



Lone Parents and Employment: What are the Real Issues?

Key Findings, Conclusions
and Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

There are 189,000 one-parent families in Ireland today – an increase of 23 per cent on the 2002 figures (CSO, 2006). In 2006, a third of such families were living in consistent poverty, a rate four times the national average (CSO, 2007). Over 84,000 one-parent families are dependent on state support through the One-Parent Family Payment (OPF). Strategies to reduce poverty and welfare dependency among such families are increasingly aimed at raising the labour market participation rate of lone parents. However there is much debate on the effectiveness of such an approach. Policy developments in this area need to be based on a clear understanding of the current labour market situation of lone parents and of the facts that determine the choices such parents are currently making in balancing their work, parenting and caring roles. This study aims to provide nationally representative data and analysis to inform this topical debate. The findings presented in this study are based on the results of an analysis of the 1488 postal survey responses received by One Family from OPF recipients across the country, representing a return of almost 20 per cent from the sample drawn up by the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA).



THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The environment in which this study has been undertaken is one in which:

- A proposal¹ to change the way the state provides welfare supports to lone parents has been set out by the government. Principally this recommends the restructuring of both the OPF and the Qualified Adult Allowance into a household means-tested Parental Allowance (PA) to assist all low-income families. This will incorporate a requirement to be available for work, at least on a

part-time basis, when the youngest child reaches a certain age which is yet to be decided.

- Such policy reform is taking place within a growing Irish and international policy climate that supports greater ‘activation’ or labour market engagement of those most distant from the labour market including lone parents.
- Research indicates that lone parents continue to face significant barriers in accessing and participating in the labour market and in combining their work and caring roles and that increased employment amongst lone parents has positive child welfare outcomes, including outcomes for teenage children, where incomes rise as a result of such employment.

KEY INTERNATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

A review of international policy on lone parents and employment indicates that:

- Many countries have introduced work requirements for lone parents. However the research indicates that there is no necessary correlation between work requirements and rates of employment amongst lone parents. Rather it seems that the effectiveness of activation policy in increasing employment rates is mediated by other factors such as in-work benefits, flexible employment and wrap-around childcare.
- Many countries have introduced statutory rights for parents in order to facilitate access to family-friendly employment. This includes provisions such as parental leave; a statutory right to career breaks; a right to part-time work; a right to take paid time off to care for a sick child and flexi-time.
- Work requirements within activation policy are often conditional on the availability of certain supports (such as childcare) and exemptions for personal circumstances exist in certain countries.
- International experience demonstrates the necessity not only of supportive activation mechanisms but also of accompanying them with improved welfare benefits and social transfers if poverty rates are to be reduced.

1 Department of Social and Family Affairs, (2006), *Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents*, Dublin: Stationery Office.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE CURRENT STUDY

This study provides statistically representative data on the experiences, plans and views of lone parents that are currently on the OFP. It confirms many of the findings of earlier studies, providing hard national data to support these findings and for the first time demonstrates in a statistically robust way the needs and experiences of a number of key subgroups of OFP recipients. The research results are summarised under a number of headings:



Profile

Respondents exhibited the following characteristics:

- 98 per cent were female, 2 per cent were male.
- 75 per cent were single, 24 per cent were separated or divorced and less than 1 per cent was widowed.
- 77 per cent were aged between 21 and 40. Only 3 per cent were under 20 while 31 per cent were over 41.
- Over 80 per cent were born in Ireland. 16 per cent were from the EU while 3 per cent were from outside the EU.
- Over 40 per cent had been in receipt of the OFP for less than three years. 27 per cent had been receiving OFP for longer than eight years.

Motivation to Work

- The study clearly demonstrates the high level of motivation among lone parents on the OFP to participate in employment. The vast majority of those surveyed (84 per cent) are currently working, looking for work or engaged in education or training.
- Two thirds of those who are currently working plan to be working more in three years time.
- Almost 80 per cent of those that have worked in the past since going on the OFP would prefer to be working now and over half of those who have

not been employed since going on the OFP have looked for a job (60 per cent).

