

Activating lone parents: an evidence-based-policy appraisal of the current welfare-to-work reform in Britain

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Background

The first New Labour government came to power in 1997 and arguably one of its boldest and most important pledges was to halve child poverty in 2010 and to abolish it by 2020 (Blair 1999). Eradicating child poverty was important because of its 'impact of poverty on children's life chances and opportunities' (Millar and Ridge 2002; p. 245). Workless households were seen as 'primary cause' of child poverty (Walker and Howard 2000) and became the 'key referent' for its welfare-to-work policy (Theodore 2007). Gregg and Wadsworth (2001) published a series of papers (1996, 1997 and 2001, in 2001) highlighting the polarisation of work between households. The vast majority of workless households with children were headed by a lone parent (Gregg and Wadsworth 2001) and the poverty level of workless lone parent households was very high (Gregg and Wadsworth 2001). Paid work was conceptualised not only as "the best route out of poverty" but also as a way to escape social exclusion for the new government:

'The chance to work opens the chance to progress, to develop and to participate fully in society. We know that people in work are often healthier, and more fulfilled, than people who are not. It matters for society because the poverty linked to worklessness divides our communities and deprives too many children of a fair chance in life.'

(Cm7130 2007; p. 5).

Progress has been made towards both the child poverty and the lone parent employment target. However, both targets are likely to be missed if current trends continue (Shaw 2007, Hirsch 2009 and HC 63-1 2007). The prospect of both targets being missed, together with the unprecedented investment in

policy infrastructure to support working parents (Millar 2005) and the growth in the inactive population in Britain (among others Evans 2003), most likely contributed towards the decision to introduce compulsion for lone parents with older children to seek work, i.e. the welfare-to-work reform that is currently being implemented. It requires lone parents with older children¹ to transfer from Income Support to Jobseeker's Allowance. The government argues that lone parents with older children are 'able to work' unless they are facing multiple disadvantages² because :

- Working will have beneficial effects for lone parents and their families,
- The infrastructure, in terms of helping lone parents into work, making work, pay and the availability of suitable childcare is already in place or will be by 2010,
- Most other countries have greater conditionality already,
- The employment rate of lone mothers in other countries is much higher as is the employment rate of mothers in couples in Britain and
- Lone parents with older children are 'able to work' as they are not required to look after their children full-time.

(Cm7290 2007: Ready for Work)..

The current welfare-to-work reform is a milestone in that it is the first substantial change to the National Assistance Act in 1948 which gave all lone parents the right to claim social assistance until their youngest child reached the age of 16. Furthermore, it is arguably the stepping stone for the far-reaching changes proposed in the Welfare Reform Bill currently going through parliament. However, the activation of lone parents with older children has been very controversial. In particular, questions have been raised as to whether the infrastructure really is in place to justify the increased conditionality. In other words, whether suitable and affordable childcare, work-life balance policies and financial in-work support really are in place to ensure that moving into work does mean moving out of poverty and that this only

¹ The reform is being implemented in stages. From November 2008 lone parents whose youngest child is twelve years old or older were transferred from IS to JSA, this will be extended to lone parents whose youngest child is ten years old or older by October 2009 and to those whose youngest child is seven years old or older by November 2010.

² Multiple disadvantages according to the DWP are being homeless or addicted to drugs.

partially the case at present (see among others HC24-1 2008, Harker 2006, Deacon 2002). In addition, concerns have been regarding whether the JSA regime will be flexible enough to accommodate the caring responsibilities of lone parents (see HC24-1 2008). However, less attention has been paid to the point made by Lewis (2005) as to which lone parents are regarded as workers and whether this is an appropriate group in terms of their ability and therefore, likelihood, of moving into work (Haux 2007).

Aims and objectives of this paper

Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine how well the current reform design it likely to perform with regards to the stated aim of the reform, namely to increase the employment rate as a way of decreasing the child poverty rate. The target group of the welfare reform shall be examined here in terms of:

- the contribution that moving this group successfully into employment would make to the overall employment target,
- future employment increases based on the steady-state assumption and
- using Berthoud's concepts of multiple disadvantages as an indication for likelihood of moving into employment.

