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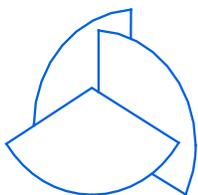
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Poverty and Social Exclusion Project

**Lone Parent Households in Northern Ireland
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Research
a g e n c y

Introduction

This bulletin describes the demographic social situation and living standards of lone parents in Northern Ireland. It is based on an analysis of 148 lone parent households containing co-resident children aged 15 or less identified in the Poverty and Social Exclusion Study (PSENI), which was carried out in 2002/2003¹. One responsible member of the household was asked to provide the information. This person is referred to as the household respondent (HRP). Lone parent households made up some 8 per cent of the sample of over two thousand households. This reflected the corresponding rate found in the 2001 Census of Population.

Demographic Profile

The vast majority of lone parents in the PSENI were female (92%) with male lone parents making up less than one tenth (8%).

Age of lone parents

The age of lone parents ranged from 18 to 53 with a mean age of 33 and a modal age — the most recurring age — of 23. Just under one fifth of all lone parents in the sample were aged between 16 and 24 and less than 9 per cent of lone parents fell into the 45 plus age groups.

Lone Parent Policy and Issues

Since the Second World War the proportion of households and families which are headed by a lone parent has risen considerably in the UK and is higher in the UK than in most other European countries.

¹ The PSENI was designed and directed by Professor P Hillyard, University of Ulster, Professor E. McLaughlin and Mr M. Tomlinson, Queen's University Belfast. The project originated and was funded by OFMDFM and HM Treasury.

The rise in lone parent households has been accompanied by a number of policy concerns relating to the impact of household structure and composition on the following items:

- (1) household income and wealth and its converse poverty.
- (2) the impact of household structure and composition on the socialisation and raising of children.
- (3) the relationship and contribution of non-resident parents to the co-resident parents and children.

The first set of issues is dominated by concerns about either or both of the adequacies of benefit levels and the employment position of lone parents with care.

The welfare to work and New Deal initiatives of New Labour and the commitment to end child poverty in the UK are all part of this policy context (see also McLaughlin and Monteith 2004). Northern Ireland lone parent employment rates remain lower than those in GB especially within the Catholic community. The level of child care places fully or partly funded by government is also lower than in GB (House of Commons DWP Select Committee *Inquiry into Child Poverty* (2004))

The third set of issues was a particular concern of the Assembly during the 1999-2002 period of devolution.

Children

The number of children aged 15 or less (in all households) in the sample totalled 1,197. Two hundred and forty-eight — or 27 per cent — were growing up in lone parent households. In other words, over a quarter of all children in Northern Ireland are now growing up in lone parent households.

The number of children in lone parent households ranged from 1 to 6. Over half (54%) had one child, nearly a third (31%) had two and 15 per cent had 3 or more. The mean number was 1.6. In over forty per cent of lone parent households the age of the youngest child was between 0-4 years, a similar proportion between 5-11 years and 16 per cent aged 12-15.

Community Background

Over half (51%) of lone parents were Catholic and 44 per cent were Protestant. The remaining 5 per cent were another religion or had no religion.

Ethnic background

The majority of all lone parent households were White (95%) and less than 4 per cent were from a minority ethnic background. This small number of minority ethnic households makes it impossible to analyse this group further.

Education

Some 11 per cent of lone parents have a higher education qualification and over a quarter (27%) has no qualifications. This is significantly lower than the 2001 Census of Population where 41 per cent of lone parents were identified as having no qualifications.

Marital status

Some 45 per cent of lone parents have never been married, 3 per cent are still married, 33 per cent are separated and 17 per cent are divorced.

Employment

Some 52 per cent of lone parents were economically inactive. This included those who looked after the home/family and those who were permanently sick/disabled. Of the economically active lone parents, some 13 per cent were unemployed. This reflects the

corresponding figure in the 2001 Census of Population.

