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Income poverty, material deprivation and lone parenthood

Morag C. Treanor

Children who do not grow up with both of their biological parents are often considered to be disadvantaged in terms of social and academic achievements (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Kiernan & Mensah, 2010; Sigle-Rushton et al., 2005) and are widely expected to display greater levels of behavioural difficulties, as discussed by Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado in the introductory chapter of this book (Amato, 2005; Waldfogel et al., 2010). However, research into the children of lone¹ parents often omit the heterogeneity of lone-parent families. As parents (or mothers) transition into and out of relationships across time, they spend different lengths of time in partnered and non-partnered circumstances. This results in different typologies of lone parenthood; for example, stable lone parenthood versus a recently separated parent (see Zagel and Hübgen, Chapter Eight in this book, for how such a life-course perspective affects the analysis of policy outcomes). This assumption of the homogeneity of lone parenthood neglects the idea that parental partnership heterogeneity has theoretical consequences for the causal argument of the effects of lone parenthood on children's development and wellbeing. Making 'lone-parent' families a unidimensional comparison category, as most studies do, implies that homogenous effects of one-parent families are expected.

In addition to the lumping together of 'lone-parent' families into one category, which is a conceptual problem, another reason for this lack of attention to heterogeneity is the quality of the data available to some researchers. For the exploration of the impacts and experiences of lone parenthood, cross-sectional data are often used, which is a rather blunt instrument with which to study such a dynamic phenomenon as relationships. Furthermore, the existing research in the area is often from the US, where the societal, political and policy contexts differ greatly from those in Europe. This chapter seeks to challenge research findings that posit lone parenthood per se, rather than the inadequate resources available to lone mothers, as a disadvantageous factor for

children, and also to challenge the assumption of the homogeneity of lone parenthood by using longitudinal, annually collected birth cohort data to derive a measure of family transitions over time.

Lone parents are more likely to experience multiple disadvantages, such as income poverty and material deprivation, due to their inadequate resources and inadequate employment (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, Chapter One in this book). These disadvantages are often written about as factors associated with children's low levels of wellbeing, with lone parenthood being included as another such factor; that is, lone parenthood is viewed as a disadvantage that children experience in addition to income poverty and material deprivation, rather than as a family state that increases the likelihood of lone parents and children together experiencing the disadvantages of income poverty and material deprivation. Yet, there is qualitative research that shows that low income and the poor quality of lone mothers' employment result in poorer wellbeing for both mothers and children (Ridge, 2007; Ridge & Millar, 2011). This chapter will use quantitative methods to complement the qualitative evidence, and to test its generalisability, by exploring lone parents' employment, work intensity, family transitions, income poverty and material deprivation to disentangle the association between lone parenthood and lower levels of child wellbeing. In so doing, it aims to challenge the research that promotes lone parenthood as yet another child-level disadvantage rather than a group of parents facing the same (or greater) disadvantages as their children.

Literature review

Being a lone parent, and specifically being a lone mother, is one of the most stigmatised positions in UK and Scottish society today. The previous Coalition and the current Conservative UK government administrations placed 'family breakdown' as the root cause of child poverty, to great stigmatising effect (Hancock & Mooney, 2013; Mooney, 2011; Slater, 2014). In today's political discourse, lone parents are seen as a political and social problem – and as deficient parents (Dermott & Pomati, 2016).

There are many, often wrong, assumptions made about lone mothers in Scotland. Contrary to the myth of the young, lone, unmarried mother, the average age of lone mothers in Scotland is 36 years old, and they have usually previously been married (McKendrick, 2016). Furthermore, in Scotland, 'only 3% of lone mothers are teenagers and only 15% have never lived with the father of their child' (McKendrick,

2016, p. 104). Lone parenthood is not usually a permanent status for families in Scotland, but is often another stage in family life that lasts on average around five and a half years (McKendrick, 2016, p. 104). As such, it is estimated that around one third to one half of all children in Scotland will spend time in a lone-parent family formation (McKendrick, 2016, p. 104).

