

# ROUND THE CLOCK

## **IN-WORK POVERTY AND THE 'HOURS QUESTION'**

Lindsay Judge



# **Round the clock: in-work poverty and the ‘hours question’**

---

**Lindsay Judge**

**April 2015**

CPAG promotes action for the prevention and relief of poverty among children and families with children. To achieve this, CPAG aims to raise awareness of the causes, extent, nature and impact of poverty, and strategies for its eradication and prevention; bring about positive policy changes for families with children in poverty; and enable those eligible for income maintenance to have access to their full entitlement. If you are not already supporting us, please consider making a donation, or ask for details of our membership schemes, training courses and publications.

Published by CPAG  
30 Micawber Street, London N1 7TB  
Tel: 020 7837 7979  
staff@cpag.org.uk  
www.cpag.org.uk

© Child Poverty Action Group 2015

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

Child Poverty Action Group is a charity registered in England and Wales (registration number 294841) and in Scotland (registration number SC039339), and is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England (registration number 1993854). VAT number: 690 808117

Cover design by Colorido Studios  
Internal design by Devious Designs  
Printed by Calverts Press

# Contents

	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>How many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)?</b>	
One	<b>The evidence to date</b>	<b>7</b>
Two	<b>Current views</b>	<b>14</b>
Three	<b>The perspective of parents</b>	<b>20</b>
Four	<b>The business perspective</b>	<b>28</b>
Five	<b>The policy implications</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>41</b>

---

## **About the author**

**Lindsay Judge** is senior policy and research officer at Child Poverty Action Group.

---

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people have contributed a huge amount to this report. Thanks go to Kate Bell and Rys Farthing, colleagues at the inception of the project, and to current colleagues Jane Ahrends, Alison Garnham, Moussa Haddad, Imran Hussain, Megan Jarvie, Alison Key, David Simmonds and Jessica Sinclair Taylor for their comments and advice throughout.

Thanks are also due to YouGov for its excellent work on the polling; to Ben Richards for his able assistance with the focus groups and to all the parents who participated; to the employers and business groups who so generously shared their time and thoughts with us; and to Fran Bennett, Laura Gardiner, Mubin Haq, Julie McCarthy and Philippa Newis, who challenged, corrected and commented always to excellent effect.

Finally, CPAG gratefully acknowledges the generous financial support provided by the Webb Memorial Trust, and in particular the support of Barry Knight, without which this project would not have been possible.

# Introduction

For many working families in the UK today, poverty is a fact of life. While the number of children living in poor households has followed a downward trend since the mid-1990s, the proportion of children in poverty with a working parent has increased significantly over this time. In 1997/98, for example, fewer than a half of children living in poverty had at least one parent with a job; by 2012/13, this figure had risen to close to two-thirds.<sup>1</sup>

In-work poverty is also an increasingly pertinent aspect of the political debate. 'Hard working families' has become a dominant trope for both left and right, and time and again we hear that work is the best route out of poverty. But while employment may be the key way most families maintain their incomes, especially through the presence of a second earner, the growing number of families who are living in poverty despite having one or more working parent tells us that a job may be a necessary, but is not always a sufficient, condition for escaping poverty.

At Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) we see in-work poverty as the product of three key variables: the level of wages; the level of benefits families receive to help them with the costs of children and to support their wages; and the number of hours that one or both parents work.<sup>2</sup> This report focuses squarely on the third of these. It asks a seemingly simple question: how many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)?

The parenthesis is important. In CPAG's view, norms about parental employment should hold true across the income distribution. Put another way, parents who are unable to leverage anything other than a low wage from the workplace should not be expected to work an unduly different number of hours than those able to command higher levels of pay. From the outset, however, we recognise that this might not be a majority position. Part of the rationale for this project, then, is to test whether our view is widely held or not.

While our question is a normative one, it has significant policy implications. Exploring what are considered reasonable hours for different types of parents to work sheds light on a host of issues. This could tell us something about wages and benefit levels, for example, and about the type of childcare provision that may be required to facilitate these working hours. It allows for a more rigorous assessment of the appropriateness of conditionalities attached to benefit receipt, and for deeper consideration of the role that businesses need to play if they are to assist with reducing child poverty.

So the 'hours question' is what our research sets out to answer. We have attempted to do this through four different exercises. First, we undertook an evidence review, scoping out the factors that shape current attitudes to parental employment. Second, we polled a cross-section of the population, asking them how many hours they thought were reasonable for any parent to work, and when those hours should be. Third, we

explored the results of these first two activities with focus groups of parents, and introduced income into the discussion by asking whether we should place different expectations on lower paid parents. And finally, we took the results to employers and business groups to hear their perspective on the topic.

This report tells the story in exactly the same way in which the research unfolded, with a section devoted to each of the above activities. These describe our methodology in more detail, set out our findings and explore both the areas of consensus and the contradictions that we discovered at each point of the project. The final section then considers the policy implications of the research, setting out an agenda for action that we believe is necessary if we truly want to address in-work poverty.

#### **Notes**

- 1 Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income 1994/95–2012/13*, July 2014, Table 4.6ts
- 2 Throughout this report, 'work' is usually a shorthand for 'paid work'. This is not intended to downplay the importance of unpaid work, especially caring for children or other dependants.

# How many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)?

One

## The evidence to date

Normative attitudes to parental employment stem from many sources. They are the product of individual preferences and of compromises reached at a household level. They may reflect deep-seated cultural values, as well as assumptions about the gendered division of labour. Norms may, in part, be shaped by economics, reflecting the levels of work required to achieve what is seen as an ‘adequate’ income. And, of course, both policy and commentary encode messages about the ‘right’ number of hours parents should work, often starkly differentiating these messages for different income groups.

Even from the outset, then, our question ‘how many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)?’ looks anything but simple. In this section, we overview some of the pressures that bear down on families as they attempt to strike an appropriate balance between paid work and parenting. Critically, we assess whether there are different assumptions placed on low-paid families compared with other parents.

---

### Individual preferences and household level decisions

The starting point for anyone answering the hours question is personal preference, which is often entwined with a particular sense of identity as a parent. For some, working full time from their child’s early years is the ‘right’ thing to do; for others, staying at home to care for their children is the preferred option. In between, there is, of course, a whole range of working patterns parents adopt in their efforts to strike a balance that suits them between earning and caring.

The notion of ‘choice’ is contentious, however. As many commentators have pointed out, choice is always bounded by a number of factors, not least by social structures. In the UK, gender plays a particularly large part in determining employment patterns. While women and men broadly work similar levels before having children, hours often diverge rapidly once they are parents. Mothers in the UK are much more likely to work part time than their Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) counterparts, for example, while fathers are much more likely than their OECD peers to work long hours.<sup>1</sup> In the UK, then, the male breadwinner model continues to shape behaviour to a considerable extent.

Alongside gender, other cultural influences play a role in determining working patterns. Studies have shown, for example, that while communities do not have homogenous views on the hours question,

attitudes to maternal employment, and especially to formal childcare, do vary by ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> Less well researched, perhaps, is the question of how income correlates with personal preferences as opposed to pragmatic choices. In 2009, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) undertook a large piece of polling work on the topic of working preferences.<sup>3</sup> This showed that many issues are common across the income distribution: all families seek to balance work and home in a way that accords with their values, and factors such as a partner's willingness to share domestic duties, other caring responsibilities and the availability of support from the wider family shape the working patterns of higher and lower income households alike.

---

## **The economics behind the norms**

Choices about how to combine work and parenting are constrained, not just by gender and cultural norms, but also by the economic realities households face. Research has shown that most believe it is 'normal' to give up certain expenditures when becoming a parent, cutting back on activities such as eating out and holidays.<sup>4</sup> While views will differ from family to family as to what is 'enough', the number of hours parents feel they 'should' work will often be determined by the desire to maintain a reasonable standard of living.

This is obviously more acutely felt by those who cannot extract a high wage from the economy. Even before the recession, the EHRC survey showed that 57 per cent of high-income households had a stay-at-home parent compared with 25 per cent of low-income respondents. As the economy has contracted and average earnings have decreased, the pressure on low-paid parents to work longer hours has clearly increased (although, at the same time, the ability of employers to offer more work has been more highly constrained).

How many hours do families currently have to work, then, in order to have a minimum standard of living? Table 1 shows the most recent data on the poverty risk experienced by different family types in the UK by working pattern.<sup>5</sup>

Various aspects of the table are worth noting beyond the obvious correlation between higher hours and lower poverty risk. First, while it is clear that one-and-a-half to two-earner couple families have a very low risk of poverty, part-time work for both does not offer substantial protection against poverty for couple families or for lone parents, or at least not in the here and now. Second, children in lone-parent families still have a significant chance of living in poverty even if their parent works full time, particularly when the after housing costs measure is used. And third, the table shows that almost one in three children living with parents who are self-employed is in poverty – a significant point given the recent growth in the size of this group.

Table 1

**Percentage of children living in different family types in relative poverty, 2012/13**

	Before housing costs %	After housing costs %
<b>Lone parent</b>	22	42
In full-time work	12	22
In part-time work	16	30
Not working	30	59
<b>Couple with children</b>	16	23
Self-employed	25	31
Both in full-time work	02	04
One in full-time work, one in part-time work	04	08
One in full-time work, one not working	18	29
One or more in part-time work	37	54
Both not in work	54	71

Source: Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income 2012/13*, June 2014

## What the tax and benefits system tells parents

Alongside the cultural norms and economic realities that shape families' decisions about employment, the tax and benefits system sends some clear (and not so clear) messages about the 'right' number of hours low-income parents should work. Most obviously, working tax credit currently incentivises lone parents to work a minimum of 16 hours a week, and couples a minimum of 24 hours between them, in order to be eligible for this top-up from the state. With the advent of universal credit, however, things look set to change.

