

# Chapter I

# Lone Parents

## OVERVIEW

- The increase in lone-parent families
- Defining lone parent families
- Lone parents' life experiences
- Lone parents as a political issue
- The political ideologies of New Right and New Labour
- The New Right and lone parents
- New Labour and lone parents
- Evaluation of recent policies
- Conclusions
- Suggestions for further study

## INTRODUCTION

Even before the recent focus on vulnerable groups, lone parents were frequently discussed in the media and in political circles, particularly in connection with concerns about changes in traditional family structures and how these may threaten social stability and cohesion. They have also found themselves at the centre of certain controversies, for example, about mothering, the rights of fathers, benefit dependency and the allocation of council housing. Some lone parents, such as teenage mothers have been stigmatised more than others.

The number of lone parents has tripled since the 1970s and there are now 1.8 million lone-parent families in Britain. This represents one-quarter of all families, who care for a total of 3 million children. Britain has the highest proportion of lone-parent households in Europe (Chambaz, 2001; National Statistics, 2007a). The extent of lone parents'

## 12 *Vulnerable Groups in Health and Social Care*

vulnerability has featured in many policy documents on social exclusion, most notably those on the promotion of paid work and the eradication of poverty. This chapter will explore some of the key issues in relation to the social and political concerns about lone parents. These are their experiences, the costs of supporting them and the different approaches reflected in the political initiatives directed at them. As 90% of lone parents are women, the focus in the discussions will mainly be on lone mothers. However, lone fathers will be addressed to illustrate particular points as appropriate.

### DEFINING LONE-PARENT FAMILIES

For official and statistical purposes a **lone-parent family** is usually defined as a divorced, separated, single or widowed mother or father living without a spouse (and not cohabiting) with his or her never-married dependent child or children. The reality is that definitional precision is elusive. One reason is that, as already indicated, there are many different routes into lone parenthood. These are divorce, separation, having a child as a teenager or during adulthood without having a partner or being married, and death of a partner or spouse. Another variable is that, although nine out of ten lone parents are female, lone parents do include both men and women. The final complicating factor is that lone parenthood can be transitional. A summary of the changes in family structure that have occurred in recent decades is required in order to fully explain this factor. One such change is that there has been a move away from traditional **nuclear and extended families** and an increase in lone parents and **reconstituted families**. The latter constitute household units that include a step-parent as a consequence of divorce, separation and remarriage. This type of family is created when a new partnership is formed by a mother and/or father who already have dependent children. Since most children remain with their mother following divorce or separation, most stepfamilies have a stepfather rather than a stepmother. The fluid boundary between these two types of family means that being a lone parent is often a temporary, albeit recurring, stage in parenthood; Ermisch and Francesconi (2000) found that, although about 40 per cent of mothers will spend some time as a lone parent, the duration of lone parenthood is often short, with one-half remaining lone parents for 4.6 years or less. A reason for this is that about three-quarters of these lone parents will form a stepfamily. However, over one-quarter of stepfamilies dissolve within one year, leading to lone parenthood once more (Stewart and Vaitilingham, 2004). Indeed Levitas et al. (2006) argue that some lone parents do not 'think of themselves as such' because

they 'may have a variety of different (and shifting) relationships with partners or ex-partners living elsewhere' (Levitas et al., 2006: 408).

## THE EXPERIENCES OF LONE PARENTS

### ACTIVITY 1.1

The following case studies of lone parents illustrate some of the more negative experiences that lone parents share. Note the experiences that are highlighted as you read. Some suggestions are set out at the end of the chapter. These and other experiences are discussed in more detail in the main text below.

#### Kirsty's story

Kirsty's own mother developed severe mental health problems during adolescence and she still struggles with her health problems. Her relationships with her four children's fathers were all transient and on a cohabiting basis only. Indeed, Kirsty, who never knew her own father. During her childhood, when she was not living in temporary accommodation with her her mother involves an hour's bus journey. Her nearest friend is two bus rides away, and when they can afford to get together, they do support each other and share in activities with the children. Both reported that they and their prams were often watched suspiciously mother and other siblings, she was in care.