Lowering the age cut-off is already being discussed as a next step (Gregg 2008 and Welfare Reform Bill 2008). Therefore, this is going to be examined as an alternative using the same criteria listed above.

Methodology

Successive New Labour governments have placed great emphasis on evidence-based-policy to establish what works (see Nutley and Smith 2000, Solesbury 2001, Sanderson 2002). This and the increasing prominence of lone parents as a political topic have meant that there is now a substantial

body of research available on this group (for summary and discussion see Holtermann et al 1997 and Millar and Ridge 2001) which means that an policy appraisal³ of which groups of lone parents are most likely to move into work could be carried out.

The objectives against which potential success of the current welfare-to-work reform will be measured are those identified by the government, namely meeting the employment target as one key policy lever to decrease child poverty levels. In order to do this a number of scenarios exploring the potential contribution successfully activating a particular target group could make to the various targets as a first step. This is followed by a steady-state analysis. One of the arguments used to justify the activation is that lone parents with older children are 'able to work'. A comparison of the number of disadvantages based on the work by Berthoud (2003) between lone parents on Income Support and in work should give an indication what proportion of this group is able to work. The analysis is based on a secondary analysis of 2005 data from the Families and Children Study⁴. Employment rate for the purposes of this paper, has been defined as working 16 hours or more per week⁵.

³ As mentioned above, economists have traditionally been involved in the policy-design stage within government and the Green Book, published in 2003 by the Treasury, contains the official guidance for economists on how to carry out policy appraisals. According to the Green Book (HMTreasury 2003) carrying out a policy appraisal involves the following four stages: justifying action, setting objectives, appraising options and making recommendations. The justifications for action and objectives set out by government with regards to this reform will be accepted and adopted for this research. Instead the focus is going to be on stages three and four of the policy appraisal guidance, namely: appraising options and making recommendations.

⁴ The Families and Children Study (FACS) is a panel survey with a cross-sectional element of all families with children in Great Britain. It is commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions together with a number of other government departments. Data is collected annually. The latest available data is wave 7, i.e. from 2005. The sample size for lone parents is around 2000 households. FACS has been chosen because of the panel element. However, the employment rates of lone parents are lower in FACS than the LFS, so some of the analysis below could be an underestimate.

⁵ The government definition of employment rate for the purpose of the employment target is working one hour or more per week. The reasons for choosing 16 hours as a cut odd point are that employment under 16 hours per week is insufficient in itself for lone parents to move off Income Support and hence potentially out of poverty, which is after all the main rationale for the welfare reform.

The likely effectiveness of the current reform design

The current welfare to work reform is using the age of the youngest child as the selection criterion for work activation. The reform is introduced in several steps as outlined above and so in this paper, the focus will be on the final target group, i.e. lone parents whose youngest child is seven years or older.

According to FACS the employment rate of all lone parents was 48 per cent in 2005 (see table 1 below). However, this figure is a cross-section of all lone parent families and the employment rate of such parents tends to differ according to the age of their youngest child. The employment rate of lone parents with children seven or older was 59 per cent in 2005, i.e. quite close to the overall employment target for lone parents (see table 1). This compares to 37 per cent of lone parents whose youngest child was six years old or younger being in employment (table 1). In other words, the employment rate of lone parents increases with the age of their youngest child, to the point where it is already quite close to the employment target.

Table 1: Employment rate of lone parents by age of youngest child

Age of youngest child (column %)	7-15	under 7	All lone parents
Working 16 + hours	59	37	48
On IS	34	55	45
Other	7	8	7
Total	100	100	100
All lone parents in that group	794	831	1625

Source: FACS 2005, all lone parents who are not married, not retired, not working and claiming IS and have children under 16, weighted using gxsw, own analysis.