In Scotland, 41% of children in lone-parent households are living in poverty compared to 24% of children in coupled-parent households (McKendrick, 2016, p. 99). However, when the lone parent works full time the poverty risk for children falls to 20%, which is far lower than the 76% experienced by children in a couple household where neither parent works (McKendrick, 2016). Poverty is not an inevitable outcome for lone-parent families, and lone parenthood per se does not cause poverty, but 'the way in which the labor market, taxation and welfare system operate in Scotland mean that lone parents are more likely to experience poverty' (McKendrick, 2016, p. 99).

The longitudinal qualitative research on the impact of lone mothers' work experiences on their children shows that prior to mothers gaining employment, children experienced severe deprivation, stigma and exclusion from school and leisure activities (Ridge, 2009). When their mothers first entered work, they experienced a welcome increase in income and material goods and increased participation in the life of the school and friends (Ridge, 2009). However, it took the whole family to manage the long nonstandard hours that mothers had to work, with children taking responsibility for household chores and caring for siblings in the absence of affordable, suitable childcare (Millar & Ridge, 2009, 2013). Furthermore, children reported being worried about how tired and stressed their mothers had become and were offering emotional support to their mothers (Ridge, 2009).

When mothers' employment was unstable, insecure, low-paid and of low quality, they rotated between periods of employment of this type and unemployment. For children, this led to 'the loss of opportunity and dwindling hopes of the improvement that work seemed to promise' (Ridge, 2009, p. 507), as well as a return to severely impoverished circumstances at each transition. The evidence shows that stable work with standard hours has a positive effect on both mothers and children (Harkness & Skipp, 2013), but 'unstable employment transitions can threaten wellbeing and result in renewed poverty and disadvantage' (Ridge, 2009, p. 504).

The economic disadvantage associated with inadequate employment and resources is typically measured cross-nationally using income poverty at 60% median income, often in conjunction with an index of

material deprivation. Material deprivation describes the conditions or activities experienced due to inadequate income or resources (Gordon, 2006; Mack & Lansley, 1985; Pantazis et al., 2006; Townsend, 1979). The index of material deprivation has been incorporated into official poverty measures, including those used in the UK, Europe and the OECD. However, the use of material deprivation to measure economic disadvantage is not a controversy-free zone. Treanor (2014) discusses two critiques: 1) there are people who cannot afford items considered essential, while affording those considered inessential (choice); and 2) living in material deprivation is not necessarily caused by poverty, as people may choose not to have the goods or participate in the events that indicate material deprivation even though they can afford to should they wish. Treanor (2014) counters that these elements of choice mean that only when material deprivation is imposed by insufficient command of resources, rather than self-imposed deprivation, can it be conceived as a dimension of poverty (inter alia Pantazis et al., 2006).

This chapter uses the standard measure of material deprivation used cross-nationally in conjunction with income poverty to explore the economic disadvantage of lone parents and their children. While there is cross-national research on income and material deprivation, there is none that focuses on the experience of lone parents and their children per se, and certainly none that looks at lone parenthood through a lens of heterogeneity. Thus, this chapter uses novel ideas and analyses to challenge the existing evidence and the current pejorative public and political attitude towards lone parents in Scotland and the UK.

The strength of this chapter lies in the quality and frequency of the collection of its data: it is a birth cohort study with an almost-annual data collection that allows a nuanced exploration of change. It also permits the exploration, to a granular extent, of the diversity, heterogeneity and dynamics of the formation and reformation of lone and couple parenthood. Thus, this chapter explores the impacts of income, material deprivation and work intensity – separately and combined, for different typologies of poverty and for family transitions – on children’s wellbeing. In so doing, it aims to explore aspects of the triple bind of lone parents: the effects of inadequate resources and inadequate employment, and how they impact on child wellbeing.

Data

The dataset used is the *Growing Up in Scotland* (GUS) study,² a longitudinal birth cohort study with a nationally representative sample

of 5,217 children born in 2004–5 in Scotland. Wave 1 was collected in 2005; wave 2 in 2006; wave 3 in 2007; wave 4 in 2008, wave 5 in 2009 and wave 6 in 2010, but wave 7 was collected after a year's gap in 2012. For this reason, panel models were not the chosen methodology but clustered ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models (clustered on child ID number over time). This chapter uses the last four waves of data (2008–12), when all the variables have been collected at each time point – with the exception of material deprivation, which has a gap at wave 5. This gap has been left as it is. The full set of variables used is described below.