Unlike working tax credit, universal credit does not have any explicit rules on hours. Instead, as many have noted, the financial incentives within universal credit are skewed more heavily in favour of short-hours working rather than longer, more sustained hours of employment.<sup>6</sup> Given this, some have questioned its poverty reduction potential, as the system encourages parents (and indeed others) into work patterns that do not map with lower poverty risk.<sup>7</sup>

In this respect, universal credit is heavily premised on the 'work first' principle. This assumes that a low-paid, short-hours job is a natural stepping stone to something better, and that while short-hours working may not solve a household's poverty in the here and now, in the longer term it will. There is, of course, some truth in this hypothesis – studies show that poverty is a dynamic phenomenon and that households that remain connected to the labour market are more likely to move out of poverty over time.<sup>8</sup> But this also relies on a supply of jobs to facilitate progression out of low-paid work, something that evidence suggests is sorely lacking in the UK today.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its lack of explicit rules about hours, it would be wrong to say that universal credit is neutral on the subject. Rather than encode normative assumptions about hours in the incentives structure, the new

benefit instead embeds them in the conditionality regime attached to its receipt. In this, it builds on past practice, especially with respect to obligations placed on lone parents in recent years to get ‘work ready’ and be available to work. Table 2 sets out the evolution of these over time.

As this shows, the requirements placed on lone parents to prepare for, and then seek, work have become more demanding over time. Since 2008, the age of a lone parent’s youngest child determines when s/he must start to be available and look for work. In a five-year period, this age threshold has reduced from 15 (or 18 if the child is still in full-time education) to five. In addition, parents of pre-schoolers are increasingly subject to expectations to get ‘work ready’ through interviews and other activities.

While Table 2 shows that lone parents of children up to the age of 12 can restrict the time they are expected to work to ‘normal school hours’, this term has never been defined in either regulations or guidance. Consequently, it is left to the adviser to interpret what this actually means. And while the table suggests that the introduction of universal credit does not herald significant new changes from the current regime (the only difference being that the obligation on parents of three- and four-year-olds changes from ‘work-related activity’ to the slightly stronger ‘work preparation’), in truth, universal credit will introduce far more discretion into the system, which many are concerned will result in more restrictively interpreted obligations being placed on lone parents.<sup>10</sup>

Universal credit heralds other changes too. The introduction of in-work conditionality will require claimants who are not earning ‘enough’ (defined as the hours they are expected to work under the conditionality regime multiplied by the national minimum wage) to increase their working hours

Table 2

**Obligations on lone parents whose youngest child is..., 2008 to 2013**

	<b>Under 1</b>	<b>1–2 years old</b>	<b>3–4 years old</b>	<b>5–12 years old</b>	<b>13–15 (18 if in full-time education) years old</b>
<b>Pre-2008</b>	No work-related requirements	Work-focused interview only	Work-focused interview only	Work-focused interview only	Work-focused interview only
<b>November 2008</b>	No work-related requirements	Work-focused interview only	Work-focused interview only	Available and looking for work when 12 or over	Available and looking for work
<b>October 2009</b>	No work-related requirements	Work-focused interview only	Work-focused interview only	Available and looking for work when 10 or over	Available and looking for work
<b>October 2010</b>	No work-related requirements	Work-focused interview only	Work-focused interview only	Available and looking for work when 7 or over	Available and looking for work
<b>May 2012</b>	No work-related requirements	Work-focused interview only	Work-focused interview only	Available and looking for work when 5 or over	Available and looking for work
<b>April 2014</b>	No work-related requirements	Work-focused interview only	Work-related activity and work-focused interview	Available and looking for work when 5 or over	Available and looking for work
<b>Universal credit</b>	No work-related requirements	Work-focused interview only	Work preparation and work-focused interview	Available and looking for work when 5 or over	Available and looking for work

Note: parents required to be available and looking for work when their youngest child is aged between 5 and 12 may restrict their work to ‘normal school hours’.

(or find a better paid job). While this does not mark a new departure for lone parents from the obligations set out above, this is a significant change for couples with children and is worth considering in detail.

Under current benefit rules, only the 'signing-on' partner in a couple with children is subject to conditionality and has any expectations about hours of work placed on her/him. This will change under universal credit when both partners will be required to sign a claimant commitment. One will be designated the 'main earner' – and will be expected to work 35 hours a week – while the other 'caring partner' will have her/his hours expectations tempered in the same way as a lone parent would. Parents in a couple whose youngest child is between five and 12, then, will be expected to work 35 hours plus 'normal school hours' (interpreted by most as 16 hours a week) – a total of 51 hours between them. This is in contrast to the 24 hours they currently need to work before conditionality is 'switched off' when a working tax credit claim is made.<sup>11</sup>

This all stands in stark contrast to the message the tax and benefits system sends to higher earning couples. Most obviously, the married couple's allowance introduced in April 2014 gives a clear signal to tax-paying households that those with a stay-at-home parent are to be rewarded. While lower income couples are subject to increasingly intense expectations to increase their hours of work, the system endorses the traditional breadwinner model for those on higher rates of pay.

---

## **Future direction of travel**

Alongside hard policy, commentary and rhetoric also tell us something about how expectations about hours of parental employment might change over time. On the one hand, society is becoming increasingly conscious of the challenges that all parents face in striking an acceptable balance between earning and caring, and there are calls to temper our expectations on hours all round. Organisations like the New Economics Foundation, for example, advocate a three-quarter working model for all, which they suggest would have manifold benefits for work/family balance, for gender equity and for environmental sustainability.<sup>12</sup>

But this message runs counter to those from other quarters. Increased expectations on low-income parents to work more hours are discernible in ongoing discussions about tackling child poverty. One obvious implication it is possible to take from the data in Table 1 is that in-work poverty could be substantially reduced if more families moved from the 'partly working' to the 'fully working' category. The government's current Child Poverty Strategy alludes to this possibility, stating that:<sup>13</sup>

As well as being in work, families need to work enough hours... Of the 1.5 million children in poor working families in 2011/12, only 100,000 were in families where all parents (including both lone parent and couple families) were in full-time work.

Implicit in this statement, then, is a conviction that a valid poverty reduction approach is to encourage all parents to work full time. More

subtly perhaps, the growing provision of childcare is increasingly linked to parental employment when children are at an ever younger age. While the free nursery entitlement for (deprived) two-, three- and four-year-olds was designed with child development objectives uppermost, we have seen this provision recently advanced as a reason why low-income parents 'should' now go out to work when their children are pre-schoolers.<sup>14</sup> Most tellingly, the Department for Work and Pensions has announced that it will increase engagement with parents of under-two-year-olds in some universal credit pilot areas in order to incentivise take-up of the free childcare entitlement, while at the same time 'offering' advice on work.

Running alongside these messages, however, are others that exhort us all to be 'warm parents' and to spend 'quality time' with our children. Not only do these suggestions ignore the well-documented link between parental stress and low income, but there is a different tenor to this debate for lower income parents: from the troubled families agenda to ongoing discussions about childcare provision for pre-schoolers, the implication is often that that poor (low-income) parents are poor (bad) parents.

Finally, at the extreme, our question – how many hours should a parent work in order not to be poor? – was inverted most aggressively when the thinktank Policy Exchange proposed recently that no family should be regarded as being in poverty unless the parents work the number of hours prescribed by benefit rules.<sup>15</sup> For some, then, the answer to in-work poverty lies not in establishing the appropriate balance between hours, wage levels and the in-work support needed to protect against poverty, but instead by excluding those who do not work the 'right' number of hours from the definition altogether.

---

## **Some comments**

Normative attitudes about how many hours parents should work, then, are the product of a complex range of factors that operate at many levels. All parents have to assess the trade-offs they find acceptable as individuals and families once they have children, and these are rarely static over time. But attitudes and behaviour are not related in a straightforward way: while one parent (or family) will tolerate a large degree of dissonance between her/his work and her/his preferred parenting arrangements, another would not.

Clearly, low-income families are subject to more intense pressures, which increase the contradictions about how many hours they 'should' work, than those on higher pay. The economics of need bear down on them much more strongly than on better-off families, and their interaction with the tax and benefits system brings them up against some sharp normative, yet contradictory, assumptions. The financial incentives of the system send couples the message to organise themselves with a breadwinner and a carer, for example, yet lone parents are expected to get 'work ready' as soon as their children are

toddlers. Alongside this, broader commentary and rhetoric exhorts them to be ‘warm parents’, yet also to ‘work their way out of poverty’.

All in all, our current thinking about the ‘hours question’ is a muddle, with evidence, ideology and cultural values interacting in ways which are rarely explicit. Could our research offer some much needed clarity?