Kirsty is now 21 and had her first child at 16. She left school before completing her GCSEs and gave birth to her second child at 18. Her children's father left over two years ago and contact is intermittent.

When she became a mother, Kirsty decided that her priorities were being with her children and doing her best for them. She has tried to make a home for the children in the council flat that she was given. However, it is very cold and damp and in need of extensive redecoration. Although she manages her benefit money very carefully, the family diet is limited, with chips and peas often on the menu as the main meal and Kirsty missing meals herself. She has a persistent cough and the youngest child is frequently

*(Continued)*

**14 Vulnerable Groups in Health and Social Care**

*(Continued)*

admitted to hospital with respiratory problems. Visiting in department stores by security guards when they were trying on clothes during shopping trips.

**Annabelle's story**

Annabelle has three children and struggled for years to save her marriage. However, her husband was frequently unfaithful and often drank to excess. The drinking meant that he was regularly unemployed, and she ended the relationship when she found that he had squandered their savings on socialising and their house was repossessed.

She is a fully qualified Physiotherapist and immediately returned to work after they separated. After three years, she managed to buy the council house that she and the children were allocated. Her husband refused to contribute financially to the family and successfully resisted all attempts by the Child Support Agency to track him down. Managing the mortgage and all the other financial outgoings was a huge strain on her. In addition, one of the children suffers from severe asthma and often has to miss school. Despite the fact that several friends were always willing to help and provide her with an, albeit limited, social life, she began to feel very depressed and unable to cope. She took the decision to move back to her home town to be near her parents and sister.

Unfortunately, the difference in house prices between the two areas has meant that since moving she has struggled even more financially. Furthermore, she could only afford a ground floor flat with a shared garden. The children have become more fractious because of the limited space they have at home and the move to new schools. The eldest one in particular seems to feel the changes in their lives most, and has developed behaviour problems which her school are also concerned about. Her parents have recently announced that they cannot cope with the children and her sister has taken up full-time employment.

She has not had the time to develop friendships with other mothers and therefore does not have the sort of social support from friends that she had benefited from in the town where she used to live. Moreover, her social life is now non-existent. Her health has deteriorated and she feels that she has no choice but to take the antidepressants that her GP has offered to help her cope with her everyday life.

As demonstrated in the first section of the chapter, there are considerable variations between lone parents. Nonetheless, both British and international research has shown that lone parents have many negative, often interconnected, experiences in common. These are discussed below.

## Poverty

With the exception of Scandinavian countries, lone parents in Europe – whether single, separated or divorced – have been consistently shown to have higher poverty rates than average. Indeed lone parents, particularly teenage lone parents, are more likely to be poor than any other type of family and up to 52% of children in lone-parent families were classified as “poor”. This is either because lone parents work part-time or are in low-waged jobs supplemented by benefits, or because they are out of work and claim income support. Lone mothers are most likely to be poor, as they are less likely to be in employment than lone fathers. (Chambaz, 2001; Sanatana, 2002; Stewart and Vaitilingham, 2004; Gardiner and Millar, 2006; Levitas, 2006).

## Poorer diets

One of the consequences of the high rates of poverty among lone-parent families is that their diets seem to be poorer. Dowler and Calvert (1995) showed that about a fifth of the lone parents in their study had low nutrition intakes and were more likely to have unhealthy diets. This was despite efforts to be creative and careful when it came to budgeting and shopping for food. Those that had the poorest diets tended to deprive themselves of good food in order to protect their children from the worst nutritional consequences of poverty. Interestingly, ethnicity is an important factor: those who followed diets that are typical of black British or Afro-Caribbean families tended to eat more nutritionally than those eating meals typical of white families.

## Social isolation

Lone mothers and lone fathers are both more likely to feel excluded from social participation than parents who live in couples. There are several possible reasons for this, for instance, they may be unable to take part in social activities. Although this was mainly attributed to lack of money, time did also curtail lone-parent participation in socialising (Meadows and Grant, 2005). In addition to no longer being able to take part in social activities with their peers, teenage mothers cited the fact that they may be housed a long way from their existing support networks and experience unsupportive relationships with the father of the child as other reasons for feeling socially isolated (Kidger, 2004).