- A third of those who have not worked have done an education course and 28 per cent a training course.
- Only 10 per cent of total respondents have neither looked for work nor attended an education or training course since going on the payment.
- Future career plans are influenced by current employment status, with those who are currently employed more likely to plan to work full-time and those currently caring for their children full-time more likely to seek part-time work in the future.

- 84 per cent are currently working, looking for work or in education or training
- 67 per cent of those who are working say that they plan to be working more in three years time
- 77 per cent of those that have worked since going on the OFP would prefer to be working now
- Only 10 per cent have neither looked for work nor attended an education or training course

Balancing Work and Parenting

- For lone parents, participation in employment is not at the expense of parenting but rather is something that must be accommodated with an important parenting role. Half of the lone parents surveyed believe that parenting is the best job in the world and most agree that parenting is a full time job (81 per cent). However nine out of ten agree with the statement that having a job improves their family's quality of life.
- The majority of those in paid employment have children that are in school or their friends or relatives take care of their children while they are at work. There is some evidence that those who work longer hours are more likely to avail of paid childcare.
- There is a subgroup of lone parents for whom caring for their children full-time or caring for someone with a health condition or a disability is their overarching priority at the present time. For this group participation in the labour market may remain a low priority for some time. This group is also relatively more disadvantaged in relation to housing and education. However many of these

lone parents plan to work in the future and most see the benefits of employment for their family.

- 81 per cent agree that parenting is a full time job
- 51 per cent believe that parenting is the best job in the world
- 89 per cent agree that having a job improves their family's quality of life

Experience in Employment

- 40 per cent are working on average more than 24 hours per week but only 19 per cent work in the afternoons and only 23 per cent work full days, demonstrating high levels of work flexibility and part-time working.
- Only 16 per cent say that they are taking home a lot more money since they started working.
- There is some evidence that higher occupational categories are dominated by those lone parents with a Leaving Cert or above level of education.
- Those who are currently employed are more likely to be in the middle group (21-50 years) in terms of age, have greater stability in regard to housing and health status, have been in receipt of the OFP for a medium period of time and have a relatively good level of education, compared to those that are not in employment.
- Rent supplement has a strong negative effect on employment. Only 15 per cent of those on rent supplement are in employment compared to 39 per cent of those in social housing, 47 per cent of those renting from a local authority or living with parents and 69 per cent of those who own their own home.
- The most highly-ranked reasons for leaving their last job are 'financially it was not worth my while' (18 per cent), followed by 'I couldn't afford quality childcare' (16 per cent). These are also the two reasons most frequently given by the respondents that have not looked for a job since going on the OFP (27 per cent and 23 per cent respectively.)

- Only 16 per cent are taking home a lot more since they started working
- 40 per cent work more than 24 hours per week, 19 per cent work in the afternoons, 23 per cent work full days
- Numbers in employment by housing type:
 - Rent Supplement: 15 per cent
 - Social housing: 39 per cent
 - Renting from a local authority or living with parents: 47 per cent
 - Own their own home: 69 per cent
- Reasons for leaving last job:
 - Financially not worthwhile: 18 per cent
 - Couldn't afford quality childcare: 16 per cent

Education Training Levels and Needs

- Educational levels vary largely – 18 per cent have no educational qualifications and 36 per cent have post-Leaving Certificate qualifications.
- 10 per cent have English language difficulties and 15 per cent literacy and/or numeracy needs.
- Many of those who plan to work full-time want to work in associate professional and skilled manual jobs.
- Access to education and training qualifications is limited by the costs of courses, non-availability of courses locally and by a lack of information on their provision. 16 per cent stated that the cost of courses was a barrier to their participation in education and training.
- Four out of five respondents want to discuss their career options with someone, while 15 per cent say they do not know how to get a job.
- Respondents are interested in participating in a range of personal development, parenting and work preparation courses.