#### Notes

- 1 For more details, see the OECD family database, ‘Usual working hours per week by gender’, Social Policy Division, July 2013, available at [www.oecd.org/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database)
- 2 See, for example, O Khan, C Victor and A Ahmet, *Caring and Earning Among Low-income Caribbean, Pakistani and Somali People*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, May 2014
- 3 Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Work and Care: a study of modern parents*, EHRC, 2009
- 4 D Hirsch, *The Cost of a Child in the Twenty-first Century*, CPAG, 2012
- 5 It is worth noting that, in CPAG’s view, the poverty line is not necessarily a measure of an adequate income, but it is the national statistic used to denote an unacceptably low level of household income. See the Minimum Income Standard project for a different, and in our view more robust, assessment of adequacy.
- 6 S Adams and J Browne, *Do the UK Government’s Welfare Reforms Make Work Pay?*, Working Paper W13/26, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2013, available at <http://www.ifs.org.uk/wps/wp1326.pdf>
- 7 CPAG and TUC, *Will Universal Credit Work?*, TUC Economic Report Series 2013, available at [www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC-CPAG-UC-report-0413.pdf](http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC-CPAG-UC-report-0413.pdf)
- 8 SP Jenkins, *Changing Fortunes: income mobility and poverty dynamics in Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2011
- 9 C Darcy and A Hurrell, *Escape Plan: understanding who progresses from low pay and who gets stuck*, Resolution Foundation, 2014 available at [www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/escape-plan-understanding-who-progresses-from-low-pay-and-who-gets-stuck/](http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/escape-plan-understanding-who-progresses-from-low-pay-and-who-gets-stuck/)
- 10 Gingerbread and others, *Job-seeking Requirements for Single Parents Under Universal Credit: briefing note for parliamentarians on the universal credit regulations 2013*, available at [www.gingerbread.org.uk/content/663/Policy-work---benefits](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/content/663/Policy-work---benefits)
- 11 Self-employed parents will also be subject to more onerous requirements under universal credit, although through a different mechanism than the conditionality regime. The ‘minimum income floor’ will ascribe them with a presumptive income equivalent to what they would earn if they worked a similar number of ‘expected’ hours at the national minimum wage. This seemingly small point has a significant impact on the poverty reduction potential of universal credit. See House of Commons, *Hansard*, 15 January 2013, c715W for details.
- 12 A Coote and J Franklin, *Time On Our Side: why we all need a shorter working week*, New Economics Foundation, 2013, available at <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/time-on-our-side>
- 13 HM Government, *Child Poverty Strategy 2014-17*, p22
- 14 See, for example, The Draft Income Support (Work-Related Activity) and Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations 2014, Report by the Social Security Advisory Committee, available at [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/277697/draft-income-support-regulations-2014.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277697/draft-income-support-regulations-2014.pdf)
- 15 M Oakley and M Tinsley, *Outcomes, Not Just Incomes: improving Britain’s understanding and measurement of child poverty*, Policy Exchange, 2013

# How many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)?

## Two

## Current views

This section explores whether there is a consensus across society about the hours that parents should be prepared to work. It begins by looking at previous research that has explored families' working preferences and their views on the policy interventions that could help them achieve a sensible work/family balance. In particular, we explore whether different income groups display different preferences. The section then turns to new polling conducted as part of this project which asked a cross-section of the population what they regarded as reasonable working hours for families of various types.

---

### Preferences polling

The majority of polling prior to our project has approached the hours question from the perspective of how much families would *like* to work. In 2009, for example, the Equality and Human Rights Commission undertook its large piece of polling work on this topic, while the annual *Time, Health and the Family* report produced by Working Families has documented parental preferences for several years.<sup>1</sup>

Both surveys show consistently that work/family balance remains an elusive goal for the majority of parents. In the 2014 *Time, Health and the Family* report, only 25 per cent of parents surveyed were content with the balance between work and home life, with 77 per cent of respondents reporting that work impinged on the time they could dedicate to core activities with their children, such as homework, taking them to clubs and putting them to bed.

Families have also been asked in surveys how they would like to strike a better balance between work and parenting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their most common desire is to work fewer hours (27 per cent), with more than a quarter of parents saying they would take a pay cut in order to do so.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-two per cent of respondents expressed a preference to give up work altogether; 22 per cent to work from home some of the time; and 21 per cent identified flexible hours as a potential solution.

While lower and higher income families shared the sense that they had not got it right with respect to their work/family balance, their views diverged when they considered the feasibility of cutting back their hours. Unsurprisingly, low-income families emphasised the need to work long hours in order to keep their heads above water, while higher income parents accentuated the satisfaction they got from work and the need to

remain on a career track as key reasons why they did not cut back in order to achieve a more satisfactory balance.

Differences between income groups also emerged when the question of flexible working was raised. Those on higher incomes identified flexible working as a key way they could manage their workload alongside their parenting. Strikingly, low-income parents did not feel the same, expressing a strong preference instead for stable contracts which ideally fitted around school hours. The difference in opinions can perhaps be explained by the fact that flexibility has very different meanings for workers in different parts of the labour market: checking emails at home for one group of employees; zero-hour contracts for another.

## Reasonable hours of work

Preferences should clearly inform but cannot necessarily dictate policy making, however. In order to explore further the question of how many hours parents should be expected to work, we polled over 4,000 respondents on the *reasonable* expectations we should have for any parent with respect to employment. The polling was organised around three sets of questions: the number of hours parents should reasonably work; the parts of the day parents should reasonably work; and the distances it is reasonable to expect parents to travel to work.

In an effort to eliminate gender bias as much as possible from the polling, respondents were asked each question in a gender neutral way. Couples were described as ‘parent one’ and ‘parent two’. When the results were analysed, the lower number of hours was then ascribed to ‘parent two’. Table 1 below summarises the median results for the first set of questions.

This shows a number of largely unsurprising results. First, it is considered ‘normal’ to temper the number of hours worked when a parent, and that as children age, working more hours becomes more reasonable. Perhaps more surprisingly, in most cases respondents felt that it was reasonable for lone parents to work more hours than the main carer in a couple. Finally, the table shows that for couples, a full-time earner and part-time ‘caring parent’ was still regarded by many as the norm.

Table 1

### Median number of hours that it is reasonable to work per week when youngest child is...

	All	Age of youngest child			
		0–2	3–4	5–13	14–18
<b>Baseline</b> (no reference to children)	40	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Single parent</b>	25	20	20	25	35
<b>Couple</b>					
Parent one	37	37	37	37	39
Parent two	20	16	20	20	30

Source: YouGov

Digging deeper into the data, various points are worthy of note. First, it was apparent that there is no clear relationship between any demographic, social or political group and the level of hours identified as reasonable. In other words, gender, social class and political persuasion are not correlated with a more lenient or more stringent approach to hours. While we could not isolate parents as a sub-group in our analysis, there were no appreciable differences in the responses by age in our data, leading us to assume that those with dependent children did not provide responses that were radically different from other parts of the population. Instead, our question provoked a range of responses from different groups across the spectrum.

And this range is significant. Looking beyond the median shows that the results are not normally distributed. Responses were generally bi-modal: Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the point by showing the frequency for lone

Figure 1

**Frequency of responses, number of hours that it is reasonable to work per week when youngest child is aged 0-2**

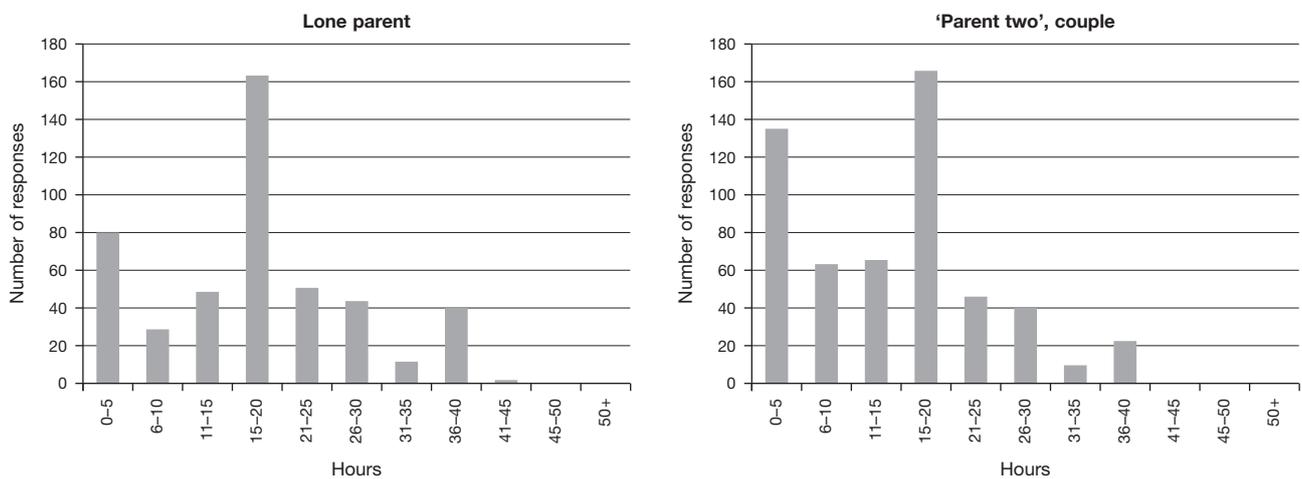
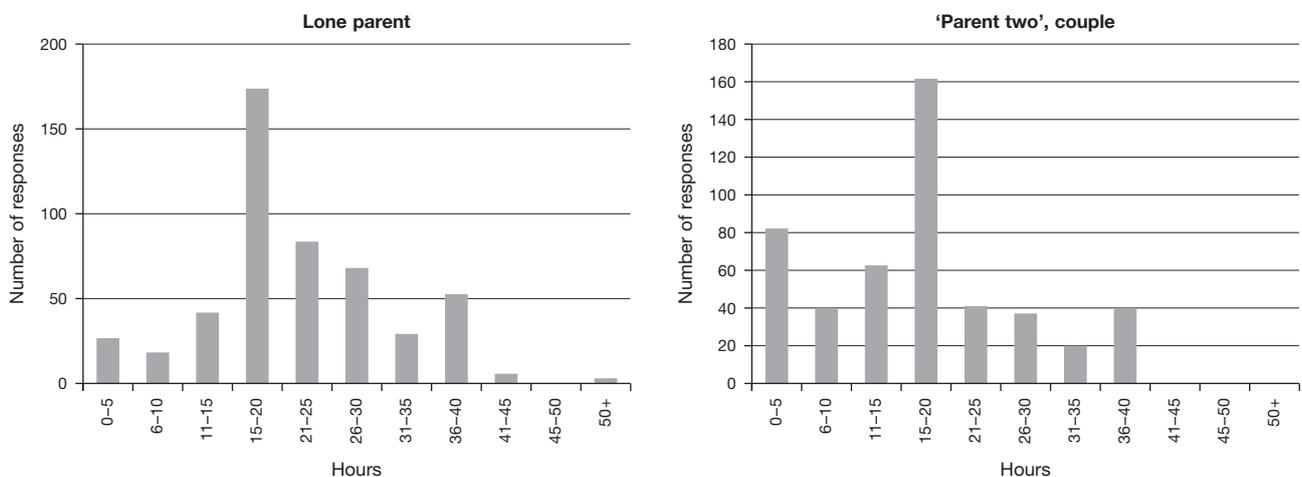


