

CHAPTER 22

ONE PARENT FAMILIES

The problems experienced by different minorities can be attributed in large measure to ^{external causes - to} the way in which society is organised and the emphasis given in that society to particular values and beliefs. An appreciation of the predicament of one parent families can be reached with the help of a few preliminary statements. A society which sets a great deal of store by the institution of marriage will tend to reward the married and withhold reward from the non-married or even punish the non-married if they should seek to obtain some of the pleasures of the married state without incurring its formal, and social, obligations. This preferment will permeate the laws and norms of society - in its property, tax and social security laws, in the norms of hospitality and even, say, in the rules of the armed forces covering compassionate leave. Partly because it is built into the institutional fabric of society, this preferment also extends to informal aspects of behaviour. In a real sense gossip about women living alone, or differentiation between non-married and married mothers by social security officials in their attitudes and behaviour, is socially engineered.

Society^o also tends to prefer producers over dependants, though less emphatically, and with more qualifications. The work ethic is deeply imprinted and the means of subsistence are denied to those not in paid employment, except in rigorously defined circumstances.

And finally society prefers the immediate or nuclear family to other forms of organisation for rearing young children and therefore, in reconciling its functions with the productive or instrumental functions of external institutions, such as industry, has to declare which of the parents in normal circumstances is expected to undertake the domestic and child-rearing roles, and which the external wage-earning roles.

In elucidating the problems of one-parent families in any society some account has to be given, if only implicitly, therefore, of the institutions of marriage, work and family, particularly as they affect women's subordination, particularly in the command of resources, to men. Quite how marriage, or access to a working or a social wage, or the division of sexual roles within and outside the family, are defined and treated, will condition the nature and severity of the situation of the one-parent family.

By examining one-parent families in relation to other families the research worker can reveal some of the effects of the institutional structure and therefore suggest in sketchy outline the underlying causation. That is the most that can be claimed for the data described in this chapter. The numbers of one parent families in the sample were also small. A comprehensive explanation of the deprivation experienced by one parent families would have to depend, as I have suggested, on a searching analysis of marriage, work and family.

The Numbers and Types of One Parent Families

At any time, rather less than one in ten of all families with dependent children have only one parent by reason of death, divorce, separation or births outside marriage. In the United Kingdom around two-thirds of a million parents are looking after one million children single-handed. Table 22/1 compares national estimates produced by the Finer Committee ⁽¹⁾ with estimates from the survey. Bearing in mind the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the survey, and the substantial sampling error to which small sub-samples in the survey are subject, the total estimates from the two sources are very similar. In all of the studies estimates of married but separated parents are less reliable than, say, of widowed or divorced parents, since it is difficult in many cases to decide whether the separation is temporary or permanent. In its comments

1) Report of the Committee on One Parent Families (The Finer Report), Cmnd 5629, London, HMSO, July 1974, p.22

on the statistics the Department of Health and Social Security points out that temporarily separated wives (including some whose husbands are mariners, prisoners or in the armed forces) are included in the Census and General Household Survey data. ⁽¹⁾ In the survey we distinguished three groups of married but "separated" persons - (i) married - away last night; (ii) married, separated - no court order; (iii) married, separated - court order. The interviewer was also instructed to enter reasons for any household member being away. We believe this procedure helped us to identify some temporary separations (including routine separations) which could be classified in (i) above. If such persons had dependent children they were not classed as one-parent families. The survey estimates of married but separated parents suggest the DHSS estimates may be too high.

INSERT TABLE 22/1

On the other hand the DHSS estimates of unmarried mothers may be on the low side. The DHSS point out that both the Census and GHS results were almost certainly too low when related to information both about numbers in work and numbers drawing supplementary benefit, and are inclined to adopt a higher figure. Our survey estimates suggest the real figure may be higher still.