## 16 Vulnerable Groups in Health and Social Care

Although they may feel socially isolated, with the exception of teenage lone mothers, lone mothers tend to have good **social networks** and **social support** systems; they have more contact with family and friends than most other members of the population. However, this support tends to be emotional and financial rather than practical (Dench, 2006; Levitas, 2006).

### Health

Lone parents, but lone mothers more so than lone fathers, and children in lone-parent families are more likely to have poorer physical and psychological health in Britain and other European Union countries (Whitehead et al., 2000; Butterworth, 2004; Levitas, 2006). Popay and Jones (1990) argue that this is because lone fathers tend to have older children and are more likely to get help from others. However, other studies have contradicted these findings about the differences in health between lone mothers and lone fathers. For instance, Weitoft et al. (2004) found that lone fathers (along with childless men, with or without partners) are at a higher risk of injury, addiction, all-cause mortality, and ischaemic heart disease than other groups.

Several studies have linked the poorer health of lone parents to their higher poverty rates (Sanatana, 2002). However, factors other than poverty in lone-parents' lives have been identified; the stress of being the sole parent, lack of control over their lives and relative lack of social support can all contribute to poorer physical and mental health (Berkman and Syme, 1979; Berkman et al., 2000; Whitehead et al., 2000; National Statistics, 2007a). Other studies have found that lone parents are more likely to be at risk of ill health because of their health-related behaviour. For instance, smoking rates among lone parents are higher than among parents living together (Rajkonen et al., 2005).

### Stigma

Teenage mothers have received the most negative political and media attention *but* only three per cent of lone parents are teenagers – the average age of a lone parent is 35. Studies have identified other more specific areas in which teenage lone mothers are likely to be stigmatised; Breheny and Stephens (2007) found that health professionals (such as doctors, midwives and nurses) constructed teenage mothers as problematic, and this **stigma** had negative implications for the quality of their healthcare.

### Educational attainment

Although young lone parenthood has been found to limit a person's chances of completing their education and gaining a well-paid job, recent studies have started to present evidence to the contrary. These studies have shown that, with the right support, many teenage parents do re-engage

with education, and progress well in terms of gaining qualifications and enhancing their ability to compete effectively in the labour market (Brown and Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2006). Such findings have been linked to some of the research about the positive impacts of parenthood on teenagers' lives identified in the literature. These include the way it gives disadvantaged teenagers a sense of identity and fulfillment (Whitehead et al., 2000; Breheny and Stephens, 2007).

## Children of lone parents

Children in lone-parent families have greater risk of lower educational achievement, ill health, unemployment, becoming homeless and getting involved in crime (Ram and Hou, 2003). Once again, these problems have been linked to the low incomes of lone-parent families (Sanatana, 2002). In contrast, Adamson (2007) recently found no relationship between overall child well-being and lone parenthood.

## Housing

Lone parents have worse housing than other types of parents; they are more likely to experience problems with their accommodation, such as lack of space inside and outside, damp, rot, mould, lack of light and poor state of decoration. They account for nearly half (43 per cent) of all those in temporary accommodation, whereas couples with dependent children account for only 26 per cent, and represent the biggest group living in temporary accommodation. They are also heavily dependent on rented housing and on rented social housing in particular; Table 1.1 shows that half of lone-parent households with dependent children in Great Britain live in rented social sector housing compared with one in seven households containing a couple with dependent children. This dependence on rented housing can limit their choice as to where they live, which can mean that they are also far from friends and other family members (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001; Levitas, 2006; Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007a; National Statistics, 2007a).

Interconnections between lone parents' experiences illustrated in these discussions include the way that their general lack of income can lead to a limited social life, poorer health and lower-quality housing than other families. Findings about the impact of lone parenthood on life experiences have also led to debates in the literature about their relationship to the concept of **underclass**. This is because some of their characteristics, such as low income, poor housing and benefit dependency correlate with the characteristics of other groups regarded as being part of the underclass. Although those who have made associations between this vulnerable group and the underclass have been criticised because it carries strong connotations of blame, any comparison with this concept signifies recognition of the extent of lone parents' vulnerability (Morris, 1998).