Figure 2

**Frequency of responses, number of hours that it is reasonable to work per week when youngest child is aged 3-4**



parents and ‘parent two’ in a couple whose youngest child is a pre-schooler.

These figures temper our findings in Table 1 to a large degree.

Perhaps the most compelling observation from the figures, however, is the different responses the question received, depending on whether it was asked about a couple or a lone parent. Respondents were generally more demanding of lone parents: this is particularly true in Figure 2, which shows that by the time a lone parent’s youngest child is nursery age, very few respondents felt it was reasonable for her/him not to work, in comparison with the main carer in a couple.

Finally, further analysis of the data tells us something interesting about what respondents felt was a reasonable division of labour between partners in a couple. While traditional gender patterns are highly evident in the polling, 29 per cent of respondents who were asked how many hours ‘parent one’ and ‘parent two’ should work considered it reasonable to split the hours equally between both parents.

## Times and distances

Our second set of questions turned from the total number of hours worked a week to consider whether there were more or less reasonable times of the week and year to work if a parent. As Table 2 shows, the least reasonable time for parents of all types is very late shifts (9pm to midnight) and early morning shifts (6am to 9am), followed by evenings (5pm to 9pm). That said, one-third still thought it reasonable for parents to work 6am to 9am and almost 31 per cent thought the same about 9pm to 12am. A large number of people thought it reasonable for parents to have to work 2pm to 5pm shifts – ie, over school pick-up. Compared to our previous question, responses on shift times showed that expectations placed on lone parents were softer than those for couples.

Table 2

**Percentage of respondents answering ‘How reasonable or unreasonable do you think it is to ask parents to work at the following times?’**

	Total unreasonable %	Total reasonable %	Neither/ don't know %
9am to 5pm weekdays	21	59	20
6am to 9am weekdays	41	36	23
2pm to 5pm weekdays	19	61	20
5pm to 9pm weekdays	41	36	24
9pm to 12am (midnight) weekdays	48	31	22
During the weekend	37	37	25

Source: YouGov

Alongside questions framed in blocks of hours, we also asked whether there were specific times or eventualities when it was more or less reasonable for parents to work. Table 3 below shows the results.

Table 3

**Percentage of respondents answering ‘How reasonable or unreasonable do you think it is to ask parents to work ...?’**

	Total reasonable %	Total unreasonable %	Neither/ don't know %
Weekends	37	37	23
School holidays	45	27	28
Bank holidays	38	34	28
If their child is sick	23	55	22
If their child has a dental appointment	36	38	27
Unpredictable hours	21	57	22

Source: YouGov

Finally, the polling asked what a reasonable commuting time is for parents.<sup>3</sup> Across the board, the median time for a reasonable commute was considered to be 30 minutes (which stands in sharp contrast to the 90 minutes considered reasonable in benefit conditionality). Respondents were generally more lenient with their expectations of lone parents, and had slightly higher expectations of parents who are currently out of work (40 minutes for parents of older – 13 plus – children). Table 4 summarises the results.

Table 4

**Percentage of respondents answering ‘How long a commute from their home, if any, do you think it is reasonable to ask parents to travel for work?’**

	Up to 10 minutes %	11 to 20 minutes %	21 to 30 minutes %	31 minutes to 1 hour %	Longer than 1 hour %	Median %
<b>Main carer in a couple with youngest child aged:</b>						
0 to 2 years old	16	21	35	26	3	30
3 to 4 years old	15	20	36	26	3	30
5 to 12 years old	11	20	41	26	2	30
13 to 18 years old	7	14	43	32	4	30
<b>Lone parent with youngest child aged:</b>						
0 to 2 years old	19	21	41	17	2	30
3 to 4 years old	17	26	38	20	0	30
5 to 12 years old	11	21	42	25	1	30
13 to 18 years old	10	16	42	30	2	30

Source: YouGov

---

## Some comments

Our polling results suggest that opinions on what is a reasonable number of hours that parents should have to work are widely distributed and far from systematic. It was particularly striking that there were no significant correlations between the responses and social categories such as age, gender, social class or voting intention. Instead, attitudes to parental employment are broadly dispersed, both in terms of what is regarded as 'right' and across the general population.

While many of the results we observed in the polling accord with what most of us would regard as 'normal', some of the results surprised us in their seeming stringency. Critically, expectations of lone parents were often (although not always) higher than those of the main carer in couples. Although efforts were made to screen out gender considerations, these clearly influenced the results, with the majority still seeing a one-and-a-half earner model as normal for couple families.

The large number of 'don't know' and 'neither' responses is also suggestive: are many indifferent to how other families organise their work/family balance? Alternatively, did some struggle to interpret the question?

Probing these and other questions that came out of the polling set the agenda for the next phase of the research, the parental focus groups. While the polling results provide us with a sense of our general work expectations for parents, it was in the focus groups that we explored whether the different sets of rules for better off and lower income parents could really be regarded as 'fair'.

### Notes

- 1 Working Families, *Time, Health and the Family: what working families want, 2014 report*, 2014
- 2 Working Families, *Time, Health and the Family: what working families want, 2014 report*, 2014
- 3 This question, perhaps more than any other in our polling, would have benefited from our being able to specify the total number of children a family has, as well as the age of the youngest child. This was unfortunately beyond the scope, but see C Skinner, *Running Around in Circles: co-ordinating childcare, education and work*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2003 for an interesting commentary on this topic.

# How many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)?

## Three

## The perspective of parents

Following on from the polling, two focus groups of parents were convened in 2014 to discuss the findings in further depth. The groups were purposively sampled with one group composed primarily of lower income parents (group one) and one of higher income parents (group two). Both contained a mix of couples and lone parents, with varying numbers of children at different ages. While some parents were currently out of work, all had worked at some point in the past. Those parents who were not actively seeking work when the groups met were all planning to work again in the future.

The story that emerged from the focus group discussions was a complex one, weaving together participants' views on the deeply personal balances they had struck between work and parenting, the nature of work today, the way that policy both helps and hinders them to combine employment and care, and observations on gender and broader cultural factors. Here, key themes are identified, while the voices of parents tell their stories.

---

### Finding a balance

Both groups made it clear that whatever a family's income, combining work and parenting was a challenge. Parents spoke eloquently of both the logistical challenges they faced, and the strong emotions they experienced, as they tried to strike an acceptable balance between work and home.

*'I work every day and I feel guilty about that. To have them looked after by someone else – it feels like they have no parents. They have one parent away anyway and the other is away too – even though all I'm trying to do is provide more for the kids. It's a no-win situation.'*

Lone parent, group one

Higher income parents also struggled to find a way of managing the demands of work and parenting, but recognised that with more money came more choice.

*'I'm aware that I come at this from a place of luxury – good salary, very flexible employer, partner with a job – and I'm aware that is not the situation for so many people. I don't think these should be luxuries. I have a lot of choice, so many people don't have that.'*

Couple parent, group two

But for most parents we talked to, this level of choice was not available.

In particular, parents with lower incomes spoke of the societal pressure they feel to work more hours.

*'I don't think you can make choices based on what you'd like to do – a lot of it is dictated by money. There is no recognition that having children, that's hard work. It's more like, you have children – why should we as a society support you? Why should the workplace support you?'*

Couple parent, group one

*'I think there's a lot of pressure in this country to work when you have kids and I don't think that's true of everywhere. You think of somewhere like Germany, when you are at home with your kids that's OK – but here there's pressure all the time to be out working.'*

Lone parent, group one

That said, the majority recognised that paid work often had manifold rewards over and above a salary, such as increasing self-esteem, providing adult company and maintaining a career track. While the quality of a job mattered, even those participants who were undertaking routine work also spoke of the pleasure they took from getting out of the home and supporting their families directly.

---

## **How many hours should parents reasonably work?**

A critical finding from both focus groups was that participants thought the balance parents strike between work and home is deeply personal. When asked about what should be regarded as reasonable working hours for parents, both focus groups made it clear that they saw this as a permissive question (what should people be *allowed* to do?), rather than a normative issue (what *should* people do?).

Given the deeply personal nature of parenting, there was a strong view that choice was key.