Dependent variable

Child wellbeing is measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores taken annually: from wave 4 in 2008 (when the children are 3 or 4 years old) to wave 7 in 2012 (when the children are 7 or 8 years old). SDQ scores have been reversed and standardised so that they have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one. Any scores below the mean (negative scores) correspond to lower levels of child wellbeing, and any scores above the mean (positive scores) correspond to higher levels of child wellbeing.

Independent variables

Longitudinal poverty is the poverty variable, measured as 60% of median household income equivalised for household size. It has been coded into four typologies: no poverty, transient poverty (one year of poverty), recurrent poverty (two years of consecutive poverty) and persistent poverty (three years of consecutive poverty out of any four), as set out by Fouarge and Layte (2005).

Material deprivation is defined as the proportion of people living in households who cannot afford at least three of the following nine items: two pairs of all-weather shoes for all adult members of the family; one week of annual holiday away from home; enough money for house decoration; household contents insurance; regular savings of £10 a month or more for rainy days or retirement; a night out once a month; celebrations at special occasions; buying toys and sports gear for children, and replacing worn out furniture (Guio et al., 2012). These are combined to create an index of multiple deprivation: a similar index that is used cross-nationally by other bodies and studies, such as the OECD, European Union and EU-SILC data. In this chapter, it has been left as a continuous index and standardised to

have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one, with higher levels of material deprivation corresponding to positive values above the mean, and lower levels of material deprivation corresponding to negative values below the mean.

Family transitions denotes different family formations across time to capture the heterogeneity of adult relationships. It has the following typologies: stable couple family; stable lone-parent family; couple recently separated; lone parent re-partnered, and repeated separations and re-partnering.

Maternal employment is a categorical variable with three categories: working full time, working part time and not in paid work. This is an individual-level variable of the mother.

Work intensity is a household measure, which for couple families uses the employment status of both partners. It is a variable that ranges between 0 and 1. For a couple family, the range is: 1 = both partners in full-time work, 0.75 = one full-time and one part-time partner, 0.5 = one full-time or two part-time partners, and 0.25 = one part-time partner, one partner not in paid work. For a lone parent, the range is: 1 = lone parent working full time, 0.5 = lone parent working part time and 0 = lone parent not working. This means that a full-time working lone parent has the same weighting as a full-time working couple.

Change in work intensity is derived by taking the change in work intensity from the previous to the current year. When this is positive, there has been an increase in work intensity for a family; when this is negative, there has been a decrease in work intensity.

As work intensity uses some of the same data as maternal employment, these variables will not be used in the same models.

Control variables

The control variables are mother's age at the birth of her first child, the child's gender and the mother's level of education, which are factors known to confound the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on children's outcomes (Schoon et al., 2012; Treanor, 2016a, 2016b).

Descriptive statistics

Table 4.1 gives summary information on all the variables used in the analysis. The data are given for the final wave of data collection in 2012 – although the clustered OLS regression analysis in Table 4.5 uses data from waves 4–7, as almost all variables, including child wellbeing,

Table 4.1: Summary statistics

Variables	Mean	SE/SD	Min	Max	SDQ (mean)	Material deprivation (mean)	Work intensity (mean)	Change in work intensity (mean)
Material deprivation (z score)	0	1	-0.67	4.77				
SDQ (z score)	0	1	-4.71	1.87				
Work intensity	0.58	0.008	0	1				
Change in work intensity	0.02	0.004	-0.75	1				
Family transitions:								
Couple (ref cat.)	0.69	0.013	0	1	0.06	-0.16	0.65	0.01
Lone parent	0.09	0.008	0	1	-0.54 ***	1.34 ***	0.30 ***	0.06
Separated couple	0.08	0.006	0	1	-0.29 ***	0.57 ***	0.41 ***	-0.03 **
Re-partners	0.07	0.008	0	1	-0.40 ***	0.64 ***	0.48 ***	0.05
Separations/re-partners	0.07	0.006	0	1	-0.48 ***	0.78 ***	0.43 ***	0.05
Poverty transitions:								
Never poor (ref cat.)	0.46	0.015	0	1	0.17	-0.37	0.72	0.01
Transient poverty	0.14	0.008	0	1	0.02 **	-0.09 ***	0.63 ***	-0.01 *
Recurrent poverty	0.14	0.008	0	1	-0.33 ***	0.36 ***	0.51 ***	0.00
Persistent poverty	0.26	0.013	0	1	-0.49 ***	1.12 ***	0.31 ***	0.06 ***
Child sex:								
Male	0.51	0.009	0	1	-0.28 ***	0.19	0.57	0.03 ***
Female (ref cat.)	0.49	0.009	0	1	0.09	0.11	0.57	0.01