In order to assess the potential impact that targeting this group could have, a couple of hypothetical scenarios will be examined. First of all, what could be called the **best case scenario**. In other words, what would the effect be on the overall employment rate of lone parents if the activation was completely successful and 100 per cent of the target group moved into employment. Secondly, Harker et al estimated that the overall employment rate of lone parents would have to rise to 86 per cent in order for the child poverty target to be met (2006; 13)⁶. Therefore, reaching an overall 86 per cent employment rate is going to be another hypothetical scenario, called **child poverty target scenario**. Perhaps more realistically, the final hypothetical scenario looked at will be the actual employment target for lone parents of 70 per cent. In other words, what proportion of the target group would need to move into employment for the overall employment target to be met will be referred to as the **employment target scenario**.

The scenarios described above are dependent on the overall size of the target group, i.e. what proportion of all lone parents is made up of the target group, i.e. lone parents with older children on Income Support. According to the FACS, 17 per cent of lone parents were lone parents whose youngest child was between seven and 15 years in 2005 and who are on Income Support (see table 2 below). Therefore, the reform targets just under one fifth of all lone parents. By comparison, lone parents whose youngest child is under seven and who are on Income Support constitute 28 per cent of all lone parents (see table 2).

⁶ Alternatively, if the employment target of 70 per cent was met for lone parents by 2010, then the proportion of dual earner couples would need to rise from 57 to 65 per cent and the proportion of unemployed couples fall from 5 to 4 per cent (Harker 2006; 13). The 82 per cent figure is used for illustration purposes as increasing the employment rate of lone parents is not the only policy lever the government can and is using to meet the child poverty target.

Table 2: Lone parents by age of youngest child of all lone parents

Age of youngest child	7-15 (total %)
Lone parents in employment of 16 hours+	29
Lone parents on IS as part of all lone parents	17
Other, i.e. lone parents not in work and not on IS ⁷	3
Proportion of all lone parents	49
Unweighted base	794

Source: FACS 2005, all lone parents who are not married, not retired, not working and claiming IS and have children under 16, weighted using gxsw, own analysis.

Table 3 starts with the overall employment rate of all lone parents which current stands at 48 per cent. Lone parents in the target group of the current welfare to work reform, i.e. lone parents whose youngest child is seven years or older who are on Income Support, make up 17 per cent of all lone parents. Therefore, in the best case scenario, i.e. if part or all of the lone parents in the target group were to move into employment, the overall employment rate would increase by 16 per cent and be brought up to 64 per cent. Therefore, if all lone parents in the target group were to move into work, the overall employment rate would come close to the employment target of 70 per cent. However, this also means that the employment target could not be reached by focusing on this group alone neither could the child poverty target.

⁷ This group has been separated from lone parents on IS as the focus of this paper is on work activation policies for lone parents on income replacement benefits. Given that this other group does not claim any income replacement benefits, they will not fall under the remit of the government's policy measures.

Table 3: Employment rates and increases by age of youngest child

Actual and potential employment rates	7-15 years
Current employment rate of all lone parents	48 %
Increase in overall employment rate in best case scenario	+16 %
Overall employment rate in best case scenario ⁸	64%
Proportion of target group that would need to move into employment for child poverty target scenario	>100 %
Proportion of target group that would need to move into employment for employment target scenario	>100 %

2005 FACS data for all lone parents who are not retired or living with someone and whose youngest child is under 16 years old, weighted using Gsxw, own analysis.

To summarise, lone parents in the target group of the reform make up 17 per cent of all lone parents. The employment target of 70 per cent for all lone parents would be just missed if all lone parents in the target group were to move into employment. This suggests that the target group chosen may not be ideally chosen if the aim of the reform is to hit the proposed employment target. One alternative is to activate lone parents with younger children, e.g. when the youngest child reaches the age of three, as is the case in a number of other countries. This possibility will be explored below. However, prior to that the target group of the current welfare to work reform will be examined with regards to its characteristics and disadvantages.

⁸ Target group refers to lone parents whose youngest child is 7 years or older and who is receiving Income Support. The 'other' group is not included in this analysis as they are not claiming IS and therefore largely falling outside the current activation measures.

