



THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
(UNIVERSITY OF LONDON)

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SURVEY OF LARGE FAMILIES

The background to the study

This study of large families is part of a bigger study of Poverty which is being directed by Professor Peter Townsend of the University of Essex and Dr. Brian Abel-Smith of the London School of Economics. The other groups being studied are: fatherless families, the long-term unemployed, the chronic sick and disabled and old people.

We are hoping to find out more about the problems of large families, in particular those in which the chief breadwinner is earning a low wage. These are the families who would probably be subject to a wages-stop if they were to come on to National Assistance. The fact that in 1962 there were 23,000 wage stop families indicates that there must be many more such families who live below National Assistance level even when the father is earning. Many of these families will have more children than average and we want to know how they cope with their problems. However, we are not concentrating entirely on low income large families because we also want to see to what extent large families have different problems from smaller families whatever their income. This, of course, means we have to try to differentiate between problems which are aspects of inadequate income and environment and problems which are aspects of the size of family. We realise this is not going to be easy.

Our questionnaire contains detailed questions on the composition of the household, the educational and social development of each child, the quality and cost of accommodation, the possession of certain durables, expenditure on certain items of food, clothing, etc., and details of the family's income and resources. We will want to interview both the husband and wife (separately, if at all possible) because although we ask the wife most of the questions, we would prefer that the husband gave us information about his income. Obviously, with so many topics to investigate, the questionnaire is not a short one, but we hope that when the questionnaire is in its final form, an interview will not take much longer than an hour and a half. As the questionnaire is longer than some, we are prepared to call again if this is more convenient for the wife.

These are the points we would like you to emphasize when you are explaining the study to the families:

- (i) It is an independent study by University of London research workers into the problems of large families.
- (ii) All the information will be treated confidentially.
- (iii) Any information they give us will be helpful: they need feel under no obligation to answer all the questions just because they have agreed to talk to us.
- (iv) We shall be glad to call at any time or on repeated occasions to suit their convenience. (Would morning or afternoon or any particular day of the week be more convenient than any other?)

We should like to thank you for the valuable help you are giving us. If there is anything else you would like to know, please telephone Hilary Land or John Veit Wilson at EUSTon 4526.

LARGE FAMILIES IN LONDON

Background Information by Hilary Land

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 every 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 practise 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".