- 53 per cent agree that they don't have the skills or experience to get the kind of job they want
- 36 per cent have post-Leaving Certificate qualifications
- 18 per cent have no educational qualifications
- 10 per cent have English language difficulties
- 15 per cent have literacy/ numeracy needs

Addressing Barriers to Employment

The research indicates that a range of barriers must be removed if lone parents are to be able to participate in sustainable employment:



- Unless childcare needs are met, 'unsuitable hours' and 'lack of access to flexible employment' are likely to remain key barriers to sustainable employment. 70 per cent agree that childcare problems mean that they will not be able to get a decent job until their children grow up.
- Existing barriers to accessing skills and qualifications must be removed including the cost of participating in such programmes.
- Housing barriers particularly relating to rent supplement must also be addressed.
- Lack of confidence is an issue for a third of lone parents when seeking employment. This highlights the need to ensure that personal development programmes are widely available and accessible to lone parents as part of the activation process.

- 70 per cent think they will not have a decent job until their children grow up, due to childcare problems
- Cost of education and training is a barrier
- Rent supplement is a barrier
- One third of lone parents lack confidence when returning to work

status and limited knowledge of how the Irish labour market operates.

Older OFP recipients are characterised by relatively low levels of education and greater health problems. They have fewer plans to work or to gain an educational qualification compared to other age categories. Male lone parents are more likely to be separated or divorced and have low levels of education and no male respondents were in education or training courses. A relatively high proportion of this group are caring for their children full-time. The small number of responses from males means that these figures must be interpreted with caution.

These findings demonstrate that lone parents are not a homogenous group but are highly diverse with differing needs and experiences and that their employment status is heavily influenced by demographic factors and differing life situations. A range of policy responses and programmes is therefore required to support lone parents to move out of poverty and welfare dependency and into sustainable employment.

- New communities: high levels of qualifications, poor family support and poor health
- Older: lower education levels, poor health
- Men: low education levels, separated or divorced

Subgroups

Older lone parents, lone parents from new communities and male lone parents can be identified as three groups that have particular experiences, plans and views of employment. For instance lone parents from new communities have a particularly high motivation to work and or obtain an educational qualification but English language difficulties and the lack of other supports work against this. These lone parents are on average better qualified than Irish recipients of the OFP but often find it difficult to get work that matches their skills or qualifications. They also tend to have less family support, poorer health

CONCLUSIONS

Overall this study indicates that:

- Compulsory work engagement is likely to be neither necessary for, nor useful to, lone parents on the OFP as they are already highly motivated to work, train and gain qualifications. Rather activation measures should seek to ensure that lone parents are better enabled to participate in financially viable and fulfilling employment with associated benefits for their families.
- Policy changes in this area should be aimed at developing a system of supports that recognises the importance of OFP recipients' parenting role, their need to balance work and parenting in a way that improves their financial situation as well as their desire to progress, and which recognises the particular circumstances of different subgroups within the overall population.
- If activation is to be successful in reducing poverty in one-parent families it must ensure that greater employment results in greater income; such an outcome is also required if increased labour force participation is to improve rather than disimprove family well-being. Addressing the issue of low pay means ensuring access to adequate childcare, removing the rent supplement poverty trap and supporting greater access to education, training and qualifications.
- Given the diverse needs and experiences of OFP recipients, policy developments in this area must be capable of providing customised responses and tailored supports. This will involve the provision of comprehensive information and advice; access to education; training and personal development opportunities where required; as well as supports aimed at easing the transition into work and from part-time to full-time work.
- Many lone parents will continue to rely on the OFP for significant periods of their children's lives whatever other policy changes are implemented. Therefore complementary policies to address child and family poverty among those dependent on social welfare are also required.
- There are many positive factors that activation policy can build on and support such as lone parents' current work levels, their desire and plans to work as well as to participate in education and

training, and their recognition of the benefits of working for them and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Responses