The total estimated numbers of children of different age in one parent families from the two sources are listed below:-

Age	Government estimates (thousands)	Survey estimates (thousands)
0- 4	260	310
5- 9	370	370
10-14	330	230
15-18	120	160
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Total	1,080	1,070
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1) Ibid, Cmnd 5629-1, Appendix 4.

The Chances of Being in Poverty

By comparison with two parent families more one parent families have relatively low incomes and substantially more of them live in poverty or on its margins. This can be demonstrated both from the survey and Government studies. In the survey more of the children than of children in two-parent families were found to live in households with incomes smaller than the minimum scales of the Supplementary Benefits Commission. (Table 22/2). Taking household income as the criterion, two-fifths of the families and nearly half the children were in poverty or on its margins. They represented 250,000 families and 520,000 children respectively in the general population. In four poor areas we also found that though more one-parent families than elsewhere had low incomes their distribution was not strikingly different from the national pattern (Appendix 8, Table A/90).

Government data confirm the disproportionately large numbers with low incomes but do not suggest such a large number below the State's poverty line. Thus the Finer Committee quote ^{mean for the period 1969 to 1971} figures of 200,000 fatherless families receiving supplementary benefit, plus 43,000 not receiving benefit who were living below the supplementary benefit level and another 22,000 having resources of less than £2 higher than that level, ~~during the period 1969 to 1971~~. Allowing for an estimated 15,000 motherless families in poverty or on its margins (including about 7,000 actually receiving supplementary benefit) ⁽¹⁾ the total number of one-parent families living on supplementary benefit, below or within £2 of that standard was 280,000 or approximately 45 per cent. ⁽²⁾ This official figure of 280,000 compares with the figure of 250,000 derived from the survey.

1) Although fewer motherless than fatherless families are in poverty or on its margins, or have incomes low relative to two-parent families, they are nonetheless disadvantaged financially, when compared with two-parent families. See George V. and Wilding P., Motherless Families, London, Routledge, 1972.

2) Report of the Committee on One Parent Families, op cit, p. 254 and Appendices 9 and 10.

The former includes all the families receiving supplementary benefit, however, and not only those whose net disposable income was ~~no more~~^{less} than 40 per cent higher than the basic scales.

Another measure of low income is obtained by comparing the mean income of the two groups of families. A 1970 study in five areas by the Social Survey Division of the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys found that "in all areas (Dorset, Dundee, Glamorgan, Halifax, Haringey) the mean usual income and the mean adjusted income (allowing for size of family) of fatherless families are less than half those of two parent families." (1)

TABLE 22/2

Per cent of children in one-parent and two-parent families, according to level of household income in relation to the social poverty standard

Net disposable household income last year as per cent of supplementary benefit scales plus housing cost.	Families		children in families ^a	
	one parent	two parents (married)	one parent	two parents (married)
under 100	14 42	4 22	29	6
100-139	26 23	22 48	20	25
140-199	33 29	41 46	33	42
200-299	21 7	24 8	12	20
300 or more	7 0	8 0	6	7
Total	100 100	100 100	100	100
Number	58 91	637 410	96	1308

- a 41 children with a step-parent or one parent or both parents dead or unmarried parents have been excluded.

Source: One Parent Family Series Nos. 2 and 29.

(TO ADD: DISTRIBUTION FOR INCOME UNITS) [?]

: POSSIBLY FOUR AREAS

1) Hunt A., with Fox J. and Morgan M., Families and their Needs, with Particular Reference to One Parent Families, London, HMSO, Vol I, p.31

Household income is not necessarily the best measure of the living standards of all one-parent families. In the survey 43 per cent lived in households consisting of two or more income units. ⁽¹⁾ This compares with 22 per cent of two-parent families. If the income unit and not the entire household is taken then the number of one parent families living in or on the margins of poverty increases to (check).