Extending activation to lone parents with younger children

The majority of countries have activation policies regarding lone parents (Carcillo and Grubb 2006) and a number of them have introduced work requirements or increased their stringency in the past 15 years (Millar 2005). Part of an evidence based policy appraisal is to develop policy options (HMTreasury 2003). The focus is on activation rather than changes to existing policy levers as this seems to be the direction of travel for government policy despite the economic downturn (see Gregg 2008).

Almost all work tests include the age of the youngest child as one of the selection criteria. In fact, the majority of countries selected lone parents on the basis of the age of the youngest child (Carcillo and Grubb 2006). Of the 19 countries that had work tests, only four of them were not based on the age of the youngest child (Carcillo and Grubb 2006⁹, see also Bradshaw and Finch 2002), though in practice the age of child was often taken into account informally in those countries too¹⁰ (Carcillo and Grubb 2006). Though this is rarely explicitly mentioned, the approach is based on theories around maternal health immediately after childbirth, institutional arrangements such as school age and, most importantly, child development. Essentially, child development theories argue that the development of children may be negatively affected if the primary carer is engaged in paid work whilst they are very young. Child development in this context refers to both the behavioural and the cognitive development of children in the first years of their life (for an introduction see Slater and Bremner 2003 and Slater and Muir 2000).

The following section examines the possibility of lowering age cut off point for activating lone parents. In a number of other countries lone parents face work requirements once their youngest child is three years old (see OECD 2007). This cut off point is variously linked to parental leave entitlements for all

⁹ The typology developed by Carcillo and Grubb (2006) has been adopted in a number of publications, such as the Freud report and the OECD Families and Bosses series.

¹⁰ These countries are: Belgium, Japan, Portugal and Spain. Carcillo and Grubb (2006) also placed Sweden, Denmark and Finland in the no age of child group, but as will be argued in

parents as well as to state provision of childcare (OECD 2007). Examples of such an approach are countries such as Germany and Sweden. Table 4 then shows the distribution of lone parents by the age of their youngest child. Lowering the age to three or older would bring another twelve per cent of lone parents into the activation target group.

Table 4: Lone parents by age of youngest child of all lone parents

Age of youngest child (total %)	7-15	3-6	0-2	All ages
Lone parents in employment	29	12	7	48
Lone parents on IS	17	12	16	45
Lone parents not in work nor on IS	3	1	3	7
Overall	49	25	26	100
Unweighted base	794	413	418	1625

Source: FACS 2005, all lone parents who are not married, not retired, not working and claiming IS and have children under 16, weighted using gxsw, own analysis.

If the activation of lone parents was extended to cover all lone parents whose youngest child is three years or older and if they all moved into the employment, the employment rate of all lone parents would increase by 28 per cent which would bring up the employment to 77 per cent and therefore above the employment target (see table 5). In fact, the employment target would be met if just over three quarters of lone parents in the expanded target group moved into employment. However, even in the best case scenario, the

this chapter, the selection for work activation is the same as for all parents, i.e. at the end of parental leave benefits and therefore directly linked to the age of the youngest child.

required overall employment rate of 82 per cent in order to meet the child poverty target would not be achieved (table 5).

Table 5: Potential employment rate increases by age of child

Potential employment scenarios (in %)	3-15	7-15
Increase in employment rate in best case scenario	+28%	+16%
Overall employment rate in best case scenario	77%	64 %
What proportion of target group currently not in work would need to move into employment to reach overall child poverty target?	>100%	>100%
What proportion of target group currently not in work would need to move into employment to reach overall employment target of 70 per cent?	77%	>100 %

Source: 2005 FACS data for all lone parents who were not retired or living with someone and whose youngest child was under 16, weighted using gxsw, own analysis.

Using age of child as a selection criterion for activating lone parents seems to be the preferred option of the current government. However, calculations of the proportion of the respective proportions that would need to be successfully activated to meet the employment target suggest that the age would have to be lowered beyond seven in order for the employment target to be met. Even when lowering the age cut off to three years, three quarters of lone parents would need to move into employment to meet the employment target. This is a very substantial proportion and it seems therefore pertinent to look more closely at this group and the likelihood of such a proportion moving into employment.