*'I think it is completely up to them and their situation and it's an individual choice what works for them as a family. I don't think there's any 'should' about it.'*

Lone parent, group two

*'It's about your own personal conflict and your value system, your belief system which is individual so you can't answer what is reasonable.'*

Couple parent, group two

As a result, the majority agreed that this was an area of policy where it was very hard to legislate, as the different needs of different children meant that hard and fast rules were rarely appropriate. While the groups recognised that as children age parents are usually able to increase their hours, nowhere was the permissive nature of the hours question more apparent than in discussions about working during the baby and early years.

There were conflicting (albeit respectful) views about how much parents should work during these times. Personal choices clearly informed their

responses, with various participants having to agree to differ on how they had struck the balance between work and parenting during this stage of their children's lives.

*'I think from about six months on you might perhaps work a few hours a day because it can be good to step away, get out.'*

Couple parent, group two

*'I think [the idea that parents go back to work at 12 months] needs to change and we need to understand that early years is an investment. But at the moment if you want to do that [stay at home] you have to battle.'*

Couple parent, group one

Generally, both groups made it clear that debates about parental employment often overlook the needs of the child, and were eloquent in demanding that the child's best interests should be put back into the picture.

*'There are two expectations: if you're a parent you should be around for your kids... but by the same token there's an expectation that you will work. But at the centre of it there is still a child who needs support and love, however that takes place.'*

Couple parent, group two

*'My first reaction [to the question how many hours it is reasonable for parents to work] is that the question is very adult-focused not child-focused. I think a better question is what is a reasonable amount of time for a child not to have their parents around? It's very hard to make one rule to suit everyone's situation.'*

Lone parent, group two

Once children entered primary school, most seemed to find working a little easier. However, the times when children were not in school were often very stressful for families, as very few had found jobs that fitted with school hours.

*'If you have a child at school, I think that it's acceptable to work school hours.'*

Couple parent, group two

*'When kids aren't at school it's a different story, but you still have to pay for care before school, care after school and the holidays are a total nightmare.'*

Couple parent, group one

However, several participants questioned the assumption that as children enter the teenage years, parents should be expected to work full time.

*'I feel quite strongly about this – I think there are two times you need to be there for your child – when they are very young, but also there is a really key time when they are 14 to 16. I know lots of parents who went back to work, but at this time they really need to be there for their children. It's a really challenging time.'*

Couple parent, group two

We probed the polling findings that showed that, at least on the question of hours, attitudes to lone parents were more stringent than attitudes to couples. Here, we expected to hear comments that encoded judgements

about lone parents; in fact, all participants were generous and understanding of the obvious additional pressure being a lone parent brings. However, the following response also sheds some potential (albeit highly gendered) light on the issue.

Convener: *'So what is a reasonable time for parent two to work?'*

Participant one: *'So she's looking after her husband and her children? [all laugh] You know, there's more than that because you've got your partner.'*  
Couple parent, group one

Participant two: *'I agree with that because my husband works very long hours so I have to look after him too. If I had to do that and look after my three children and work – that would really test my patience.'*

Finally, both groups noted that there were times when it was very challenging to work as a parent, both practically and emotionally.

*'Yes, the hours are an important issue, but I also think the days – you know, weekends and holidays and after-school hours – they also have to be taken into consideration. It's not just the hours, but when you're working when you want to be with your children.'*

Lone parent, group one

Interestingly, the higher income group used the word 'sacred' a great deal when talking about certain family times when they felt that the needs of their child had to be paramount. Bank holidays, weekends and part of the school holidays were all seen as privileged times of the year. In contrast, the lower income group was more pragmatic.

*'I think it is sacred actually – when they've got their school play or their assembly – I can't bear it if I can't be there.'*

Couple parent, group two

*'[School holidays are] the times for your children and it's also really hard to find someone to look after them. But if I took off six weeks, I would lose my job... so my husband does shifts.'*

Couple parent, group one

---

## **How does low income impact on hours worked?**

All participants recognised that money constrained people's choices, and that the lower the wage a parent was paid, the more that choice about hours worked became a fiction rather than a reality.

*'It's not the number of hours that you work, but how much you get paid for those hours. I mean, that's my issue around this. Too many people get paid too little. We need to pay people more so that they have quality time with their children and not worried time with their children.'*

Couple parent, group two

*'Do parents on lower wages have to work longer hours? I think I've answered your question. Yes, you have to work longer hours to pay for the necessities of life. I can't imagine if you are earning the minimum wage and you have*

*kids – how are you going to manage? You need to buy shoes every year, clothes for your kids. Even with tax credits and child benefit – what does that leave you? Not a lot!*

Couple parent, group one

Although focus group participants acknowledged this was the reality, there was a strong consensus that those earning lower hourly rates should be able to strike the same work/family balance as higher earning parents.

*'I think that the idea that just because I don't have the skills I have to work 40, 50, 60 hours a week when others can work 20 is a complete injustice.'*

Couple parent, group one

*'I think it is completely unreasonable to ask poor parents to work more. I say that as someone who used to work all the hours God sends and earned quite a low wage – we've got to balance things out much better.'*

Couple parent, group two

Finally, time and again, participants in both groups questioned why parenting was not valued despite its societal importance and manifold rewards. They expressed a strong sense of injustice that their hard work at home was not recognised and, indeed, in some cases, denigrated.

*'I also just feel that bringing up a child is working! Why is that not given the status?'*

Couple parent, group two

*'It's not just about your working hours – there needs to be recognition that outside working hours, there are more working hours that are just not paid and not recognised.'*

Couple parent, group one

---

## **The place of policy**

Beyond the role that low wages play in putting additional pressure on parents to work hours that they find hard to combine with their parental responsibilities, the groups discussed other policy changes that could potentially help them strike a better work/family balance.

Time and again, parents spoke of the need for affordable, quality childcare to facilitate their working. Often, the question of whether working at certain times was reasonable or not was intimately linked with childcare availability: if there was no suitable provision locally, participants clearly saw it as unreasonable to expect parents to work.

*'It just comes back so much to childcare and can you get good quality childcare, and actually we are really lucky in this area. In order to have that expectation, you have got to provide really good childcare – you cannot expect people to go to work otherwise.'*

Couple parent, group two

*'I think there's also an element of what childcare options are available to you as well. I was in a situation where we needed some after-school care and the*

*care that was available wasn't, I felt, a supportive environment or one that I wanted for [my daughter] for a long time.'*

Lone parent, group one

However, parents also questioned how long it was appropriate to expect children to be in formal settings, and made it clear that no matter how high the quality, childcare could not substitute for the more relaxed and reflexive time children spent with their parents.

*'When that child has a parent to listen to them, they will grow stronger than if they are left all over the place.'*

Lone parent, group one

*'For some people, it's normal that they put their child in nursery from eight in the morning and not pick them up again until six at night. I'm a health visitor by background and I see all the stress that that causes, and I think that this makes it more difficult for both the parents and the children.'*

Couple parent, group two

Finally, again, the needs of different children made some participants question whether childcare provision was quite as straightforward an answer to working hours as it is often presented to be.

*'And different children cope with the stresses of childcare completely differently – my two children reacted completely differently to my going to work.'*

Couple parent, group two

*'Well, I feel comfortable with my children in after-school club because they are really happy there – if they weren't, that would be radically different.'*

Couple parent, group two

Both groups also considered the issue of tax credits. While most made it clear that they disliked claiming benefits, tax credits were seen as an essential source of support for those working less than full time.

*'There has to be that safety net. I come from the US and that topping up is pretty much not there – so lots of single parents work so many hours they never see their children. There has to be a safety net.'*

Couple parent, group two

However, some questioned whether tax credits were not propping up businesses in an inappropriate way.

*'I think if someone has a full-time job, they shouldn't need to have their wages topped up. If you are a single parent and have to have a part-time job, then you can't make ends meet, then a top-up is a justifiable thing. But otherwise it's a subsidy for the company for the directors' wages and the shareholders, and not the people who do the work.'*

Lone parent, group two

Flexible working was also discussed quite extensively in both focus groups as a potential solution to the challenge of finding a good work/family balance. While some parts of the economy were becoming much more flexible, others were not.

*'Everything is open 24/7 now, so there's weekend work, night shifts...'*

Lone parent group one

Participant: *'I would also say that in the public sector they've become more inflexible on working hours.'*

Group convener: *'Why do you think that's changed?'*

Participant: *'Because they are thinking that fewer people will do more work.'*

Couple parent, group two

Flexibility was also seen as a double-edged sword, particularly for those who were in low-paid work who had little power to determine which hours they worked.

*'I have a job with a really flexible employer, but I do get called up at short notice and it's incredibly stressful.'*

Couple parent, group two

*'If you are on a zero-hour contract, you are already not going to be earning much, so how do you pay for childcare to cover those times? It's not unreasonable for people to have some kind of predictability in the workplace.'*

Couple parent, group one

Overall, then, the focus groups confirmed that flexibility can look very different in different parts of the labour market, and that a balance needs to be found between offering parents predictable hours and accommodating their requirements as parents.

*'Employers need to think about how they can be flexible so that we can all have a less stressed, more caring environment – so that we can all feel we give the best to the next generation. The world needs to start thinking slightly differently [about working hours].'*

Couple parent, group two

Finally, parents in both groups talked about the need to train and skill up in order to progress into the higher paid jobs that they saw would allow them to strike a better work/family balance. Several parents in the groups had undertaken training while their children were small, but few had found much formal support for this.