18 *Vulnerable Groups in Health and Social Care*

Table 1.1 Household composition, percentages by tenure, Great Britain, 2005

	Owned outright	Owned with mortgage	Privately rented	Rented from social sector
<b>One person</b>				
Under pensionable age	18	39	20	22
Over pensionable age	58	4	6	33
<b>One-family households</b>				
Couple:				
No children	46	35	9	10
Dependent children	8	70	8	14
Non-dependent children only	35	52	2	10
<b>Lone parent</b>				
Dependent children	6	29	14	52
Non-dependent children only	42	29	6	33
<b>Other households</b>	20	22	44	14
<b>All households</b>	30	38	12	20

Source: Adapted from National Statistics, 2007a

## POLICIES AIMED AT LONE PARENTS

Both Conservative and New Labour governments' have targeted lone parents. This section will outline their political ideologies and show how these were/are reflected in their policies.

Although the increase in those identified as lone parents, the number of children and recognition of the vulnerability of both the parents and children involved has attracted the attention of policy-makers, the costs of supporting lone-parent families have received the most attention. These became a big political issue in the 1990s when it became apparent that expenditure on benefit claims for lone parents in the 1990s was double that of the 1980s and it was increasing; in 1995 lone parents cost the welfare state £9.1 billion in benefit claims and £10 billion in 1997. As reducing public expenditure has been a priority for both Conservative and New Labour governments, such rising costs became a cause for concern. However, the political ideologies that influenced each government have meant that their approaches to lone parents have differed.

Conservative government policy in the 1980s and 1990s was influenced by the political ideology of the New Right. Although there are discontinuities within this ideology, there were some common themes. Key tenets of this ideology were its emphasis on a smaller role for the state, greater emphasis on the rights of the individual and individual choice, greater role for markets, with the removal of impediments for the operation of the free



market. This was combined with strong beliefs in individual responsibility, social and moral order, 'traditional family life' and appropriate sexuality. In relation to welfare, the welfare anti-statism and emphasis on **individualism** and **consumerism** that ensued essentially meant that there was a move away from the collective provision of welfare by the "nanny state" reliant upon excessive taxation to more privatised and market-style provision, cost reduction, financial accountability, encouragement of the voluntary sector. There was also an emphasis on individual responsibility. This was known as 'new public management' (Baggott, 1998; Carabine, 2001).

When a Labour government came to power in 1997, it both called itself and its approach New Labour. This was distinctive from previous Labour governments and is also referred to as the 'Third Way'. It is influenced by communitarian ideology, which has also been influential in other parts of the Western world, such as in the United States. There is much diversity within this ideology and it is the 'responsive communitarianism' that has emerged since the 1980s that has been incorporated into New Labour thinking. This has strong moral and ethical elements, is opposed to the individualism of the New Right, and stresses common interests and common values arising from communal bonds. While it does emphasise the responsibilities of the state and the rights of individuals, it also emphasises the social responsibilities of individual citizens, families and communities. Indeed families are viewed as essential in the transmission of moral values to and support of their members. Communities are seen as vital units of social organisation with shared moral values, and as a means for ensuring social cohesion (Powell, 2000; Johnson, 2000; Deacon, 2002).

The adoption of communitarianism by New Labour governments has had several implications for welfare provision. One is that New Labour is against purely individualistic conceptions of welfare. Therefore, a dominant theme has been the obligations as well as the rights of welfare recipients, with welfare benefits being conditional on the demonstration of individual and social responsibility. Inherent in this are moralistic and judgmental themes, and an overall aim of shaping individual values and characters to produce an increased sense of individual responsibility and social concern. In order to pursue a welfare agenda that embodies communitarianism in this way, it has been necessary for New Labour to persuade voters that everyone will benefit and that policies serve social and communal needs.

However, ambiguities in New Labour's appeal to communitarianism have been identified; Chamberlyne and King (2000) argue that there are conservative elements in New Labour's approach. For instance, their firm belief in the value of conventional families. Nonetheless, New Labour has produced a plethora of welfare policies that illustrate

**20** *Vulnerable Groups in Health and Social Care*

its distinctive approach. Examples include cross-departmental initiatives focusing on social exclusion and welfare-to-work (as discussed in the Introduction).

