museum or historical site, compared to 46% of children in couple families. This might be explained by the fact that 64% of lone parents in the study do not own a car, compared to only 9% of couple families. Not surprisingly, low income families were less satisfied with the range of activities their child had access to than higher income families.

## **10. Child health**

Babies born to lone mothers are more likely to be of low birth weight than those born into couple families. GUS Sweep 1 shows that 9.5% of babies born to lone parents were of low birth weight (less than 2.5kg) compared to 6.2% of babies born into couple families.

At Year 2 of GUS, 57% of lone parents thought their child's health was 'very good' compared to 69% of couple family parents. This gap had widened from the previous year. Long standing illnesses and disabilities were more commonly reported in lone parent families. Children in lone parent families suffered from short-term health problems, such as coughs and colds, more often than those in couple families.

Among the young children aged nearly 2, 31% of those in lone parent families had had an accident requiring NHS treatment in the previous year, compared to 21% of those in couple families. However, among the older children aged nearly 4 there was no significant difference in accident rates by family type.

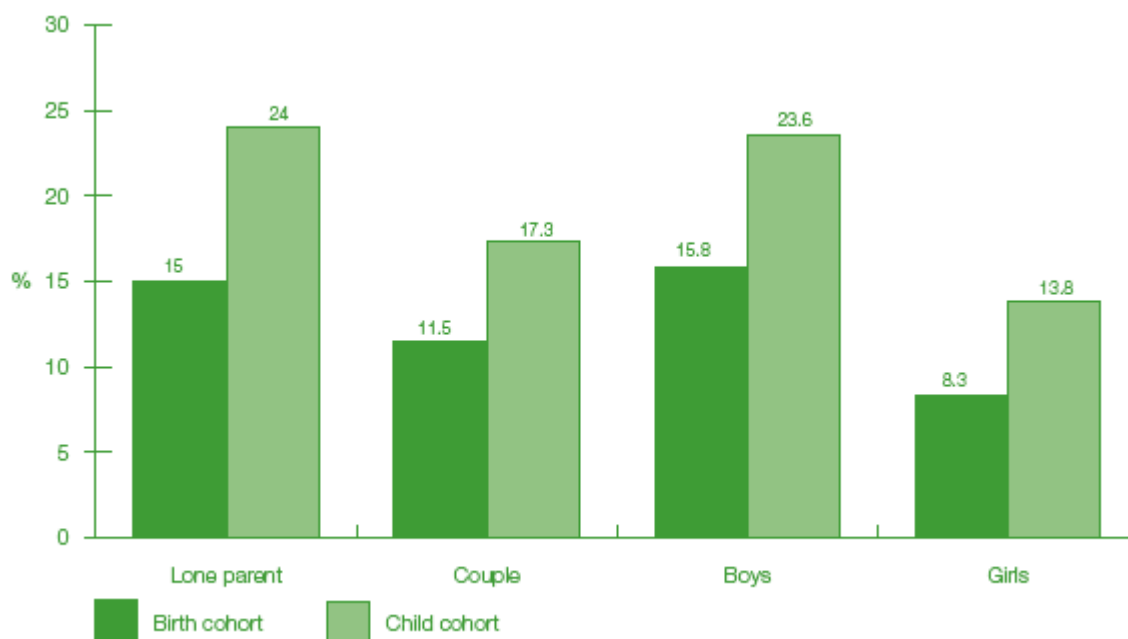
At Year 2 of GUS, height and weight measurements were taken from the older children aged nearly 4 to calculate their BMI (body mass index). Overall, the majority of boys and girls were of normal weight. Children living in lone parent households were slightly more likely to be overweight or obese than children in couple families (26% compared to 23%). When looking at girls in both types of households it was found that almost twice the proportion of girls in lone parent households are obese (10.8% compared to 5.9% in couple families).

In terms of the number of NHS services used for their children, there were no differences between lone parents and couple parents.

## **11. Child development**

Figure 1 below shows that lone parents are somewhat more likely than couple parents to have concerns about their child's development, learning or behaviour. Parents of boys are also more likely to have concerns. Lone parents were also more likely to express concerns about their child's speech and language development.