The central goal of government policy for lone parents should be to lift one-parent families out of poverty in a way that facilitates choice, supports financial independence and leads

to improved family and individual well being. Our recommendations are in four areas:



1. Reducing Child and Family Poverty in One-Parent Families

1. Building on the recent NESC report (NESC, 2007) which examined child income support mechanisms, a special group made up of departmental officials, state agencies and social partners including NGOs, be established to recommend specific actions to address child and family poverty in one-parent families in an employment positive way.
2. Immediate action be taken to reduce existing poverty traps in the housing system through the faster roll-out of the Rental Accommodation Scheme and through increasing the supply of social and affordable housing with challenging targets set for one-parent families over the next three years.
3. These actions be incorporated as key targets within the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016.

2. Supporting Employment Options

The Department of Social and Family Affairs supported by other government departments develop, pilot, monitor and evaluate a co-ordinated system of supports for lone parents on the OFP. This system would include the following elements:

1. An assessment of each lone parent's needs and career plans and the subsequent development of a rolling career plan that would be regularly reviewed by local facilitators with relevant expertise and knowledge.
2. Access to a comprehensive information, advice and referral system, staffed by personnel with specialist expertise that focuses on:
 - rights and entitlements;
 - the financial implications of pursuing different work, education and training options;
 - available education, training and employment opportunities and childcare options that match the lone parent's own career plans as well as their education, training and employment history; and
 - the needs of the different subgroups identified above.
3. Access to specialist personal development and family supports, including parenting supports where required, with recognised progression routes and referral.
4. Access to a menu of options of affordable education and training that allows for flexibility and leads to recognised qualifications.
5. Provision of financial and other supports to assist in making the transition into work or into more sustainable and rewarding work, including childcare supports.
6. The development of initiatives with the social partners to facilitate access by lone parents to flexible employment options that support their career plans and the need to improve the financial returns from employment, while also addressing employers' needs.

We recommend that the roll-out of this system be piloted on a voluntary basis in a number of areas with agreed indicators and targets. We recommend that all recipients should be encouraged to engage with the process regardless of their length of time on the OFF. Prior to its implementation the relevant personnel should be trained and effective links with lone-parent and other relevant groups in the areas involved should be developed to assist in providing information, referral and support to lone parents in the pilot.

The operation of the pilot system should be fully monitored and evaluated as part of the roll-out of the Social and Economic Participation Programme of the National Development Plan and its effectiveness and impact on increasing employment, income and the family well-being of one-parent families be fully evaluated.

3. Balancing Work and Parenting

Specialist resources be made available to support the development and implementation of a co-ordinated strategy for the provision of accessible, affordable quality childcare, including after-school care, as part of the activation process and such a programme be built into a revised National Childcare Strategy. This strategy should also be monitored and evaluated.

4. Understanding the Needs of Specific Sub-groups

We recommend that further studies be undertaken on:

- a. The health needs and concerns of one-parent families, including children;
- b. The specific issues affecting male lone parents dependent on the OFF;

and based on these studies action taken to address their findings.

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One Family's Vision

One Family believes in an Ireland where every family is cherished equally, and enjoys the social, financial and legal equality to create their own positive future.

One Family's Mission

One Family is working to ensure a positive and equal future for all members of all one-parent families in Ireland – changing attitudes, services, policies and lives. Together with one-parent families and those working with them, we are committed to achieving equality and respect for all families.

In addition to striving for fundamental structural change, we support individual one-parent families as they parent through times of family, work and life change, and those experiencing a crisis pregnancy. We know that every family is unique, and so we work in a family centred way to bring about better lives for parents and children.

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If you would like to learn more or become involved in our policy and campaigning work you can become a member of **can*** (Campaigning and Advocacy Network).

Please e-mail can@onefamily.ie for more information.