**ACTIVITY 1.2**

Read through the outlines of New Right and New Labour ideologies above again. How do you think each would have manifested itself in terms of its approach to lone parents? List your main ideas and compare them to the discussion of the New Right and New Labour policies and attitudes towards this group.

**The New Right and lone parents**

The New Right's individualistic approach to social problems, its emphasis on 'traditional family life' and normalised ideas about appropriate sexuality manifested itself in a negative attitude to lone parents. The increase in their numbers was seen as being 'indicative of a growing underclass presaging moral and social breakdown' (Levitas, 2006: 406).

Its antipathy to welfare dependency meant that it tried to reduce their dependency on the state and reduce the costs of lone parents. The benefit structure was seen to be both financing and encouraging lone parenthood, which contributed to a 'culture of dependency'. Lister (1998) argues that the New Right's views on traditional family life led them to construct lone mothers' primary obligation as being to care for their children as opposed to undertaking paid work. Thus, instead of encouraging lone mothers to enter the labour market, changes were made to the benefit system so that there were incentives to be less reliant on income support by introducing packages that combined child support, wages and benefits that were linked to being in paid employment. In addition, attempts were made to reduce the cost of single parents by making the absent parent (whether married or not to the other) pay in respect to their biological children. To this effect, the Child Support Act was passed in 1991 and the Child Support Agency introduced in 1993 to ensure that absent parents supported their children financially (Lister, 1998).

Although they only constituted a small percentage of all lone parents, teenage mothers were demonised in particular. For instance, some sections of the media portrayed them as immoral scroungers living off the state. In 1988 Margaret Thatcher spoke of the apparent problem of young single girls who were deliberately getting pregnant in order to jump the housing queue. These ideas were forcibly endorsed at a Conservative party conference when a series of swingeing attacks on young, single, unmarried

mothers were made. Although some argued that they were scapegoated, such views did influence policies and the message came through loud and clear that welfare benefits and housing should only be made available to 'respectable' married women (Lewis 1997; Lister, 1998; Carabine, 2001).

However, young, single, unmarried mothers are not a new phenomenon and they have featured in policies for nearly two centuries; the 1834 Poor Law addressed the concerns about increasing illegitimacy and related increased demands for poor relief. Unmarried mothers were negatively portrayed as being immoral and seen to be less deserving than other people who were poor and they were only given poor relief through the workhouse (Lewis, 1997). So why did they become such a big issue?

Lewis (1997) offers an explanation; she argues that this particular group of lone parents have gradually become more visible in the late twentieth century. She says that until recently such lone mothers were hidden away. In the early part of the twentieth century, women could be sent to an institution if they became pregnant as pregnancy in unmarried women was regarded by many as such a profound mark of deviance that it could only be explained by mental instability. In the middle of the century, young, single, pregnant women may not have run the risk of incarceration but often went to a 'mother and baby home' for the birth. The mother's family would then bring up the child without making public the circumstances of its birth. Another reason put forward as to why single, unmarried mothers have remained invisible is that in the 1960s teenage girls who became pregnant often resorted to backstreet abortion, while others gave their child up for adoption (often under parental pressure). Lewis maintains that it is only since the 1970s that single, unmarried mothers have become more visible as they started to live more autonomously in the community (often in social housing) and draw state benefits. This is when more attention became focused on them.

## **New Labour and lone parents**

Like the New Right, New Labour has viewed lone parents as problematic, mainly because of the increasing costs of supporting them from public expenditure and their dependency on welfare benefits. However, New Labour rejected the New Right's stigmatisation of lone parents and has also focused much more on the social exclusion and poverty of this vulnerable group.