Do many of the poorest families have assets, which indirectly help them to raise intolerably low living standards? ^{The short answer is no.} When the potential income represented by the value of all assets, expressed as an annuity, is added to net disposable incomes, the number of children of lone parents living at a level below, or just above, the supplementary benefit basic scale rates is reduced only from 49 per cent to 43 per cent. Indeed, one of the critical problems of many one-parent families is a total or almost total lack of assets of any kind - whether savings, houses or even consumer durables in the home. Nearly half the one parent families, compared with only 13 per cent of two parent families had assets of no value at all or were actually in debt (though some lived in households with other income units having assets). Another 17 per cent, had less than £100, ~~and~~ Only 11 per cent had more than £5,000, compared with 21 per cent of two parent families.

Many of the families living around the ^{State} poverty line already receive supplementary benefit. Table 22/3 shows that ²⁷ ~~26~~ per cent of one parent families ^{in the survey} comprising 37 per cent of dependent children in such families, were said to be receiving benefit. The figures represented 170,000 families and 390,000 children in the population. These totals correspond fairly closely with administrative totals for the same period. In 1968, for example, there were ^{according to official sources,} approximately 360,000 and in 1970 420,000 dependent children in one-parent

1) This corresponds closely with other estimates. The Government's Family Expenditure Survey produced an average figure of 46 per cent for the three years 1969 to 1971. Report of the Committee on One Parent Families, op cit, Appendix 10, p.331.

families receiving supplementary benefit. ⁽¹⁾ But there were an additional 10 per cent, representing 100,000, who were in 56,000 families eligible for supplementary benefit but not receiving it. About two-thirds of these families were headed by lone mothers.

TABLE 22/3

Per cent of one-parent families and of dependent children in such families^a in the United Kingdom and in Four Special Areas, according to eligibility to receive supplementary benefits

Eligibility of income unit for supplementary benefit	United Kingdom				Four Areas	
	One-parent families		Two-parent families ^b		One-parent families	Two-parent families
	fami- lies	chil- dren	fami- lies	chil- dren		
Unclassifiable	2	5	1	2		
Could not claim	53	39	94	92		
Currently receiving benefit	27	37	1	1		
Ineligible (income too high)	10	10	2	2		
Eligible but not receiving	9	10	1	2		
Total	100	100	100	100		
Number	68	115	744	1509		

a Including children aged 15 and over at school or college.

b Both parents married.

Source: One Parent Families Series No. 22 and 40

Trends in Numbers in Poverty

Both in proportion receiving and not receiving but eligible for benefit,

1) There were 182,000 fatherless and 6,000 motherless families receiving benefit in 1968, and 212,000 and 6,000 respectively in 1970, with an average of 1.91 and 2.26 children. Report of the Committee on One Parent Families, Appendix 9, pp 313 and 316.