(continued)

Table 4.1: Summary statistics (continued)

Variables	Mean	SE/SD	Min	Max	SDQ (mean)	Material deprivation (mean)	Work intensity (mean)	Change in work intensity (mean)
Age of mother at birth of first child:								
Under 20	0.07	0.008	0	1	-0.52 ***	1.07 ***	0.38 ***	0.03
Twenties	0.41	0.012	0	1	-0.22 ***	0.32 ***	0.53 ***	0.03 *
Thirties (ref cat.)	0.49	0.013	0	1	0.08	-0.13	0.63	0.01
Over 40	0.03	0.003	0	1	0.03	0.14	0.57	0.01
Maternal education:								
Degree (ref cat.)	0.30	0.013	0	1	0.17	-0.30	0.69	0.02
Vocation	0.41	0.009	0	1	-0.14 ***	0.20 ***	0.58 ***	0.02
Higher	0.06	0.005	0	1	0.02	0.14 ***	0.58 ***	0.00
Standard	0.14	0.009	0	1	-0.30 ***	0.50 ***	0.46 ***	0.02
NoQual	0.08	0.008	0	1	-0.51 ***	0.92 ***	0.30 ***	0.03
Maternal employment:								
Full time (ref cat.)	0.60	0.011	0	1	0.03	-0.08	0.74	0.05
Part time	0.11	0.007	0	1	0.02	-0.09	0.42 ***	-0.02 ***
No paid work	0.29	0.011	0	1	-0.40 ***	0.74 ***	0.27 ***	-0.03 ***

Notes: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. SE = standard error; SD = standard deviation.

All at wave 7 (2012) except where longitudinal.

Svy weights applied.

Binary variable significance by t-tests.

Multiple response category variables' significance by simple linear regression compared to the reference category with no controls (coefficients not shown).

Source: *Growing Up in Scotland*

were collected annually in these waves. The exception is material deprivation, which was collected in waves 4, 6 and 7 but not in wave 5.

In Table 4.1, the means in the first column denote the means for the continuous variables and proportions for the dummy variables. The variables 'family transitions', 'poverty transitions', 'work intensity' and 'change in work intensity' are longitudinal variables created across all seven waves of data but only reported for those who are present in the data at wave 7 (2012). The four columns to the right of the table give the means of child wellbeing (SDQ), material deprivation, work intensity and change in work intensity for all the independent and control variables in the data. The significance levels attached to these are from bivariate analyses: t-tests and simple linear regressions with no control variables. It should be noted that these are means and not coefficients, and so they should not be interpreted across the different variables.

There is much to note in the descriptive statistics, but for the purposes of this chapter four points are of particular importance:

1. With no controls, the child wellbeing (SDQ) of children for all family formations is significantly lower than that of stable couple families.
2. Those living in persistent poverty have very deep levels of material deprivation.
3. Material deprivation is also particularly high for those not in paid work.
4. The work intensity rate is lowest for stable lone parents, although it is lower for all family transitions than for a couple family.

The descriptive statistics in Table 4.1 suggest that the first facet of the triple bind – inadequate resources – does indeed disproportionately affect lone-parent families, although this will be explored further in the multivariate analysis. To explore the second facet of the triple bind – inadequate employment – Table 4.2 shows that stable lone parents are half as likely to work full time as their partnered contemporaries. The biggest difference lies in the proportion of stable and re-partnered lone parents who are not in paid work compared to those in a couple. This employment variable gives a useful snapshot but does not give an indication of the type, quality or stability of employment that lone parents are able to access. To examine this further, two variables – work intensity rate and change in work intensity rate – were created to measure the change in the work patterns of coupled- and lone-parent families over time.