In the 1990s, the United Kingdom had one of the lowest percentages of lone parents in paid work in the OECD and the poverty rates for lone parents were also one of the highest. Cross-national evidence indicated that lone parents were less prone to poverty when in paid employment (Lister, 2002). As mentioned in the introductory chapter, New Labour sees paid employment as the route out of poverty. Thus it was argued that the solution to these problems lay in encouraging more lone parents to work and a target of getting of 70 per cent of lone parents into work by 2010 was set

## 22 Vulnerable Groups in Health and Social Care

(Bell, et al., 2005). The New Deal for Lone Parents was introduced (see the Introduction for an outline of the New Deal strategy). Although the obligation for lone parents to work is almost universal in other welfare states (Lister, 1998, 2002), this is a *voluntary* programme specifically designed to help lone parents into work. Nonetheless, in 2007 more pressure was put on lone parents to work through the limitation of their benefits by expecting them to apply for paid employment when their youngest child reached 12 and not 16, which had been the previous cut-off age.

The personal advisors appointed to the New Deal for Lone Parents not only take those interested through the steps to find, apply for and start a job but also offer practical advice and help in finding childcare and training. In addition, advisors are able to tell lone parents how their benefits will be affected once they start work, help them apply for any in-work benefits or tax credits, and meet expenses (including fares and registered childcare costs) incurred when attending any meetings, job interviews or training arranged.

Other initiatives to assist lone parents combine employment with parenting have focused on help with supplying more good-quality, convenient and affordable childcare (such as the National Childcare Strategy); offering taxation subsidies (the Working Families Tax Credit); and removing any barriers to work that lone parents face (for instance, a legal framework for the provision of leave for family emergencies is provided by the Employment Relations Act 1999).

Efforts have also been made to discourage people from becoming lone parents; New Labour's communitarism means that the economic rationality embodied in the approach above is interwoven with social morality. This has led to the political promulgation of the views that children are better off with two parents rather than one, and that marriage is better than co-habitation as married couples are more likely to stay together (Carabine, 2001). Even though New Labour has not demonised teenage mothers as the New Right did, it has targeted them specifically. This has been mainly because of the evidence that teenage motherhood is more likely to lead to reduced opportunities for both the mother and her child(ren) than other types of lone parenthood. Thus, tackling their social exclusion has been part of the drive to break the 'cycle of disadvantage' whereby deprivation in one generation is passed down to the next. The Social Exclusion Unit produced a strategy in 1999 to reduce the number of conceptions among those under 18 and hence to reduce the number of young, single mothers (Social Exclusion Unit 1999). More recently they have been identified as still being one of the most excluded groups who require additional support. Proposals include revising the original strategy, focusing on those areas where teenage pregnancy rates have not fallen, an expanded media campaign and better access to contraceptives (Cabinet Office, 2006).

## EVALUATION OF RECENT POLICIES

### ACTIVITY 1.3

Read the following extract:

The Work and Pensions Secretary, John Hutton, signalled his willingness to consider more stringent requirements for lone parents to look for work as part of a package of measures to encourage them back into employment and to alleviate child poverty ... Jane Ahrends, spokeswoman for the group One Parent Families, said that two-thirds of single parents who had children aged between 11 and 16 years were already working. "The majority usually amongst those who are not working have very good reason for not doing so; a third of divorces happen when children are in that age category, so that it may well be that single parents decide that their priority must be to stabilise family life and to be at home with their children ... while most single parents want to work when the time is right for them, there are very high barriers for them, particularly in the absence of affordable childcare." (Hutton, 2007)

What issues does this extract highlight about recent attempts to address the social exclusion of lone parents? See how your thoughts compare with the points made in this section. Some ideas to help get you thinking can be found at the end of the chapter.

The discussions above showed that there were two main themes in the more recent policies about lone parents – namely the focus has been on increasing their employment rates and discouraging lone parenthood. Although the former is exclusive to New Labour's policies, both New Right and New Labour governments have introduced initiatives to address the latter. The evidence about the effectiveness of this two-pronged approach is considered below.

### Lone parents and employment

The workforce participation rate for lone parents increased from 44 per cent in 1997 to 57.1 per cent in 2007 (Levitas, 2006; Office for National

**24** *Vulnerable Groups in Health and Social Care*

Statistics, 2007). Lone parents themselves have identified many advantages of paid work. These include improved self-esteem, wider social contacts, increased sense of personal identity, break from childcare, and greater stimulation. However, despite these positive outcomes and all the efforts to encourage lone parents into work, the workforce participation rate for lone parents is still the lowest in Europe. There is no evidence to suggest that characteristics of lone parents vary between European countries and in countries such as Sweden and Denmark up to 80 per cent of lone parents work (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001; Hutton, 2007).