Social Class

The Registrar General's classification of social class is based on present or most recent occupation (kind of work done and skill required) and includes six categories: professional, managerial and technical, skilled non-manual, skilled manual, partly skilled and unskilled manual. Lone parents are predominately skilled non-manual (31%) or partly skilled or unskilled manual (37%).

Lone Parents and Poverty

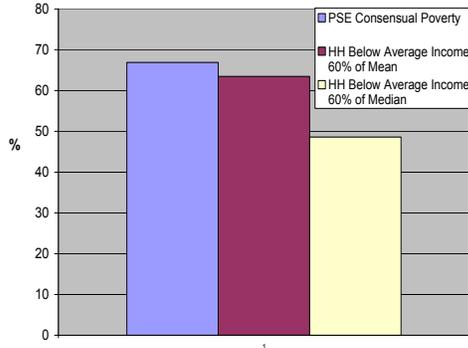
The PSENI study used a number of different measures of poverty. They included the UK Government's measure of poverty (the proportion of households which fall below a percentage of either the mean or median income) as well as a consensual measure (households lacking three or more necessities) (See Figure 1). Throughout the rest of this bulletin the PSENI consensual measure of poverty is mainly used.

The nature and extent of poverty can be described using these measures in two ways. First, it is possible to explore the risk of poverty: what groups are most likely to be poor? Secondly we can look at the composition of those who are poor. We begin by looking at the risk of poverty for lone parents.

Figure 1 shows the risk of poverty for lone parent households using the different measures. The risk of poverty varies depending on the measure. On the PSE consensual poverty measure, some 67 per cent of lone parents are living below the poverty line. On the Government's measure of Households Below Average Income (before housing costs and at less than 60 per cent of the mean) some 64 per cent of lone parents are in poverty. When 60 per cent of the median is used, nearly half of lone parents are in poverty. In other words, whichever measure is used between one half

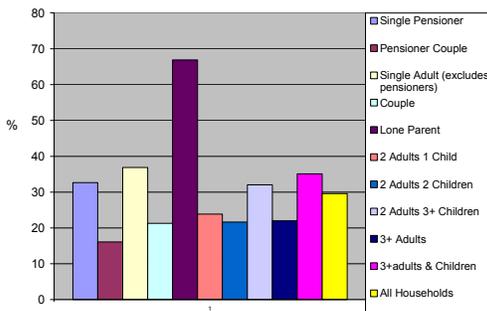
and two-thirds of all lone parents are in poverty compared with at most a third of other families.

Figure 1. Risk of Poverty for Lone Parent Households



The risk of poverty for lone parents compared with other types of households is illustrated in Figure 2. At 67 per cent, lone parents have the highest risk of poverty of any of the types of households. Lone parent households are more than twice as likely to be in poverty as all other households in the population. Single adults form the second group with the highest risk of poverty — 37 per cent of them are at risk, some seven per cent above the average.

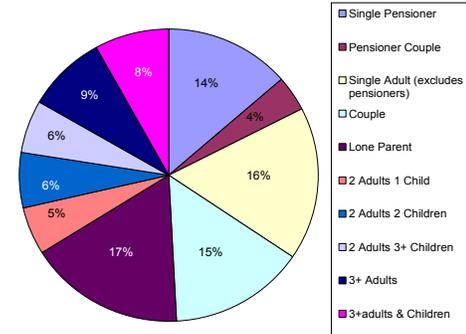
Figure 2. Risk of Poverty for Types of Households



Within lone parent households the risk of poverty (consensual definition) varies by age. The youngest lone parents (aged 16-34) have the highest risk of poverty at 79 per cent. As the age of lone parents increases, the risk of poverty declines from 79 per cent (for those aged 16-34) to 52 per cent (for

those aged 35-54). Of those lone parents that were poor, two thirds (67%) were aged 16-34.

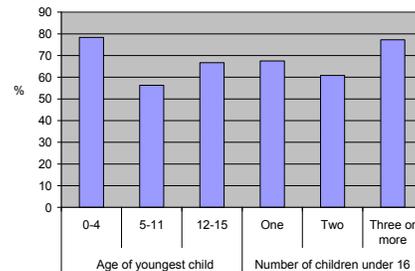
Figure 2a. Composition of All Poor Households



Lone parent households and households with single adults together make up over a third of all poor households (Consensual definition see Figure 2a).

