

## PRESS STATEMENT

### LARGE FAMILIES IN LONDON

This study of the lives of 86 large families in London from all income groups - the richest had an annual income of £7000, the poorest £700 - found that all of them experienced some restrictions because of their size. Certain patterns of organisation are imposed on a large family because there is a limit to the amount of time money can buy. The mother of a large family has yet to enjoy the partial liberation from domesticity enjoyed by mothers of small families. However the lives of those having to manage on a low income were restricted in every respect. The experiences of these families show what it means to be poor today and to be excluded from sharing in the rising standards of living of the general population.

Fortunately poverty in this country no longer means starvation, but it can still mean a diet of nothing but tea, bread and jam, and chips. One family of ten ate 100 pounds of potatoes a week. Seven of the mothers never had a cooked meal. Poverty can still mean homelessness: in the past ten families had been homeless and a further five had had children in care or living with relatives because of accommodation problems. Children are still kept away from school because they have no shoes to wear. In the winter the poorer families had to go to bed early to keep warm - under 'blankets' made of old coats and newspapers. In many respects it was the mother who went without most. Eleven of the mothers had had neither a new coat nor dress since their marriage at least ten years ago.

It was the mother too who had to exercise considerable management skills and self-discipline for in the poorest families they held the purse strings completely. What looks like thrift is often the effect of having more money. The poorest families had insufficient resources to practice economies of scale and because they had to ration their consumption had no choice but to buy 'little and often'.

Material deprivation was often magnified by their isolation from neighbours and relatives because the large family of a low income earner, unlike their richer counterparts, has low status. They were often the object of considerable disapproval from the community although low income arose mainly from the father's illhealth (the earning capacity of one in four of the fathers had been reduced by illness for some period during the previous year, seven were chronically ill). Those who were sick and unemployed suffered further loss of status and self respect, or as one of the fathers with a chronic heart condition said: "Without a job you've got no status".

Although a third of the parents in the study were Roman Catholics, religious convictions delayed rather than prevented attempts at family limitation. Altogether two thirds of the parents had attempted to limit their families, including half the Roman Catholic parents who had used a method of birth control

not approved of by their Church. However the family planning advice and assistance some of them had received had not been sufficient or of the right kind to enable half of those who attempted to limit their fertility to do so successfully. Most of those who had failed had attempted birth control before becoming a large family. Ignorance, shyness and lack of confidence in their ability to control their lives prevented further attempts at contraception. Similar obstacles existed for families who had never tried to limit their size. In these circumstances it is hard to say that the majority of these parents had deliberately chosen to have a large family. Their feelings can be summed up in the words of one mother: "You're always disappointed when you 'fall' for another, but you love it when it comes". Meantime, because of our inadequate attempts to relate family income to family size the addition of another child too often means, as it did fifty years ago, "more crowding, more illness, more worry, more work and less food, less strength, less time to manage with."

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This is a study of the experiences of 86 families with at least five children, some but not all, living on a very low income. The report describes where and how they lived, the extent of support they received from the community and the social services, and explores the reasons for their unusual size.