Examining the likelihood of lone parents in the target groups to move into employment

One way of estimating employment rates for coming years is to base assumptions on trends of the previous years. In other words, the estimate of an employment rate at some point in the future rests on past employment patterns. In table 6 the employment rates of lone parents from 2002 to 2005 are broken down by age of the youngest child. The overall employment rate (bottom line of table 6) has remained relatively stable over the four year period. The employment rate of all lone parents was 47 per cent in 2002, then went up to 51 per cent in 2004 but came back down again to 48 per cent in 2005. Looking more closely at the employment trends over these four years by the age of the youngest child shows a more mixed picture. The employment rate for lone parents whose youngest child is seven or over has increased slowly from 56 per cent in 2002 to 59 per cent in 2005. Similarly, the employment rate of lone parents whose youngest child is three and over has increased from 52 per cent to 55 per cent. The biggest fluctuations in the employment rate can be seen in the lone parent group with the youngest children (from 21 per cent in 2002 to 33 per cent in 2004 and then back down again to 27 per cent in 2005).

Essentially, the employment rate has increased by one per cent per year for lone parents with older children. Therefore, projecting this trend forward to 2010 would add another five per cent to both employment rates. This would suggest that the employment rate for lone parents whose youngest child is seven and over would stand at 64 per cent in 2010 and that for lone parents whose youngest child is three years or over at 59 per cent. This would lead to an increase in the overall employment rate of lone parents by two and three per cent respectively.

Table 6: Employment rates by age of child from 2002 to 2005

Year (in %)	2002	2003	2004	2005
7-15	56	57	58	59
3-15	52	52	54	55
0-2	21	28	33	27
All	45	46	49	48

Source: 2005 FACS data for all lone parents who were not retired or living with someone and whose youngest child was under 16, weighted using gxsw, own analysis.

The higher employment rate of lone parents with older children to some extent supports the government's claim that this group of lone parents are 'able to work'. However, this does not necessarily apply to all lone parents in this group and it might be that those lone parents who have remained out of work are less likely to move into work for a number of reasons.

The link between multiple disadvantages and employment

Much of the research on lone parents to date not in work has focused on the following two questions: whether lone parents not in work differ in terms of their characteristics to those in work and what the barriers to work are (Millar and Ridge 2001). The research on characteristics of lone parents not in work presents 'a very complete and generally consistent picture' (Millar and Ridge 2001: 147) and will therefore be used as approximations for the likelihood of lone parents in the respective target groups to move into employment.

The key distinguishing characteristics of lone parents not in work compared with those in work, relate to: family composition, route into lone parenthood, level of qualifications, recent work experience and health status and work orientations, in particular not being in work is associated with

- Having a child under five,
- Having three or more children,
- Being single rather than divorced or separated,
- Having a health problem,
- Not having any qualifications,
- Not having any recent work experience and
- Not looking to move into work.

(Millar and Ridge 2001).

Berthoud's (2003) work on multiple disadvantages can be seen as a summary and extension of the research on characteristics. He argues that having several disadvantages has a cumulative effect on the employment chances of an individual. This approach is being adapted for the purposes of this paper in order to explore the composition of the respective target groups. In other words, an increase in the number of disadvantages are taken as an indicator of higher chances of being (and staying) out of work. Berthoud (2003) compared three groups in his work: lone parents, older workers and workers with a disability¹¹.

¹¹ Berthoud (2003) investigated the concept of multiple barriers, with regards to likelihood of labour market entry and found that a cumulative model is the best predictor for labour market entry, i.e. taking into account both the number of barriers, as well as the effect of certain combinations. He explored the following disadvantages: age, family structure, skill level, ethnic group, labour demand and health and argued that even a simple additive model is relatively good at predicting the risk of non-employment.

Given that this paper is focusing on lone parents the indicators of disadvantage have been adapted from those used by Berthoud and the main findings from the research on lone parents out of work. The following five indicators of disadvantage in the labour market will be used:

- Having three or more children,
- Either the lone parent or at least one child having an impairment that is expected to last for at least a year and affects either the amount or the kind of work someone can do,
- Not having any qualifications,
- Living in the area with the lowest employment rate, i.e. London, and
- Having been on Income Support for six or more years¹².