The number of children and their ages make a significant difference to the risk of poverty (Figure 3). Lone parent households with one child have a risk of poverty (consensual definition) of 67 per cent, with two children — 61 per cent and three or more children — 77 per cent.

Figure 3. Risk of poverty according to age of youngest child and number of children in lone parent households



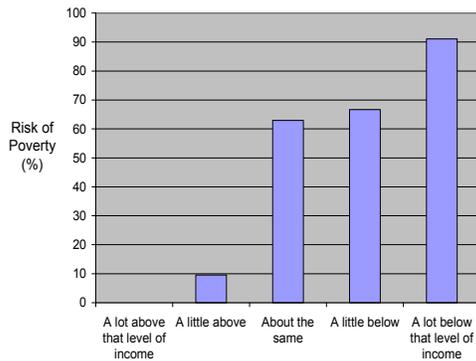
Those lone parent households with the youngest child aged between 0-4 years had the highest risk of poverty (78%). Those with the youngest child aged 12-15 had the next highest risk (67%) and those with children aged 5-11 the lowest risk (56%).

Subjective Poverty Measure

To ascertain whether or not people felt they were in poverty, the HRP was asked: ‘How many pounds a week after tax do you think it is necessary to keep a household such as the one you live in, out of poverty?’ They were then asked: ‘How far below that level would you say your household is?’

Lone parents’ subjective views of poverty coincide to a large extent with the consensual measurement of poverty (Figure 4). Of those who claim their income is a little or a lot above the necessary level of income, fewer than 10 per cent are in poverty. Of those that say their income is a lot below, some 90 per cent are in poverty on the consensual measure.

Figure 4. Risk of poverty by subjective measure of poverty



Household Income

The average net weekly income of lone parent households was £199.94 in contrast to £502.59 of other households with children.

Lone parents’ perception of their adequacy of income was significantly related to poverty. The majority of lone parents who believed their income was not enough were at the highest risk of poverty (90%) in contrast to those who believed their household income was just enough (55%) or more than enough (14%).

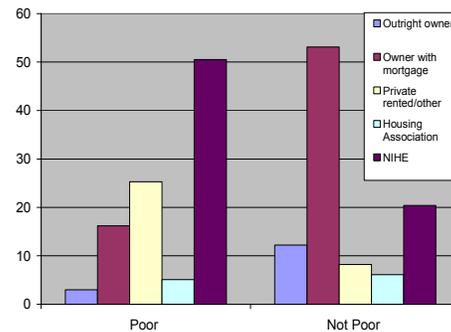
Benefits

Over half of all lone parent households (56%) received income support. Some 21 per cent were in receipt of working family tax credit and 3 per cent of incapacity benefit. Of those on income support some 88 per cent were poor.

Housing and Environment

The majority (51%) of poor lone parent households lived in accommodation rented from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. In contrast the majority of non-poor lone parent households owned their homes with a mortgage. Lone parent households, who either rented privately or from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive were at the greatest risk of poverty (86 per cent and 83 per cent respectively). These figures were markedly higher than the risk of poverty for all lone parent households (67%).

Figure 5. Housing Tenure of Lone Parent Households



The majority of lone parent households live in an urban area (82%) with the remaining 18 per cent living in a rural area. This pattern was also apparent for poor lone parent households with 80 per cent living in an urban area and the remaining fifth residing in a rural community.

Area Characteristics

Lone parents held a number of different perceptions about their area. Over three quarters thought it to be good, 15 per cent perceived their area to be neither good nor bad and 7 per cent considered it to be bad. This pattern remained irrespective of being poor or not. Lone parents who indicated that their area was neither good nor bad were at the greatest risk of poverty (72%) and this was slightly higher than the risk of poverty for all lone parent households (67%).