Table 4.2: Employment and family transitions (cross-tabulation)

Employment status	Stable couple		Stable lone parent		Lone parent re-partnered		Couple separated		Separations/re-partnerings		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Work full time	1,291	18.7	48	9.9	57	15.0	155	22.1	105	24.2	1,656	18.6
Work part time	3,976	57.7	204	42.2	163	42.9	374	53.2	171	39.4	4,888	55.0
Not in paid work	1,628	23.6	231	47.8	160	42.1	174	24.8	158	36.4	2,351	26.4
Total	6,895	100	483	100	380	100	703	100	434	100	8,895	100

Source: *Growing Up in Scotland*

Table 4.3 shows the results of t-tests for each year of the data employed (2008–12), using the work intensity and change in work intensity variables. These variables cover all families in the data – including all lone parents, not just those in work – which is what makes the work intensity rate of lone parents seem quite low (remembering the higher proportion of lone parents not in paid work at all). The final column and the change in work intensity rate show that lone parents' work intensity changes more year after year than that of coupled parents. This relationship was tested again only for those in employment, and the relationship holds firm. The differences are statistically significant each year. Only after the financial crisis of 2008–09 did all families experience a reduction in work intensity. As coupled families recovered, lone parents continued to experience greater reduction and flux in their work intensity.

This shows that the nature of employment for lone parents is less stable and more precarious than for couples. While this does not tell us directly about the quality of employment available to lone parents, when looked at in relation to lone parents' rates of poverty (Table 4.4) and the extent of their material deprivation (Figure 4.1) it can give an indirect indication that lone parents are experiencing more precarious, unstable employment that is insufficient in monetary terms and so of a lower quality than their coupled counterparts. Thus, work intensity is used here as a proxy for work (in)adequacy, to empirically test the second facet of the triple bind.

As can be seen from Table 4.4, stable lone parents experience the most persistent poverty at over 70% prevalence compared to just 8.8% for stable couple families. Only 10% of stable lone-parent families experience no poverty compared to 66% of coupled-parent families. The next most disadvantaged form of family in terms of lone parenthood is a lone parent who has re-partnered, suggesting perhaps that insufficient time has lapsed to enable the lone parent to recover

Table 4.3: Change in work intensity (t-test)

Year	Work intensity (mean)		Change in work intensity (mean)	
	Couple	Lone	Couple	Lone
2008	0.655	0.324 ***	0.005	0.031 **
2009	0.644	0.317 ***	-0.009	-0.035 ***
2010	0.650	0.345 ***	0.010	-0.007 **
2012	0.655	0.389 ***	0.017	-0.001 **

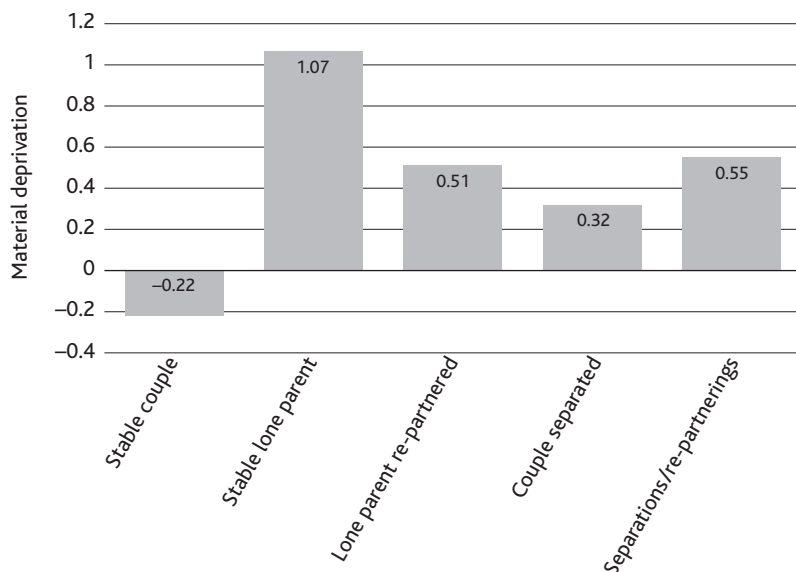
Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: *Growing Up in Scotland*, waves 4–7

Table 4.4: Income poverty and family transitions (cross-tabulation)