The indicators of disadvantage have been set deliberately low, i.e. six year or more on benefits rather than say two or four years, in order to strengthen the argument that they present real labour market disadvantages.

Table 7 is focusing on lone parents who are targeted by the current welfare to work reform, i.e. those whose youngest child is seven years or older and compares the distribution of disadvantages by their employment status. It shows marked differences in that 68 per cent of those in employment did not have any of the employment disadvantages identified above compared to only 17 per cent of those on Income Support. Conversely, 53 per cent of those on IS had two or more disadvantages compared to around four per cent of those in employment.

¹² This indicator skews the level of disadvantage slightly towards older lone parents and ideally I would be able to include whether a lone parent has ever worked. However, this variable is not reliable in the previous waves of FACS and has therefore been omitted altogether.

Table 7: Number of disadvantages for lone parents in the target group

Number of disadvantages (column %)	In work	On IS	All
None	68	17	49
One	28	32	30
Two	4	31	14
Three or more	*	21	8
All	100	100	100
Weighted Base	470	272	794

* fewer than 10 respondents

Base: FACS 2005, weighted using cross-sectional weighting, excluding those married and living with partner and those retired, own analysis.

In table 8, lone parents in the target group are compared with other lone parents on Income Support with younger children. Comparing the number of disadvantages of lone parents on IS by the age of the youngest child suggests that lone parents with older children face more disadvantages than the other groups. For example, while only 17 per cent of lone parents with older children have no disadvantages, this applies to 33 per cent of those whose youngest child is between three and six. Similarly, eight per cent in the middle group have three or more disadvantages and 21 in the group with older children.

Table 8: Number of disadvantages for lone parents on IS by age of child

Number of disadvantages (column %)	On IS	On IS
	3-6	7-15
None	33	17
One	42	32
Two	17	31
Three or more	8	21
All	100	100
Weighted Base	199	272

* fewer than 10 respondents

Base: FACS 2005, weighted using cross-sectional weighting, excluding those married and living with partner and those retired, own analysis.

Summary and discussion

The current welfare reform focuses on lone parents on Income Support whose youngest child is between seven and 15 years. The stated aim of the reform is to increase the overall employment rate of lone parents and by so doing reduce child poverty levels. The employment rate for this group is already relatively high and therefore, even if all lone parents with older children were to move into employment, the employment target of 70 per cent of all lone parents in employment would be just missed. Moreover, this group seems to face a relatively high number of disadvantages when it comes to entering the labour market such as ill-health, lack of qualifications and time spent outside the labour market. Around half of all lone parents in this group have at least two of these disadvantages and a fifth have three or more disadvantages. This is substantially higher than for other groups on IS or their counterparts in employment. This suggests that these lone parents are less likely to move into employment any time soon.

A number of countries target lone parents for employment once their youngest child is three years old and this also seems to be the direction of travel of

policy in Britain as shown by the Welfare Reform Bill. Therefore, this policy has been applied to the British case. If two thirds of lone parents in both groups, i.e. with younger and with older children were to be successfully activated, the employment target would be met. When comparing lone parents with younger children in work with those on IS, in terms of their characteristics, lone parents with younger children are less likely to experience the same number of disadvantages than their counterparts with older children. Arguably, lone parents with younger children therefore have a better chance of moving into the labour market.

However, given that the aim of the reform is to move lone parents into the labour market, it could be argued that selecting lone parents by the age of child is perhaps not the best mechanism for identifying 'ability to work. There are alternative models to the age of child model, such as basing it on transition status (such as in Norway or France), selecting by employability (e.g. Wisconsin Works) or selection on the discretion of personal advisors (New Zealand).¹³.

When taking into account the economic context, the concerns over gaps in the support infrastructure mentioned above and the availability of other policy leavers such as focusing on employment retention, the current policy reform seems not only likely to be ineffective but also not the best use of available resources.

¹³ Given the limitations of space these will not be elaborated further here but will form part of the presentation at the conference.

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