As mentioned in the Introduction, the importance that New Labour has attached to paid work as a route out of social exclusion for vulnerable groups and its shift to employment-based citizenship has been a constant theme in the criticisms of its policies. This criticism has also been made about the emphasis on workforce participation for lone parents as it ignores other impediments and barriers to the social inclusion of this group.

Some of these are associated with practicalities, such as lack of skills, job history, the fact that types of work are limited because lone parents want to be near home and to have hours to fit in with children (lone parents prefer 'normal hours' because of the difficulty in getting childcare for unsocial/shift hours, and prefer term-time contracts only), and the need for flexibility to respond to exceptional childcare situations (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001). Interestingly, childcare costs are rarely cited as a major difficulty to overcome in order to enter and/or remain in paid work. There do seem to be moves to address some of these difficulties. For instance, New Labour has promised that by 2010 there will be a 'childcare place for all children aged between three and fourteen from 8am to 6pm each weekday, including school holidays' (Hutton, 2007).

Other obstacles that exist and have been identified include the fact that, as sole carers and providers, lone parents can experience conflicts between work and family duties; Bell et al. (2005) found that effectively coordinating work, childcare, running a home and their children's education could be very complex and that lone parents often suffered from role strain. In addition, many lone mothers want to look after their children themselves at least when they are of pre-school age, and are not motivated by economic rationality (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001; Lister, 2002; Bell et al., 2005; Meadows and Grant, 2005).

Research has shown that there are psychological barriers to workforce participation for lone parents. There is a need to address other more personal obstacles to their inclusion such as the development of self-esteem and confidence, and a feeling of agency. It is argued that more small-scale initiatives based at community level are required, such as support groups, voluntary work and college courses to help

develop their transferable skills. For instance, increasing levels of social contact, confidence, regaining some element of control over their lives, ability to deal with fluctuating situations and setting of personal goals. All of these have been shown to help lone parents feel that they are prepared for work and facilitate their integration into the labour market (Kidger, 2004; Meadows and Grant, 2005).

There are also structural barriers. Using teenage lone parents as an example, the highest rates of teenage pregnancy are in the poorest areas (with high unemployment) and among the most vulnerable young people, including those who have been in care and excluded from school. Ethnicity is another example; lone parenthood is far more common among black Caribbean families than any other groups. It is therefore argued that New Labour's policies are not addressing the underlying causes of the social exclusion of lone parents, such as poverty, unemployment and ethnicity. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that policy reforms account for only about 50 per cent of the increase in lone-parent employment and that there has only been a slight overall improvement in lone parents' income. Furthermore, research has shown that those who have gone back to work were already committed to starting work in the short term or those who would have done so in any case (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001; Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Levitas, 2006).

This evaluation clearly indicates that focusing on getting lone parents into employment as means of addressing their social exclusion cannot be effective on its own. In addition, it suggests that a broader approach needs to be taken that acknowledges the heterogeneity of lone parents and the multidimensional nature of their social exclusion that has been identified. The Sure Start Plus initiative, which aimed to improve the social and emotional well-being of teenage parents and their children, is an example of an approach that addresses some of the wider, non-financial issues associated with the social exclusion of specific groups of lone parents (Kidger, 2004). Increased support for such programmes may be one way forward. Unless the criticisms of existing policies are effectively addressed through the development of different approaches, Britain will remain behind its European counterparts in the drive to ensure that more lone parents are in paid employment.

## Discouragement of lone parenthood

Both the New Right and New Labour political discourses have placed a strong emphasis on the value of stable family life and the *cerdó* that 'two parents are better than one'. Under New Labour in particular, there have been a range of family-friendly policies such as the introduction of parental leave (Pascall, 1997; Civitas, 2002; Driver and Martell, 2002). Critics have argued that tensions within such policies

## 26 *Vulnerable Groups in Health and Social Care*

meant that the New Right actually contributed to family breakdown (Pascall, 1997) and that the current tax and benefit system discourages marriage for lower-income families (Civitas, 2002). Nonetheless, such rhetoric and policy initiatives can at very least be interpreted as political support for more traditional family structures and the discouragement of lone parenthood.