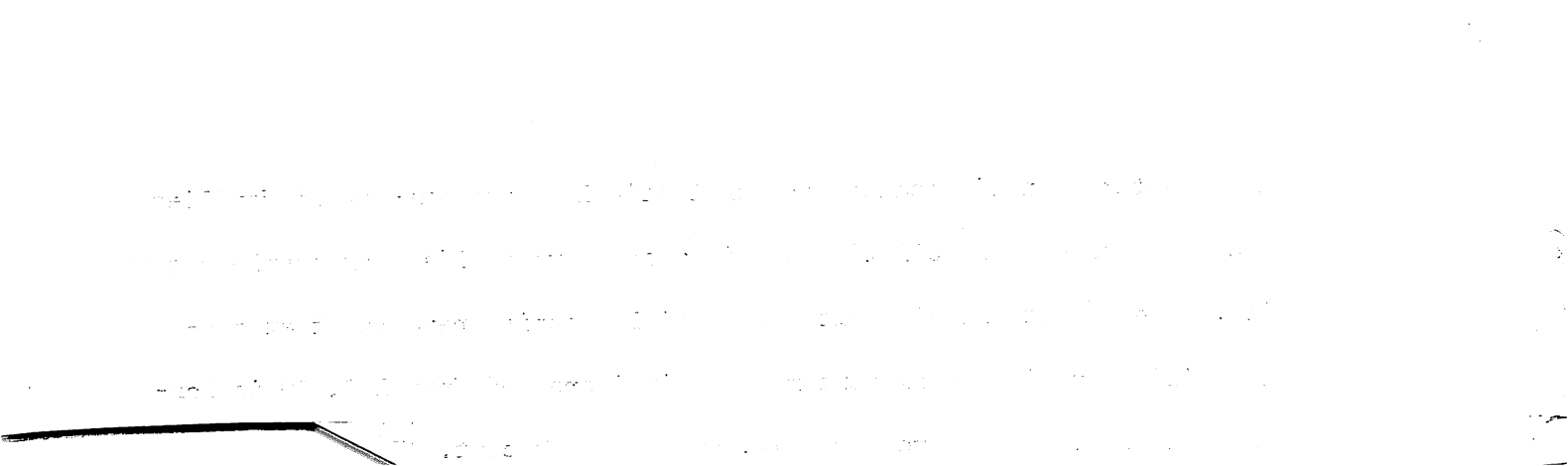
children in one parent families are at a disadvantage when compared with other children. But even those children in families unable to claim benefit are at a disadvantage. Their mothers (or fathers) are in full-time employment, but usually earning less than parents in two-parent families, and sometimes so much less that they are in poverty. At the time the survey was carried out the Family Income Supplement scheme had not been introduced. This supplements the incomes of one parent and two parent families in full-time employment by one half of the amount by which their gross weekly income falls below prescribed levels. Because the prescribed amounts for family supplements were set a lot higher than the supplementary benefit levels for one parent families, the effect was to "raise the disposable income of one parent families whose incomes were already higher than the supplementary benefit level - that is, the supplements increased the positive net resources of lone mothers who work rather than transferred families from negative net resources to positive net resources" (or from an income position below to an income position above the supplementary benefit level).^{*} (1)

There is little evidence that the distribution of one parent families above and below the ^{income represented by the} supplementary benefit standard has changed since 1968-9. Only 37,000 one-parent families with 50,000 (check) children received family income supplements in April 1973. (2) As conceded by the DHSS, many of these would not beforehand have been in poverty or on its margins. Moreover, although the survey estimate of 440,000 children under 15 and 250,000 mothers or fathers, (check) in one-parent families in poverty or on its margins, would have been reduced to some extent because of the introduction of the family income supplements scheme, these numbers will also have ^{first} increased ~~either~~ because one parent families have themselves increased (without much change in the proportions of families having incomes of different amounts relative to

1) Report of the Committee on One Parent Families, op cit, Appendix 10, p 355.

2)

the supplementary benefit scales) ^{and second, because many} ~~or substantially fewer~~ one-parent families ^{ceased to rely on full-time employment} ~~have become dependent on full-time earnings~~ and have applied for supplementary benefits. The Department of Health and Social Security reported that one-parent families drawing supplementary benefit increased from 188,000 in November 1968 to 259,000 in November 1972, or by 38 per cent. (1)



Between the 1950's and early 1970's there has been scarcely any change in the numbers of married women in England and Wales taking matrimonial proceedings in magistrates' courts (varying only by one or two thousands for different years above and below a figure of 26,000). As a proportion of all live births illegitimate births increased from around 5 per cent per annum in the 1950's to over 8 per cent in the early 1970's. A large number of such births are to married women, to women living in a stable partnership or to women who marry before or soon after the birth. Nearly a fifth of such births are re-registered subsequently as legitimate and about another quarter result in adoptions. Only a minority of illegitimate children born in any year ^{in fact go on to live in} ~~help to form~~ ^{and} fatherless families. In a large number of instances the mother marries within a short period.