Poverty transitions	Stable couple		Stable lone parent		Lone parent re-partnered		Couple separated		Separations/re-partnerings		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No poverty	4,523	65.6	49	10.1	50	13.2	204	29.0	96	22.1	4,922	55.3
Transient poverty	1,068	15.5	22	4.6	40	10.5	179	25.5	53	12.2	1,362	15.3
Recurrent poverty	697	10.1	72	14.9	96	25.3	156	22.2	127	29.3	1,148	12.9
Persistent poverty	607	8.8	340	70.4	194	51.1	164	23.3	158	36.4	1,463	16.5
Total	6,895	100	483	100	380	100	703	100	434	100	8,895	100

Source: *Growing Up in Scotland*, waves 4–7

Figure 4.1: Material deprivation by family transitions

Source: *Growing Up in Scotland*

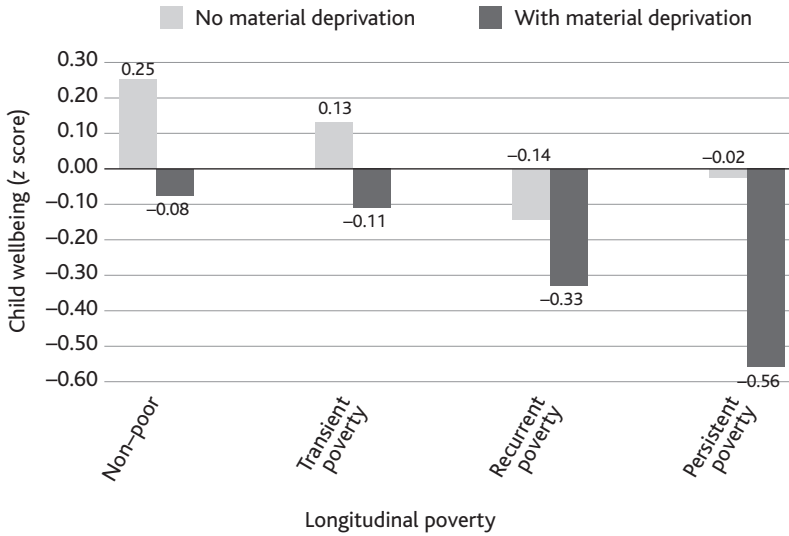
from previous disadvantages, that resources and financial burdens are not shared equally with a new partner or that the new partner is equally disadvantaged. This is not tested empirically in this analysis.

Figure 4.1 shows the depth of material deprivation for family transitions. Being a stable lone parent results in a level of material deprivation that is almost six times deeper than those who have never been a lone parent and almost twice as deep as those lone parents who have re-partnered.

So far, stable lone parents have been shown to be most likely to have precarious employment when they have employment, a higher incidence and more persistent experiences of poverty, and far deeper levels of material deprivation. This is in contrast to all other family transitions, including recently separated lone parents, indicating that the length of time spent as a lone parent has an increasingly detrimental effect on employment (as measured by work intensity) and on resources (as measured by income poverty and material deprivation), supporting two facets of the central thesis in this book: that lone parents experience a debilitating bind as regards the adequacy of resources and employment.

To explore the effects that income poverty and material deprivation have on child wellbeing, Figure 4.2 shows the levels of child wellbeing for the four poverty typologies with and without material deprivation.

Figure 4.2: Child wellbeing by poverty and material deprivation



Source: *Growing Up in Scotland*

The level of child wellbeing for those experiencing recurrent and persistent poverty without material deprivation is below the mean for all children, as one might expect. What is striking, however, is the depth the level of child wellbeing falls to when material deprivation is experienced in combination with recurrent or persistent poverty. When a child lives in persistent poverty and material deprivation, they can expect to have wellbeing up to 28 times lower than those with no material deprivation. This suggests that there is no floor to the effects of income poverty and material deprivation combined on child wellbeing, and that the longer lone parents experience the effects of the triple bind, the greater the detrimental effects on child wellbeing. Whether this relationship holds in the multivariate analysis is tested in the models in Table 4.5.