With reference to discouraging teenage lone parenthood, there have been efforts to provide teenagers with appropriate information about contraception and to convey the realities of being pregnant and bringing up a child alone. There have also been attempts to address the contradictory nature of British culture for both male and female teenagers that 'sex is compulsory but contraception is illegal' (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 7). However, although the birth-rate to teenage girls has declined in Britain since the 1970s, it is still the highest in Europe and the second highest in the world (Daguerre and Nativel; 2006, Firth, 2007a). It is argued that more efforts are needed to address the underlying causes of teenage lone parenthood. For instance, the fact that teenage parents often have low expectations about their future employment prospects and 'see no reason not to get pregnant' (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 7). Another underlying cause is that they are also more likely to come from a disadvantaged background and be children of teenage parents themselves (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999; Millar and Rowlingson, 2001).

## CONCLUSIONS

In this overview of lone parents, their experiences and policy initiatives, we have seen that there is still have a long way to go in order to address the key issues around lone parenthood. Further research into the effects of past and current initiatives both in this and other countries could yield insights into ways of progressing. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, more and more adults and children are facing the potential disadvantages of being in a lone-parent family at some stage in their lives. According to recent figures, there will be further increases in some types of lone parenthood. For instance, the numbers of live births outside marriage continues to rise. It has also been predicted that if current divorce rates continue, 45 per cent of all marriages will end in divorce and that almost half of divorces will take place before married couples reach their tenth wedding anniversary. In view of the fact that divorce in the earlier years of marriage is more likely to involve young children, there will be an upward trend in divorced lone-parent families (National Statistics, 2008). It is therefore imperative that effective solutions are identified if this 'vulnerable



group' is to achieve true social inclusion and enjoy full citizenship both now and in the future.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

What definition of a lone-parent family do you think should be adopted?

Explore the concept of underclass further. Do you think the comparison between this concept and lone parents is justified?

Compare and contrast the approaches adopted by the New Right and New Labour to lone parents.

## FURTHER STUDY

See Ermisch and Francesconi (2000) and Ram and Hou (2003) for more discussion about the changing nature of families and increasing numbers of people who may spend some time in their lives in a lone-parent family. For more information about lone parents in relation to poverty and social exclusion, see the chapter by Levitas et al. (2006), which presents an analysis of recent data from the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain (PSE). Several of the sources below offer a cross-national perspective on lone parents. These include the work done by Lewis (1997), Lunt (2006), Millar and Rowlingson (2001), Sanatana (2002) and Whitehead et al. (2000). Detailed evaluations of recent policies can be found in the articles by Kidger (2004) and Lister (2002).

### Key readings

Ermisch, J. and Francesconi, M. (2000). 'The increasing complexity of family relationships: lifetime experience of lone motherhood and stepfamilies in Great Britain.' *European Journal of Population*, 16 (3) 235–249

Levitas, R., Head, E. and Finch, N. (2006). 'Lone parents, poverty and social exclusion' in Pantazis, C., Gordon, D. and Levitas, R. (eds) *Poverty and social exclusion in Britain: the millennium survey*. Bristol: Policy Press

Lister, R. (2002). 'The dilemmas of pendulum politics: balancing paid work, care and citizenship.' 31 (4) 520–532

## POST-ACTIVITY COMMENTS

### ACTIVITY 1.1

What sort of experiences did you identify? Some suggestions are:

- living on a low income;
- lack of social contacts and social support;
- lack of family support;
- both lone mothers and one/more of their children had health problems;
- inadequate housing.

### ACTIVITY 1.3

You might like to think about the following:

- The efficacy of the focus on paid work as a solution to lone parents' social exclusion and barriers to lone-parent employment other than those highlighted in the extract.
- Are there aspects of these initiatives that you agree with? Perhaps you feel that paid work has advantages for lone parents?
- Jane Ahrend identifies one type of barrier to lone parents' employment. What other barriers can you think of?
- Are there other issues that need to be addressed to ensure the social inclusion of lone parents?