**Figure 1 - Concern about child's development, learning and behaviour by cohort, sex and family type (GUS Sweep 2)**



During Year 3 of GUS, the younger children, now aged nearly 3 have been participating in 'cognitive testing' to measure their development. These tests are based on the British Ability Scales and involve naming objects presented in pictures. The analysis of the results from these tests will allow for comparisons between different groups of children to look at rates of development. These findings will be published in early 2009.

## **12. Parental health**

A recent study published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that changes in the physical and mental health of parents had the biggest impact on their parenting abilities<sup>7</sup>.

Information about parental health was collected but not reported at Year 2 of GUS. This section summarises information from Year 1 of the GUS study. This information was provided by mothers using a self-complete questionnaire on a lap top computer.

Lone parents were significantly more likely than parents in couple families to report a long-standing illness. Among the parents of the younger children (9 months old at Year 1), 23% of lone parents had

<sup>7</sup> 'Diversity, complexity and change in parenting' JRF 2008 (Waylen, A and Stewart-Brown,S) <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/2247.asp>

a long-standing illness, compared to 15% of parents in couple families.

Table 3 below shows that lone parents were consistently more likely than couple parents to report that poor health affected their daily lives on a variety of measures.

**Table 3 Health related quality of life (baby cohort only, GUS Sweep 1)**

Health-related quality of life measures	Family type	
	Lone Parent	Couple Family
<b>Health assessed as fair or poor</b>	22.1	12.8
<b>Extent to which ill-health limits ability to perform moderate activities</b>		
A lot	4.1	1.8
A little	12.2	7.3
Not at all	83.7	90.9
<b>Extent to which ill-health limits ability to climb several flights of stairs</b>		
A lot	4.6	1.8
A little	16	9.7
Not at all	79.4	88.6
<b>Accomplished less as a result of poor physical health</b>	17.3	12.3
<b>Limited in work or other daily activities as a result of poor physical health</b>	13.7	8.6
<b>Accomplished less as a result of emotional problems</b>	27.1	14.9
<b>Performed work or any other activities less carefully as a result of emotional problems</b>	21.5	12.3
<b>Pain interfered with normal work at least slightly</b>	25	18.3
<b>Extent to which felt calm and peaceful in past 4 weeks</b>		
All/most of the time	45.1	42.6
Good bit/some of the time	19.7	21.8
A little/none of the time	14.1	12.2
<b>Amount of time had a lot of energy in last 4 weeks</b>		
All/most of the time	40.2	35.5
Good bit/some of the time	44.2	51.4
A little/none of the time	15.6	13.1
<b>Amount of time felt down in last 4 weeks</b>		
All/most of the time	9.5	4
Good bit/some of the time	29.5	22.6
A little/none of the time	61	73.4
<b>Amount of time felt that physical or emotional problems interfered with social activities in last 4 weeks</b>		
All/most of the time	8.4	3.6
Good bit/some of the time	17.6	10.4
A little/none of the time	73.8	86
Mean physical component score	52.1	53.5
Mean mental component score	48	50.6

Smoking rates were higher among lone parents than couple parents (59% compared to 22 % in the child cohort). Mothers living in

deprived areas were more likely to say they had smoked while pregnant.

In terms of drinking alcohol there were some interesting trends. Parents in couple families were significantly more likely than lone parents to consume alcohol more than once a week. However, on average lone parents drank a slightly higher number of units of alcohol in a typical week and were more likely to drink five or more units of alcohol on one occasion than parents in couple families. Lone mothers were less likely to say that they drank alcohol while pregnant.

Lone parents were more likely to say that they had ever taken drugs than parents in couple families. A third of lone parents said that they had taken drugs at some point in their lives, compared to one quarter of couple family parents.

A follow-up report from Sweep 1 of GUS on the effects of disadvantage on health behaviours found that lone mothers are less likely to attend antenatal classes and less likely to breastfeed their babies<sup>8</sup>. Just over one third of lone mothers had ever breastfed, compared to two thirds of mothers in couple families.