A sub-sample of respondents was asked about problems in their area. These included drug use, paramilitary activity, noisy neighbours, poor housing and graffiti. Over a third of all poor lone parent households indicated none of these things were a major problem in their area, 17 per cent stated one of the items was a major problem in the area and 27 per cent believed that five or more of the items were a major problem in their area. Those lone parents who perceived three, four and five or more of the items to be a major problem in their area were at the greatest risk of poverty (79%, 100% and 77% respectively). In comparison, HRPs of other households with children that identified five or more of items to be major problems in their area were at the greatest risk of poverty (58%).

Noble Index

The Noble Index is a spatial measure of deprivation for Northern Ireland. It is made up of seven domains, income, employment, health & disability, education, skills and training, access to services and housing stress. These domains are incorporated into an overall measure of deprivation. Wards are ranked according to their level of deprivation and then grouped into five bands from most deprived to the least deprived. Each household in the PSENI study was allocated into one of the five bands.

The Noble score correlated with the numbers of lone parents in poverty. Those lone parent households that lived in the most

deprived areas were at the greatest risk of poverty (77%).

Ill-health and Disability

All respondents were asked whether they had a limiting long-term illness, health problem or disability that limited their daily activities or work. The number of lone parents who answered 'yes' was the same as other parents at (25%). Lone parents who answered 'yes' had a higher risk of poverty (78%) than those who answered 'no' (63%).

Respondents were asked to rate their state of health. Some 23 per cent of all lone parents stated they were in poor health in comparison to 10 per cent of HRPs in other households with children.

Ill-health, disability and poverty

There was a significant relationship between self-rating of health and poverty in lone parent households. Lone parents who stated they were in poor health were at the greatest risk of poverty (85%). However those lone parents who stated that they had good health also had a high risk of poverty (71%). The risk of poverty was considerably higher than the risk of poverty for the corresponding population in all households (55%).

Necessities and Economising

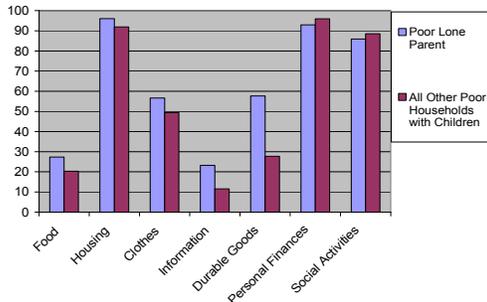
Adult necessities

Everyone was asked if they possessed a range of items and if they did not, whether it was because they did not want them or because they could not afford them. The items covered seven domains: food, housing, clothes, information, durable goods, personal finances and social activities.

Poor lone parent households are more likely than all other poor households with children to lack at least one item in all domains excluding personal finances and social activities where the opposite pattern is apparent (Figure 6). These differences were most noticeable in the domains of

information and durable goods. There were approximately twice as many poor lone parent households deprived of at least one item in each of these domains due to lack of money than all other poor households with children.

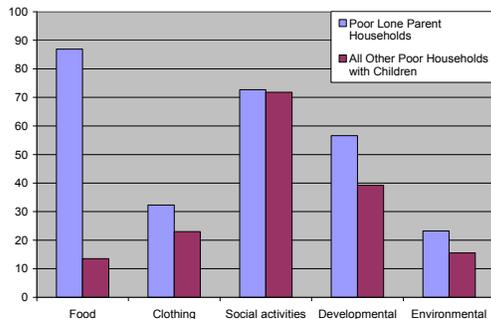
Figure 6. Percentage of households who lacked at least one item in each domain due to lack of money



Child necessities

A similar set of questions were asked about children's items. These covered five domains: food, clothing, social activities, development and the environment.