In the 1950's and 1960's, during a period when there was a slowly diminishing proportion of lone parents, widowed mothers gained a series of new and improved benefits. The earnings rule was abolished and children's benefits introduced at specially favourable rates. Today widowed mothers do not lose benefit if they earn a wage and they receive a weekly allowance for each child which is 70 per cent higher than other national insurance benefits for children. Of all one-parent families they are likeliest to have income from some provision made by the father, for example life assurance or an occupational pension and paid-up mortgage. Even by the mid-sixties an early study of fatherless families had shown that widowed mothers were more favourably placed than other families. ⁽¹⁾ A 1970 study found widows were "better off financially than all other groups." ⁽²⁾ The lone father, too, will normally be better off than the unmarried or married but separated or divorced mothers. Even if he has to restrict his hours in paid employment his earnings are usually high enough to keep his family substantially better off than supplementary benefit levels.

1) Marsden D., Mothers Alone, Penguin Books (revised edition) 1973.

2) Hunt A., et al, op cit, p.32

TABLE 22/5

Per cent of adults in two parent and one parent families experiencing certain difficulties or deprivations.

Characteristics	Two parent	One parent families			
		unmarried and separated mothers	widowed and divorced mothers	All lone mothers	All
Net income worth of household below 140 per cent supplementary benefit level	19 70	(58)	(21)	(45) 46	(38) 69
Not owner occupier	49	(86)	(62)	75	72
Structural defects	24 63	(45)	(21)	34 59	29 57
Housing facilities poor or very poor	4	(21)	(4)	13	13
Household with too few bedrooms	19 70	(55)	(33)	45 56	41 54
Fewer than 6 consumer durables in list of 10	15 57	(38)	(15)	28 38	27 42
No holiday away from home in last 12 months	47	(79)	(64)	73	70
No evening out in last fortnight	39 ^b	(52)	(62)	57	56
Moderately or severely deprived according to 8 criteria	24 83	(48)	(32)	41 90	41 89
Maximum base number ^a	1480 653 534	29	24	53 91	68 96

a For some items the number is slightly fewer.

b Mothers only.

(Possible addition four special areas)

Source: One Parent Families Series, Nos. 30,33,34,35,37,38,39,46

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Explanations of Two Forms of Inequality

The inequality of resources between different types of one parent family is partly a function of age. In the survey most of the widowed and divorced

POINTS FOR INCLUSION IN SUBSEQUENT ACCOUNT

1. Three quarters (¹⁸/₂₄) of separated and divorced mothers said they were worse off after separation. (Tab. 44)
2. Our data show that of 54 separated wives for whom we have both income and assets information 30 said the husband left, 18 said she left, and the separation was mutual in 6 cases. It was in the case of desertion by the husband that (a) most wives said they were then worse off and (b) Far more of them than in case where the husband left or mutual separation were objectively poor (i.e. ¹⁶/₃₀ below 140% SB)
3. 57% of lone mothers were in paid employment (40 per cent working 30 hours a week or more); compared with only 34 per cent of other mothers (14 per cent working 30 hours or more) (Table 32)
4. Subjective deprivation. 76 per cent of one-parent families say they are worse off than rest of their families (compared with only 22 per cent other families) (Table 49). 42 per cent worse off than neighbours (compared with 12 per cent) (Table 50). 37 per cent worse off than average in society (compared 18 per cent) (Table 51) And 36 per cent worse off than in past (compared 13%) (Table 52). However, about a fifth also say they are better off than previously (e.g. divorced, widowed women who say they've experienced greater privations).
5. Family contacts and churchgoing pattern about same as two-parent families about same as two-parent families. But, bearing in mind fact that more 1-parent families live with other income units (usually related) more 1-parent than 2-parent families can be said to have frequent contacts (Tables 41 and 53).

TABLE A/90

Per cent of individuals in one parent families in the United Kingdom and in four special areas, according to income in relation to the poverty standard

Net disposable household income last year as per cent of supplementary benefit rates plus housing cost	United Kingdom	Four areas
under 100	23	29
100-139	22	21
140-199	32	34
200+	22	17
Total	100	100
Number	154	192

Source: Special area table No. 38

One Parent Families Series Nos. 2 & 31.