### **13. Education**

Lone parents with young children are more likely than parents in couple families to have no educational qualifications. At Year 1 of GUS, over one fifth of lone mothers with children aged 10 months had no qualifications, compared to around 6% of mothers in couple families. Less than half (46%) of lone mothers had Higher grade qualifications or above, compare to over three-quarters (78%) of mothers in couple families.

Among lone mothers and younger mothers, level of education was found to be crucial in promoting 'resilience', a term used to describe situations where positive outcomes are achieved in spite of disadvantaged circumstances. Outcomes for mothers and their children were better for lone mothers with higher educational attainment<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>, Bradshaw,P and Martin,C with Cunningham-Burley,C '*Exploring the experience and outcomes for advantaged and disadvantaged families*'. The Scottish Government 2008. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/03/12101843/0>

<sup>9</sup> As above

## **14. Childcare and work-life balance**

At Year 2 of GUS, 68% of all parents of the younger children were using some form of childcare while almost all (99%) of parents of the older children were using childcare, largely explained by the statutory provision of pre-school education from the age of 3. (For the purposes of the study, pre-school education was counted as childcare, though many people do not view it as such.) As would be expected, childcare was much more prominent among working families. Higher income households are more likely to use childcare than lower income households. In terms of the use of childcare, there were no significant differences between couple families and lone parent families. Lone parent families were just as likely as couple families to be using childcare.

A considerable number of families were using more than one childcare provider. Two fifths of parents of children aged just under 4 used two providers, while a further fifth used three or more. Again, when it comes to the number of childcare providers used, there are no significant differences between lone parent families and couple families.

Childcare is divided into 'formal' and 'informal' categories. Formal childcare providers include nurseries, children's/family centres, playgroups and childminders. Informal providers include grandparents and other friends and family members. As at Year 1 of GUS, lone parents continue to rely more on informal childcare provision than parents in couple families most probably due to the costs of formal childcare. Lone parents are more likely to use ex-partners and other relatives for childcare. One implication of this pattern is that parents whose children had no previous experience of formal childcare were more likely to report that their child had difficulties when making the transition to pre-school.

Lone parents were slightly more likely than couple parents to say that they found it difficult to arrange childcare. 11% of single parents reported difficulties in arranging suitable childcare over the last 12 months, compared to 6% of parents in couple families.

In terms of attitudes towards work-life balance, no analysis by family type has been carried out. This might be an interesting area for further analysis. In general, most parents who work believe that their employment is not detrimental to their enjoyment of family life or to their ability to raise or spend time with their child(ren). However, this varied with hours worked and type of employment, with those in working full time and in lower status jobs more likely to report that working adversely affected their family life.

## **15. Support**

GUS finds that most parents of young children in Scotland have access to and make considerable use of informal support provided by family and friends. However, there are some small differences across families with different characteristics. In general, parents in more disadvantaged circumstances reported more limited social networks than more advantaged parents<sup>10</sup>. However, younger mothers and those in low income households were more likely to be using informal childcare, usually provided by their own parents and to draw on advice from their parents.

In terms of formal support, contact with formal services such as GPs, Health Visitors and Social Workers was higher among lone mothers. Younger mothers were more likely to report that professionals do not offer enough advice about how to bring up children. However, at the same time, younger mothers and those from low income households were more likely to be wary of seeking advice from professionals and more likely to be concerned about interference from formal service providers.

## **16. Conclusions**

The Growing Up in Scotland study finds that there are many significant differences when comparing the experiences of children in lone parent families to those of children living in couple families. Many children in lone parent families face considerable disadvantage right from the very start of their lives. However, lone parenthood, in itself, does not explain the differences. The differences are accounted for by age of mothers, income, education and other socio-economic factors. Lone parents with very young children are more likely to be young, to live in lower income households, in areas of deprivation, and to have fewer qualifications. These inequalities combine to produce sets of circumstances that can be very difficult to overcome. In time, GUS will be able to assess the impact of difficult circumstances and disadvantage on outcomes for children and young people.

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<sup>10</sup> Bradshaw, P with Wasoff, F and Jamieson, L 'The Use of Informal Support by Families with Young Children' The Scottish Government 2008.  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/03/12110018/0>

## **17. Contact details**

For more information about GUS, please contact:

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