Figure 7. Percentage of households who lacked at least one item in each domain of child necessities due to lack of money



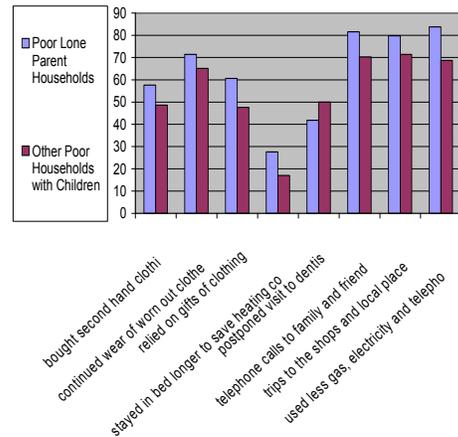
There were more poor lone parent households that lacked at least one item in each of the domains of child necessities due to lack of money than all other poor households with children (Figure 7). These differences were most pronounced in the food domain where there were six times as many poor lone parent households that

lacked at least one item than all other poor households with children.

Economising

Poor lone parent households economised to a greater extent than other poor households with children. A higher proportion of poor lone parent households economise on clothes, basic amenities such as gas and electricity and social activities (Figure 8). For example, 15 per cent more poor lone parent households economised on gas/electricity and the telephone than all other poor households with children.

Figure 8. Poor households compared on economising items



Debt

All respondents were asked a series of questions about debt from a variety of different sources. Just under half (49 %) of all lone parent households had borrowed money. When asked about the different sources of their loans; 33 per cent had borrowed from their family and 16 per cent from friends and 8 per cent from money lenders.

Seven per cent of lone parent households were behind on hire purchase payments, 16 per cent on telephone bills, 14 per cent on catalogue payments and some 11 per cent were behind in payments for other loans.

Household respondents were asked: ‘Have you ever been disconnected from gas, electricity or the telephone because you could not pay bills?’ Less than 1 per cent indicated that they had been disconnected from gas and/or electricity and 18 per cent had been disconnected from the telephone. This compared with 1 per cent and 4 per cent of all other households.

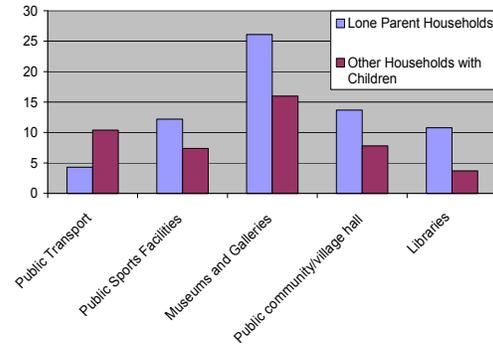
Social Exclusion

People may suffer social exclusion for a variety of reasons. This section of the analysis focuses on those excluded from public and private services. A sub-sample of household respondents was asked if they used a range of services. If they answered ‘yes’ they were then asked whether they believed them to be adequate or inadequate. If they answered ‘no’ they were asked the reason why not. Two aspects of social exclusion were analysed for services whose use showed significant differences between groups:

- (i) Collective exclusion — where services were unavailable or unsuitable to everyone in a certain area.
- (ii) Individual exclusion — where services exist but individuals cannot use them because of lack of money.

Public services

Figure 9. Collective exclusion from public services



A larger proportion of other households with children than lone parent households did not use public transport because it was unavailable/unsuitable (Figure 9). However lone parent households were twice as likely as other households with children to be excluded from public community village hall and libraries because they were either unavailable or unsuitable.

Figure 10. Individual exclusion from public services

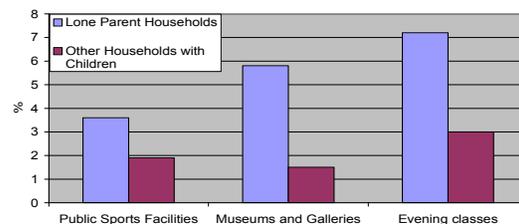
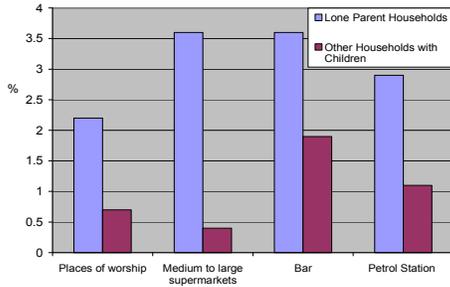


Figure 10 shows that two to three times as many lone parent households as other households with children did not use the services indicated because they could not afford them.