In Table 4.5, child wellbeing is regressed on family transitions, poverty transitions, work intensity and material deprivation in a series of models. In model 1, all family transitions are negatively associated with child wellbeing compared to a stable-couple family, with stable lone parenthood showing the largest effect size. With control variables added at model 2, lower education, a male child and the youthfulness of the mother are statistically significantly associated with lower child wellbeing. These relationships hold in model 3 when work intensity is added. Higher levels of work intensity are statistically significantly

Table 4.5: Child wellbeing, family transitions, poverty transitions and material deprivation (clustered OLS)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Family transitions (ref: stable couple family):					
Stable lone-parent family	-0.560*** (0.081)	-0.368*** (0.081)	-0.263** (0.081)	-0.143 (0.086)	-0.0697 (0.084)
Couple who separated	-0.283*** (0.060)	-0.236*** (0.059)	-0.188** (0.059)	-0.141* (0.059)	-0.0992 (0.058)
Lone parent who re-partnered	-0.439*** (0.080)	-0.232** (0.081)	-0.206* (0.080)	-0.0957 (0.082)	-0.0739 (0.082)
Separations and re-partnerings	-0.413*** (0.078)	-0.289*** (0.078)	-0.253*** (0.076)	-0.166* (0.076)	-0.115 (0.075)
Mothers' qualification (ref: degree):					
Vocational		-0.175*** (0.033)	-0.158*** (0.033)	-0.119*** (0.033)	-0.108** (0.033)
Higher grade/A level		-0.0477 (0.059)	-0.0335 (0.059)	-0.0125 (0.058)	-0.0106 (0.058)
Standard grade/GCSE		-0.278*** (0.053)	-0.233*** (0.054)	-0.173** (0.055)	-0.170** (0.054)
No qualifications		-0.528*** (0.090)	-0.437*** (0.090)	-0.323*** (0.091)	-0.288** (0.090)
Child sex (ref: female)		-0.254*** (0.029)	-0.255*** (0.029)	-0.260*** (0.029)	-0.263*** (0.029)
Mothers' age at first birth (ref: 30–39):					
Under 20		-0.318** (0.102)	-0.267** (0.103)	-0.205* (0.104)	-0.166 (0.101)
20–29		-0.160*** (0.034)	-0.144*** (0.034)	-0.120*** (0.034)	-0.105** (0.033)
Over 40		0.0865 (0.071)	0.0942 (0.071)	0.0946 (0.071)	0.103 (0.070)
Work intensity			0.359*** (0.057)	0.183** (0.061)	0.0750 (0.061)
Poverty transitions (ref: no poverty):					
Transient poverty				-0.0292 (0.040)	-0.0181 (0.040)
Recurrent poverty				-0.223*** (0.051)	-0.167** (0.051)
Persistent poverty				-0.347*** (0.062)	-0.217*** (0.063)
Material deprivation					-0.162*** (0.018)
Constant	0.119*** (0.017)	0.412*** (0.027)	0.153** (0.050)	0.296*** (0.052)	0.303*** (0.051)
r2	0.032	0.076	0.084	0.094	0.111
N	8,895	8,895	8,895	8,895	8,895
df_r	3,251	3,251	3,251	3,251	3,251

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. OLS clustered by ID number over time.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: GUS, sweeps 4–7

associated with higher levels of child wellbeing. When poverty transitions are added at model 4, recurrent and persistent poverty are highly significantly associated with lower child wellbeing, and the earlier associations with family transitions and child wellbeing are attenuated. Now the only transitions associated with lower child wellbeing are a separated couple and the experience of repeated separations and re-partnerings. Work intensity continues to be significant, however, indicating income poverty and work experience are having a separate additive effect. In the final model 5, material deprivation has been added. Here, the relationships for poverty, education and gender continue to hold, but those for all types of family transitions and for the work intensity rate are no longer statistically significant.

These findings strongly indicate that it is not the state of lone parenthood, nor separations, nor meeting a new partner that is deleterious to child wellbeing, but the impoverished and materially deprived conditions that lone parents find themselves living in. In Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, two thirds of children living in poverty have a parent who is working; this suggests that work is only sometimes the best route out of poverty (see Horemans and Marx, Chapter Nine in this book). The key aspects of employment as a route out of poverty are its quality and stability. This analysis shows that lone parents have lower work intensity rates and greater changes in work intensity rates year-on-year, indicating higher levels of instability in their employment. Coupled with the fact that they also experience higher levels of poverty and material deprivation – even when working in precarious employments – it is clear that for lone parents, work as a route out of poverty is simply not ... *working*. That higher levels of poverty and material deprivation are associated with lower levels of child wellbeing, rather than the state of lone parenthood itself, is a matter of urgency for policy.