*'Parents want to get out and create a better life for their kids. They are trapped, they don't want their kids to be trapped and they can't do this if they are unable to progress... I asked at the Jobcentre Plus about courses and they said, 'oh yes, there's this'... and it was useless. I would swear if you weren't recording this!'*

Lone parent, group two

Many felt that working part time was constraining their career progression, however.

*'I think in the office there were people who were very dismissive of women leaving at 3 o'clock to pick up their kids. They were seen as part-timers and not committed. What I can't get my head around is why are offices and companies more important than people and families when it is the people and families who are the people working?'*

Couple parent, group one

---

## Some comments

The focus groups gave us new insight into the way that preferences, social norms, policy and commentary impact on decisions about caring and earning. The majority experienced conflict at some point in time between their own and others' attitudes and behaviour, but what was striking was the generosity most extended to other parents who had often made radically different decisions as to how to strike the balance between work and family.

As a result, parents found it very hard to answer our research question in hard normative terms ('parents should work this many hours'). Instead, they responded in permissive terms ('parents *should* be able to work this many hours *if they see fit*'). This sheds new light on our polling results, suggesting that respondents answered our questions generously, and may explain the high number of 'don't knows'.

There was widespread acknowledgement that, while most parents struggle to find the optimum balance between work and parenting, there is much more pressure on low-income parents. The question of control is critical: how genuine a choice do parents have to select their working hours when essential bills need to be paid? Can they resist the exhortations to 'cut themselves free of benefits' by refusing to take on work during anti-social hours? And does flexible employment mean parents or employers have the power to dictate hours?

All in all, there was a strong sense from all the parents involved in the research that the level of pressure put on low-income families was not 'fair' – for parents, but especially for their children. It was striking that, almost without exception, participants answered the questions as parents first, and taxpayers a very distant second.

# How many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)?

## Four

## The business perspective

Having heard to the views of parents on the 'hours question', the research then turned to the business side of the question through a series of interviews with employers and business representatives over the course of 2014. Once again, a purposive sample was selected of small and large employers from four key sectors of the economy: retail; catering and hospitality; childcare; and administration. In addition, meetings were also held with both the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Federation of Small Businesses to ensure that we had a broader employer view on the topic.

In a series of one-hour interviews, we sought answers to three broad questions. First, what types of hours did businesses need employees to work? Second, what could be, or had been, done by employers to accommodate the demands of family life? And third, how did policy assist or hinder 'family-friendly' practice?

As with the parental focus groups, the business interviews raised almost as many questions as answers. But once again, common themes and responses emerged, as well as areas of disagreement.

---

### Patterns of work

All the employers we spoke to for this part of the research employed staff on a range of different contracts, and for a range of different hours. At one end of the spectrum, one business only employed staff on zero-hour contracts; at the other, one employer offered only permanent contracts with fixed hours.

*'I am running a small starter business – I can't afford to employ people at times when there's nothing to do.'*

Owner, small business

*'I don't understand why people are employed on insecure contracts. All that does is make the staff feel insecure.'*

Manager, small business

However, generally most businesses interviewed offered staff a mix of contract types and hours. Part-time work was standard in several of those interviewed. A large national company, for example, employed a quarter of its workforce on contracts of less than 16 hours per week, and a further 41 per cent on part-time contracts, albeit with higher hours. Likewise, a large multinational company employed about a quarter of its support staff on part-time contracts, although as a rule

offered most of these staff at least three days' work a week.

*'It depends on our bottom line. We want to employ people for the hours they want, but we are in an extremely competitive world. We can only offer the hours if we are making the money to cover them.'*

Human resources manager, large company

The question of who benefits from low and/or flexible hours is not straightforward. On the one hand, these types of arrangements can clearly suit parents: several employers spoke of the number of staff who had exercised their right to request flexible working in recent months. On the other hand, the business model of some sectors is premised on extremely high levels of staff flexibility or on low hours that are clearly hard to reconcile with family life.

Many recognised that hours of work and their variability was something that needed to be worked out to benefit staff and employers. However, how these discussions played out in practice was highly dependent on individual managers.

*'There is a tension between staff stability and flexibility, and employer stability and flexibility. You have to work this out together. There can't be a blanket conversation – it has to be worked out by individuals.'*

Human resources manager, large company

*'We can issue all the directives we want from head office, but we depend on our managers to implement them. And some will do that better than others.'*

Human resources manager, large company

---

## **Low-skilled work, substitutability and retention**

Some companies had done a great deal to accommodate parents' needs by offering the option of working from home, providing help with childcare and giving time off in emergencies. While larger companies generally offered these 'perks' as standard, smaller companies tended to do so more reluctantly and with a sense of resignation.

*'I mean, if someone's kid's sick, they are sick, right? There's not much you can do about that but send them home.'*

Manager, small company

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was the close relationship between low-skilled work and what could be described as the sharper end of flexible work. Employers made it clear that the lower skilled a worker, the more easily s/he could be substituted with another, and hence the less likely they were to accommodate that staff member's preferences on hours or prioritise her/his retention.

As a result, low-skilled work seemed to go in hand in hand with more sporadic and unpredictable hours of work that suited the employer rather than the employee, and with less 'family-friendly' practice. However, this was not always the case. One employer of a large number of low-skilled, low-paid staff contested the view that it was good

business practice to trade retention for extremely flexible or short-hours contracts.

*'Yes, you can pretty much substitute one member of staff for another in a lot of our business, but what about the back-room costs if people leave? There are the contracts that have to be dealt with and the training that has to be redone.'*

Human resources manager, large company

Similarly, where relationships were critical to a business's success, more effort was made to offer staff contracts and working hours that accommodated their needs. Finally, the way employees were treated was often very different in higher value businesses. Here, flexibility was seen as a generous response to employees who had skills that were prized and, critically, who the firm wished to retain.

*'We do highly complicated work in our firm and have sophisticated contracts with confidentiality clauses. We just don't want our staff to leave.'*

Human resources manager, large company

---

## Pay

While our research with employers was very squarely focused on the question of hours, the subject of pay levels inevitably cropped up in the course of discussion. Many low-paying employers made the point that they could only increase pay if productivity increased. They were fearful of a significant increase in the national minimum wage, arguing that they would simply have to cut other benefits if a greater share of their profits had to be dedicated to their wage bill.

*'Our staff wouldn't be better off though would they [if the national minimum wage was increased]? We'd just have to cut back on benefits, so their total package wouldn't be any better.'*

Human resources manager, large business

However, others did see the question of low pay more strategically, recognising that higher wages could increase motivation and, therefore, output. Finally, some employers who could only offer very low wages as a result of contracting arrangements made efforts to show that they valued staff in other ways.

*'We think a lot of our staff, even though we can't pay them well, and will do what we can for them because we want them to be nice to [our clients]!'*

Manager, small business

---

## The role of the regulatory framework

Clearly, businesses operate in a legislative and regulatory environment that requires them to treat their staff in particular ways. Several interviewees raised a range of issues about both the intended and unintended consequences of various aspects of the policy environment on working hours.

To begin, some noted that both the national insurance contribution framework that requires employers to pay contributions for staff once they work over a certain number of hours and, from next year, the auto-enrolment of regularly employed staff in a pension scheme actively encourage employers not to take on staff over a certain number of hours.

*'If you own a shop and need someone else to work your till for you, why would you employ the same person for more hours when you can employ another person and avoid paying national insurance contributions? It just doesn't make good business sense.'*

Manager, small business

However, others thought the influence of the national insurance contribution threshold on businesses was overstated. It is worth noting that, again, these tended to be higher value businesses or those who placed a lot of emphasis on customer care.

*'If I need more staff, I will offer overtime to all and if I go over the threshold and have to pay national insurance contributions, it's not a concern.'*

Manager, small business

*'We don't really need to play an employment game like that. If we need more staff, we need them and we'll employ them.'*

Human resources manager, large business

Finally, some employers spoke of how changes to the benefits system could affect the hours their staff members were willing or able to work. While most had been approached at some point by staff to increase their hours so they would be eligible for tax credit support, the ability of businesses to accommodate this was often limited.

*'We encouraged our staff to come in and discuss their tax credits situation [when the hours rules changed for couples from 16 hours to 24 hours] but lots of people just couldn't pick up the extra hours because they weren't at the times they needed.'*

Human resources manager, large company

While awareness about future changes was low, one employer raised questions about how in-work conditionality would function once universal credit was fully implemented.

*'How far can that work if you can't offer the hours? Does that mean my staff will have to find another job?'*

Human resources manager, large company

---

## Some comments

Most employers we spoke to for this research clearly valued their employees and acknowledged the conflicts faced by those who were parents. They attempted to give parents a degree of stability in their working hours, and accepted – albeit with more or less grace – the need to be flexible towards employees with caring responsibilities. The more an employer valued a member of staff, however, the more likely they

were to try to accommodate requests for flexibility. But low-paid work did not always mean low value: if a member of staff had accrued on-the-job knowledge, developed relationships that were important to the firm, or had sight of confidential information, her/his retention was more important.

At the end of the day, however, the bottom line clearly comes first for employers. Companies can only offer the hours that accord with their business model, and are conscious of disincentives that exist within the regulatory framework. While employers often take voluntary action to accommodate parents' needs, this tends to happen only when a clear business case can be seen.

# How many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)?

## Five

## The policy implications

One resounding message came out of all our research activities: the number of hours parents should be expected to work is an intensely felt and deeply personal question. Some believed that the right thing to do was for parents to stay at home with their children for longer periods of time than the average; others felt that it was imperative for parents (especially mothers) to reconnect with the labour market, even when their children were very young. Whoever we asked – the whole population or more tightly drawn sub-groups defined by age, gender or political persuasion, parents or businesses – little consensus on the ‘hours question’ emerged.