Private services

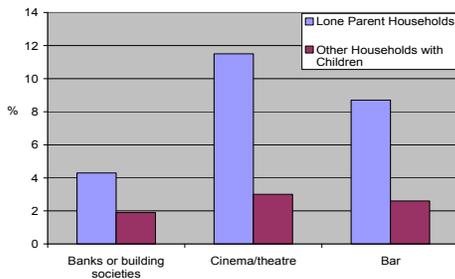
Significantly more lone parent households did not use each of the private services indicated in Figure 11 because they were unavailable or unsuitable than all other households with children. This is most noticeable for medium to large supermarkets where three times as many lone parent households are collectively excluded than other households with children.

Figure 11. Collective exclusion from private services



Individual exclusion from each of the private services included in Figure 12 was higher for lone parent households than all other households with children. This was most noticeable for the cinema/theatre; four times as many lone parent households as all other households with children did not use this service because they could not afford it.

Figure 12. Individual exclusion from private services

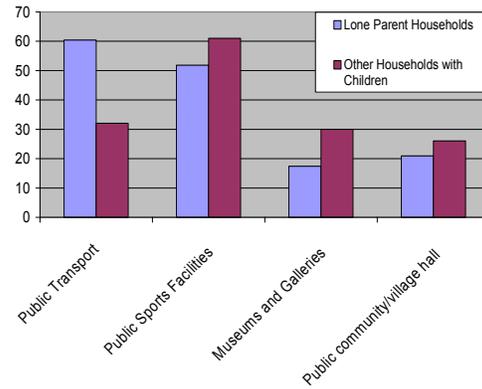


Usage rates of public and private services

A usage rate of services was constructed. It was defined as the proportion of households using a particular service (irrespective of whether it was adequate/inadequate) divided by the total number of all households.

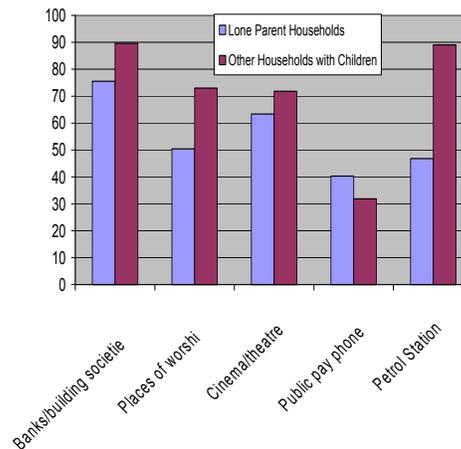
There are higher percentages of other households with children using museum/galleries, public sports facilities and the public/community village hall than lone parent households (Figure 13). In contrast significantly more lone parent households used public transport (60% compared with 32% of other households with children).

Figure 13. Usage rates for public services



More lone parent households use the public pay phone than other households with children (Figure 14). For the remaining private services the opposite pattern is shown.

Figure 14. Usage rates for private services



Lack of Social Support

Another indicator of social exclusion is the level of social support available in times of need. Respondents were asked how much support they would get in certain situations. These items were divided into two categories:

- (i) Practical support — items included help when ill, help with heavy household/gardening jobs, help with

caring responsibilities and someone to look after home/possessions when away.

- (ii) Emotional support — items included needing advice about life change, someone to talk to if depressed and someone to talk to about problems with a spouse/partner.

Three levels of support were calculated according to responses to items in each of the categories: good, reasonable and poor support.

Lone parents reported that they had a good level of practical support (75%) and emotional support (84%). However the corresponding figures were higher for respondents of other households with children (91% and 90% respectively).

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2. Monteith, M. and McLaughlin, E. (2004) *Severe Child Poverty in Northern Ireland: Key Research Findings*. Belfast: Save the Children

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information about the bulletin can be obtained by writing to:

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