Discussion

The main points from the analysis are that: the wellbeing of children in lone-parent families is more determined by income and material deprivation than by lone parenthood or changing family formations; the longer the experience of lone parenthood, the lower the levels of employment and work intensity; stable lone parents have a higher incidence and persistence of poverty; lone parents have a higher incidence and deeper levels of material deprivation; and lone parents have greater precariousness in their employment, as shown by the annual changes in work intensity.

The triple bind of lone parents posits that lone parents have a tripartite set of circumstances that disadvantage them: inadequate resources, inadequate employment and inadequate policies. The findings in this chapter empirically test the first two of these and provide support to this theory. They show how inadequate resources and inadequate employment, rather than the status of lone parenthood and family transitions, are associated with poorer levels of child wellbeing. The analysis in this chapter exonerates lone parents, in Scotland at least, from the blame and shame associated with the lower wellbeing of their children, and points the finger of blame instead to the triple bind. In considering that third aspect of the triple bind – inadequate policies for lone parents – it is important to consider not only what can be implemented to improve the circumstances of lone parents and release them from the triple bind but also the policies that may be causing actual harm and should be repealed.

The analysis in this chapter leads to two clear policy recommendations for the position of lone parents in Scotland. The first policy recommendation is to increase the income of lone parents not in paid work, and to support the circumstances and enhance the incomes of those who are working. In Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, there has already been one such policy change. Under the New Labour government (1997–2010), Child Tax Credits were introduced to do just that. The Child Tax Credit policy was successful in that it lifted 900,000 children in the UK out of poverty. It provided those on modest incomes with money for each child, covered up to 70% of childcare costs for working families (not just lone parents), and extra money for those families with disabled children. This policy was rightly criticised for being overly complicated and unwieldy, but wrongly criticised for its efficacy. It was a successful policy, although it did not enable the New Labour government to end all child poverty in a generation as was the stated intention (Hills et al., 2009), and research shows that parents spent this new additional income on their children (Dickens, 2011).

Unfortunately, the Child Tax Credit policy has been incrementally dismantled in Scotland by the two subsequent UK administrations. Its dilution will lead to even higher rates of poverty and material deprivation (Brewer et al., 2011) and even lower levels of child wellbeing in the coming years. A recommendation of this chapter is that steps should be taken to improve the income and material deprivation of lone-parent families.

The second policy recommendation is that lone parents should be supported into work when the time is right. The work ought to be

stable (not precarious with constantly changing hours) and have a decent income (not one that does not allow for adequate provision for families). The UK government believes that work is valuable in and of itself, but the relentlessly poorer circumstances of lone parents and children show that this is not necessarily the case. The take-home message is that poor employment, income poverty and material deprivation are detrimental to the wellbeing of children, especially those of lone-parent families.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes by reiterating the findings that undermine much current thinking in relation to lone parents in Scotland and the rest of the UK. Although lone parents are less likely to be in employment (remembering the young age of children in this study), their annual changes in work intensity are statistically significantly different to their coupled counterparts. Additionally, their low income and higher levels of material deprivation indicate precarious, low-pay employment. They experience exceedingly high levels of material deprivation compared to all other family formations, and have increasing levels of material deprivation the longer they remain a lone parent. When all these factors are taken into account, it is not the state of lone parenthood that is negatively associated with child wellbeing, nor transitions in family formations, but the low levels of income and high levels of material deprivation they experience. To improve child wellbeing, policy needs to begin by securing the financial circumstances of lone parents. This is not an easy ask, given the stigmatised status of lone parents in Scottish and UK society. Policies aimed directly at children will always have an easier transition and garner more support than those aimed at lone parents, but a bold step is required. If the UK government is disinclined to take that step then the Scottish government, with its increasing powers devolved from Westminster, ought to take up the mantle.

Notes

- ¹ 'Lone' parent is preferred to 'single' parent, as single implies never married and is therefore only one category of lone parent. The status of single (that is, never-married) lone parent is highly stigmatised in Scotland and the UK, and so avoided in this chapter.
- ² <http://growingupinScotland.org.uk/>.

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