That said, it would be wrong to conclude that we drew a blank in our search to find the ‘right’ number of hours that parents should be expected to work in order for their families not to be poor. Whatever our respondents’ personal preferences, most believed that ‘choice’ should be at the heart of any policy framework touching on parental employment. But choice was also recognised as a bounded concept. The question, ‘how many hours should parents work?’, was answered time and again with ‘it depends’ – on the parents’ values, on external factors such as the availability of childcare and suitable jobs, and, crucially, on the needs of children which vary from individual to individual and are rarely static over time.

For most, then, the ‘hours question’ was seen as permissive (‘what should parents *be allowed* to do?’) rather than normative (‘what should they *have to* do?’). In large part this was because respondents in our research recognised that parenting is challenging and valuable in its own right. As many pointed out through the course of this project, value judgements about ‘non-working’ parents might disappear if being at home with a child is viewed as work too.

Where there was more agreement, however, was on the question of how income intersects with working hours. Our research showed that the balance that could be struck between work and parenting by those on higher wages was not possible for lower paid parents and, therefore, choice was a luxury that only some could afford. When asked explicitly if those on lower pay should have to work more hours than was ‘reasonable’ in order to get by, the answer was a resounding ‘no’. There was a strong sense throughout the research that this simply was not ‘fair’.

How policy can, and should, bind decisions about hours of parental employment is therefore treacherous terrain. The hard rules we look for in policy sit uncomfortably with the multifarious needs and desires of families, with the cultural and gender norms that shape choice, which

we may or may not want to accept, and the ideological perspectives we may all hold on the best balance between the state and the individual. But if our interest lies in tackling in-work poverty, there are clear policy implications from this research, some of which we now turn to consider.

---

## Childcare

Throughout this research, respondents consistently highlighted the importance of suitable quality childcare in helping them to strike an acceptable balance between work and parenting. For some, the entire notion of what was reasonable hinged on childcare provision: if this was available, it was 'right' to work. While this was tempered by others who saw formal childcare as only a partial substitute for time at home with parents, childcare is clearly a critical issue in the hours debate.

However, as many have noted, current childcare provision in the UK could, at best, be termed incoherent. Parents can currently access 15 hours of free early education when their child is aged three and four years old (two years old if the family is considered to be among the most disadvantaged). They may be able to claim some costs of childcare provision back through tax credits (and, in the future, universal credit), subject to certain caps. If lucky, they may currently get childcare vouchers through their employer. And, in the future, they may be able to get support through a new tax-free childcare scheme if they are on higher incomes. Parents must stitch together a patchwork of childcare support, then, from state, private and family provision, and make multiple judgements about quality and cost in the process, with often obscure information.

As CPAG has pointed out in the past, this is a system that ill serves the needs of most parents, least of all those on low incomes.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the following aspects of the system require urgent attention.

- ◆ Attention should shift from demand-side interventions, which often create poverty traps, to supply-side childcare provision. The hours of the free entitlement could be increased, a coherent policy on extended schools developed, and greater emphasis placed on supporting parents with teenagers who still require some care and supervision, especially in the long summer holidays.
- ◆ That said, there is much that could be done to improve the demand-side support. In contrast to the tax credits system, families claiming universal credit will be eligible for support with their childcare costs from the first hour they work and, from April 2016, will be able to claim back 85 per cent of the costs incurred, compared with the current 70 per cent. However, delays in the universal credit roll-out mean that many families are unlikely to access this more generous package of childcare support for some time. These two rule changes could usefully be introduced into the current tax credits system.
- ◆ While the increase in support that all working families in receipt of universal credit will be able to claim from April 2016 is welcome, the

fact that parents will need to pay for their childcare provision and then claim back a portion is clearly something that many on low incomes will struggle to do. The government has suggested that budgeting advances could be used to bridge the gap, but this introduces yet another claim process into busy parents' lives. Instead, payments in advance should be explored.

- ◆ Parents may also lose as a result of the way universal credit supports families with childcare costs on a monthly basis. Many pay childcare fees in sporadic ways, at the beginning of term for instance, or in larger amounts over school holidays. Without a mechanism to average these costs over the year some families may end up short-changed.
- ◆ The caps on the level of childcare support available for those claiming tax credits (and, in the future, universal credit) have not been updated since 2003. As the cost of childcare has increased dramatically since then, parents are increasingly likely to see their childcare support hit the limit, damping down incentives to work longer hours.<sup>2</sup> If the caps were updated regularly, this problem could easily be averted.
- ◆ Wage progression is an essential part of any poverty reduction strategy, and yet current childcare provision for parents who wish to undertake education and training is patchy, badly advertised and often hard to access. Policy makers need to rationalise childcare support for those who wish to improve their skills by, for example, allowing those on designated courses to claim childcare support through universal credit.
- ◆ Finally, however the childcare system develops in the UK, additional provision should not be linked to increased coercion on low-income parents to work an unreasonable number of hours or to work at unreasonable times of the day. Extended and improved childcare support should facilitate choice, and could in itself shift norms as to what is reasonable over time.<sup>3</sup> But our research shows that linking better provision to increased pressure to work is policy development that is simply unacceptable to the majority.

---

## **Employer behaviour and rewards**

As our research makes clear, employer culture and practice have a significant impact on how far parents can strike an appropriate balance between earning and caring. Much emphasis has been placed in recent years on 'family-friendly' policies: from the right to request flexible working arrangements to 'use it or lose it' paternity leave, employers are being enjoined to accommodate parents' preferences to an ever greater degree.

In addition, many have sought to make the business case to employers that 'family-friendly' working benefits their bottom line. Apart from the obvious link between happy staff and increased productivity, they argue that by failing to accommodate the needs of parents, firms exclude

large numbers of potential employees from the ‘talent pool’, thereby limiting the scope for recruitment.<sup>4</sup>

However, as our project makes clear, many low-paid parents cannot avail themselves of the same arrangements as those who command a higher wage in the workplace. In part, this stems from contract patterns: low pay often correlates with short- or zero-hour contracts that have fewer formal rights attached to them than more stable working arrangements. But the offer made to lower paid parents also relates to the extent to which their employer values them and, critically, wishes to retain their services. While our research shows that not all low-paid workers are viewed as low value in the eyes of their employers, many are seen as interchangeable. In such a situation, firms are clearly less inclined to accommodate the wishes and needs of parents, as their retention is less important.

Finally, although our research project did not look directly at wage levels, the findings have significant implications for the pay employers need to offer their staff if in-work poverty is to be addressed. Previous studies have shown that pay, rather than hours worked, is the strongest determinant of in-work poverty (although, of course, the worst combination for any family is low pay and low hours).<sup>5</sup> It is only through renewed action on low pay, then, that we can remove some of the most extreme pressure from the lowest paid parents to work a number of hours that they find incompatible with their family life.

Given this, there are a number of implications for policy makers to consider.

- ◆ While much is made of the virtues of flexible contracts for businesses and employees alike, our study shows how unacceptable most feel it is for parents to have to work unpredictable hours when children need stable arrangements and households need stable incomes. As a result, restrictions need to be placed on the use of zero- and short-hours contracts, especially for parents and those with other caring responsibilities.
- ◆ How parents who have few formal rights and are not considered high value by their employers can strike an appropriate work/family balance is a critical policy question. Thought should be given as to how the bargaining position of such employees can be improved.
- ◆ Finding ways to help parents work more hours is important for poverty reduction, but it should not allow employers and policy makers to take their eyes off pay levels. The UK urgently needs a coherent strategy on low pay, which employs both voluntary and regulatory methods to ensure that those businesses that can afford to pay the living wage do so, and incentivise others to pay the same via their supply chains.

---

## Social security provision

While action on pay is a key part of the agenda required to tackle in-work poverty, living wage calculations still assume that a level of state support is available to supplement the incomes of low-paid families.<sup>6</sup> Under the current system, families may be eligible to claim: child benefit and child tax credit, both of which assist with the many additional costs associated with children; working tax credit to supplement their low wages; housing benefit to assist them if their rent is high; and help with their council tax if their local scheme allows. With the exception of child benefit and council tax reduction, all these payments will be replaced in the future by a single universal credit award.

As many pointed out over the course of this project, one of the reasons why tax credits have become so unpopular in recent years – and hence been so easy to cut – is because it is widely perceived to be subsidising low-paying employers. While there may be some truth in this view, what is increasingly absent from current discussions about social security provision is any sense that it may be entirely legitimate for the state to support parents to take time away from the workplace and care for their children. Instead, the prevailing political discourse emphasises the virtues of personal independence.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say that most low-income parents do not share this ambition: our research shows that clearly they do. But even with radical action on pay, state support (including with housing costs if these are high) remains essential if low-paid parents are to strike a work/family balance similar, if not the same, as those who can leverage a higher wage.

How this support can best be structured raises a number of important questions. To begin, one issue the benefits system needs to be more mindful of if we wish to address in-work poverty is how to incentivise a more equitable sharing of earning and parenting between men and women. As our research shows, gendered patterns of work remain the norm and, as a result, the main carer is often relegated to lower paid, less highly valued work.

A second critical design issue is the question of how much low-paid parents' incomes actually increase as they work additional hours. As the work of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has shown, increases in pay have much smaller poverty reduction impacts than perhaps one might assume.<sup>8</sup> In some part, these underwhelming gains stem from the fact that if they are claiming universal credit, a family loses 65 pence of benefits for every extra pound earned (76 pence if they are also paying tax and national insurance). Minimising the poverty traps that exist in the benefits system is likely to remain an enduring policy issue.

Third, it is imperative that in debates about the hours question we do not lose sight of the critical issue of children's benefits. To state the obvious, wages do not reflect family size, and thus the income that an extra hour of work brings into the family's purse must be spread more thinly the larger the family.<sup>9</sup> While children's benefits may seem tangential

to the issue of parental hours of employment, if we care about in-work poverty for families with children, they must be kept in mind.

Social security provision, then, remains a key part of the in-work poverty agenda and the following are essential issues for consideration.

- ◆ We should challenge the notion that work can ‘do it all’. Even with radical action on low pay, benefits will continue to be needed to perform essential functions such as supporting families with the costs of children and enabling them to limit their hours while they care for their families. The notion that we should all aspire to ‘cut ourselves free’ of benefits is one that downplays the collective pooling of risk and smoothing of incomes over the lifetime that the vast majority still see as essential functions of our social security system.
- ◆ Universal credit must be reformed so that it protects the incomes of parents. A second-earner work allowance would improve the incentives for the second partner in a couple to move into work, while a higher lone-parent work allowance would allow lone parents to retain all their universal credit award at a higher level of earnings.
- ◆ The poverty-reduction potential of universal credit could be greatly enhanced by reducing the taper rate, thereby allowing families to keep more of the in-work support they receive as their earnings increase. In addition, different taper rates should be considered in order to improve incentives once families start paying national insurance contributions and tax.
- ◆ The value of children’s benefits must be restored to their pre-2010 levels. Analysis by the TUC and CPAG has shown, for example, that an increase of 10 per cent in the value of the children’s element of universal credit would reduce child poverty by almost 1.5 percentage points. In addition, it is important to find a stable settlement on uprating children’s (and indeed adult) benefits to maintain their value over time, rather than allow them to be subject every year to political whim.

---

## **Conditionality**

Conditionality has such a strong bearing on the question of how many hours a parent should work that it deserves a section in its own right. As our project has shown, the conditionality regime attached to universal credit receipt will intensify pressure on parents to get ‘work ready’, to look for and be available to work and, for couples at least, to search for longer hours of employment than they are currently expected to do.

While our polling work shows that the median number of hours considered reasonable, at least for parents of school-age children, is fairly well aligned with the current conditionality framework, the whole tenor of the regime is at odds with what our research found. Rather than centralising the interests of children and facilitating a reasonable level of

choice about working hours for all, the new system looks set to be more intrusive and more judgemental about families' efforts to strike an acceptable work/family balance.

In fact, the evidence suggests that this level of coercion may be unnecessary if we wish to increase levels of parental employment. The New Deal for Lone Parents, for example, was an intervention that resulted in significant rises in employment and arguably in reductions in child poverty, and was voluntary, rather than compulsory, in nature. Studies show that its success stemmed largely from the informed, supportive relationships that parents developed with personal advisers, and the sensitive nature of this.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than a system premised on bad faith, then, we need to move to a system based on trust: trust that low-income parents want to work, and that they know what is best for their children. This would constitute a major policy shift, but could usefully commence with the following actions.

- ◆ We should consider the role that discretion plays in the conditionality system. Advisers should receive training on parental employment so that they better understand the factors that determine parents' choices, and can develop sensitive and appropriate work search requirements.
- ◆ Alongside this, greater emphasis should be placed on work progression rather than simply 'work first', to ensure that parents are supported to make choices that will lead to the steady and improved earnings that are necessary if they are to avoid in-work poverty, rather than the blunt requirement that they increase their working hours.
- ◆ There are areas where reducing discretion by putting more detail into regulation would benefit parents. For example, it would be helpful to clarify what constitutes 'good cause' for not taking a job under the universal credit system. High costs of childcare and dissatisfaction with provision should be included, as should unreasonable times of the day or week to work and unreasonable levels of unpredictable hours. The presumption should be that the parent is best placed to establish that there is 'good cause' not to take up a job or interview offer or apply for a role, rather than the adviser.

#### Notes

- 1 Child Poverty Action Group, *Childcare Support Under Universal Credit: CPAG's submission to the 'tax-free childcare' consultation*, CPAG, 2013
- 2 See D Hirsch, *The Cost of a Child in 2014*, CPAG, 2014 for further details.
- 3 Studies have noted, for example, that the advent of the free entitlement has 'normalised' formal childcare for low-income groups who in the past were more suspicious of nursery schools. See also S Himmelweit and M Sigala, 'Choice and the Relationship between Identities and Behaviour for Mothers with Pre-School Children: some implications for policy from a UK study', *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol 33 Issue 03, July 2004
- 4 See, for example, E Stewart and others, *Building a Sustainable Quality Part-time Recruitment Market*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012, available at [http://timewisefoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Building\\_a\\_sustainable\\_quality\\_part-time\\_recruitment\\_market.pdf](http://timewisefoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Building_a_sustainable_quality_part-time_recruitment_market.pdf)
- 5 J Cribb, A Hood, R Joyce and D Phillips, *Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality 2013*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2013
- 6 D Hirsch and R Moore, *The Living Wage in the United Kingdom: building on success*, available at [www.crsp.ac.uk/MIS/downloads/livingwage](http://www.crsp.ac.uk/MIS/downloads/livingwage)
- 7 See, for example, Iain Duncan Smith, 'Labour only stands for welfare dependency', *Telegraph*, 15 February 2015

- 8 H Reed and J Portes, *Understanding the Parental Employment Scenarios Necessary to Meet the 2020 Child Poverty Targets*, research report, Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, June 2014, available at [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/318073/3b\\_Poverty\\_Research\\_-\\_Final.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/318073/3b_Poverty_Research_-_Final.pdf)
- 9 For an interesting reflection on this, see F Bennett, 'The "Living Wage", Low Pay and In-work Poverty: rethinking the relationships', *Critical Social Policy*, 2012
- 10 D Finn and R Gloster, *Lone Parent Obligations: a review of recent evidence on the work-related requirements within the benefit systems of different countries*, Inclusion, July 2010, available at [www.cesi.org.uk/publications/lone-parent-obligations-review-recent-evidence-work-related-requirements-within-benefit](http://www.cesi.org.uk/publications/lone-parent-obligations-review-recent-evidence-work-related-requirements-within-benefit)

# Conclusions

How many hours should parents work (in order not to be poor)? What we thought might be a relatively simple question at the outset of this research project turned out to be anything but. Norms about parental employment are the product of multiple factors which are mediated at the individual, household, community and state level. Deeply held personal values about the appropriate balance between parenting and work interact with cultural beliefs, and especially with views on the gendered division of labour. The tax and benefits system incentivises families to work in particular ways, while employer behaviour (including the level of pay and contractual arrangements offered) determines the lived reality of working hours.

One thing was clear from the outset, however: that all these pressures bear down on lower paid earners more strongly than they do on the better off. The gains from working more hours are much lower for low-paid families than those higher up the income distribution: their benefits are tapered away quickly once their earnings rise, and the costs of going to work (especially if they pay for childcare) quickly consume their remaining income. Where the incentives are weak, the benefits system increasingly cajoles them to look for more hours at an ever earlier point in time. Alongside this, political rhetoric suggests that 'hard working families' are those that work as many hours as it takes to 'cut themselves free of welfare'.

Rather than having their parental choices supported, low-income parents increasingly find themselves subject to subtle, and not so subtle, forms of coercion to work more hours than many consider reasonable. And it is easy to see why. Put simply, in-work poverty is the product of three variables: the level of pay; the level of in-work benefits; and the level of hours worked. Yet the agenda to address low pay and benefit levels is acutely political, as it needs to tackle vested interests and deeply ingrained ideological positions in business and government. Placing the emphasis on hours 'individualises' responsibility for in-work poverty: it is for parents to solve the problem through striving to work more and more hours (and they are failures if they do not do so).

That is not to say that low-income families do not want to work more: rather than being an impediment to work, the presence of children often motivates parents to earn. Moreover, parents identify all kinds of benefits from work over and above wages: it provides much needed social contact, an improved sense of self-worth, and parents know that they are acting as good role models for their children. But for all parents, choice is regarded as paramount. They are the ones who know their children, are best placed to make decisions about the suitability of childcare and can judge how much they need to be at home to support them (including through the teenage years). Rather than coerce parents to work, then, policy should be premised on trust and should aim to facilitate, rather than compel, employment.

Even if low-income parents do work a reasonable number of hours, those on the lowest levels of pay remain perilously close to the poverty line. This is a particularly acute problem for lone parents. If employers pay more, the state can reduce its role in supporting family incomes. But social security will always remain an essential part of the child poverty reduction toolkit. It is needed to help families smooth the costs of children over the course of their lifetimes, as well as to provide support during the times parents reduce their working hours to care for their children (and, increasingly, elderly relatives too).

Children are not private luxuries: they are a joy in themselves and a social good. By placing unrelenting pressure on low-income parents to work an unreasonable numbers of hours, we neither solve in-work poverty nor allow families to get on with the essential job of parenting. Instead, as this project has shown, the task of tackling child poverty is one that requires action on many fronts: on pay and benefit levels, on employer behaviour and government rhetoric, and on cultural and gender assumptions, as well as on simple hours of work.



# Webb Memorial Trust

Established in 1944 as a memorial to Beatrice Webb