

Lone parents in the North East

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Summary

- 1 There are an estimated 108,000 lone parents of working age living in the North East. Lone parents account for 7 per cent of the region's working age population, the same proportion as the national average. Over 90 per cent of lone parents in the region are female. Just 9 per cent are male.
- 2 Around half of the lone parents in the North East are in employment. Lone parents are less likely to work in higher level or skilled trade occupations than the average among all working age adults.
- 3 One in ten lone parents in the region are unemployed and seeking work. Two in five are economically inactive and around one in six workless lone parents have never had a job. Among those who have previously been in employment, half have been out of work for five years or more.
- 4 Two in five economically inactive lone parents in the region say they would like a job, even though they aren't looking for one.
- 5 Around half of the lone parents in the North East who want to work would like a part-time job. For some, this reflects a desire to 'be there' for their children. The cost of childcare can also be a barrier to working longer hours.
- 6 Qualification levels among lone parents in the North East are well below average. Fewer lone parents are qualified to Level 2 or above than the proportion among the working age population as a whole. One in five lone parents in the region have no formal qualifications at all.
- 7 Participation rates among lone parents are below average. Around a quarter of lone parents in the North East are currently undertaking learning or have recently done so, compared with nearly a third of all working age adults. The youngest and oldest lone parents are least likely to participate. Lone parents who are in employment are far more likely to participate in learning than those who are unemployed or economically inactive.

LSC North East Region

Regional Office

Moongate House 5th Avenue Business Park Team Valley Gateshead Tyne and Wear
NE11 0HF

T 0845 019 4181 F 0191 491 6159 www.lsc.gov.uk

Introduction

- 8 The Government has targets to increase the proportion of lone parents in work to 70 per cent by 2010 and to have halved child poverty by the same date. Increasing employment among lone parents is central to the Government's strategy to tackle child poverty.
- 9 Although employment among lone parents is rising, many remain disadvantaged in the labour market. Childcare responsibilities can be a significant barrier to employment. Many lone parents have been out of work for several years. Many have low skills and lack qualifications at Level 2 or above. Nevertheless, many lone parents who don't have a job would like to work.
- 10 This paper provides a brief overview of the number and characteristics of lone parents in the North East, drawing mainly on data from the Q4 2007 Labour Force Survey. It looks at economic activity among lone parents, and at attitudes towards employment among those who do not have a job.

A note on data sources

- 11 The Labour Force Survey classifies respondents according to household type. For the purposes of our analysis, we have defined lone parents as working age adults (women aged 16–59 years old, and men aged 16–64 years old) who live in lone parent households and who are identified as the head of the family unit.

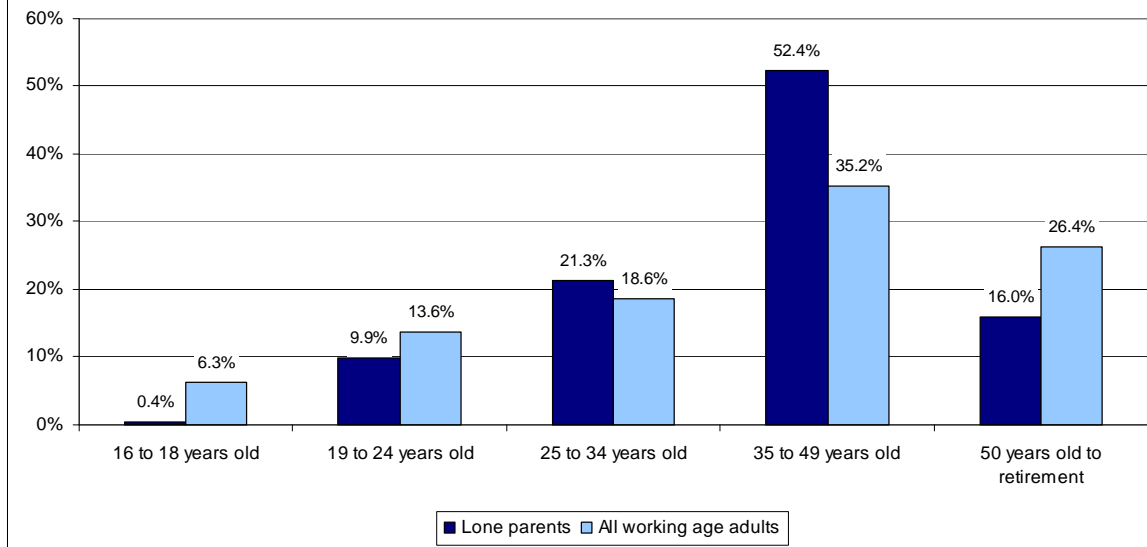
Some adults living in other types of household may also be lone parents (for example, young mothers sharing a house with their own parents), but they are not easily identifiable in the Labour Force Survey.

- 12 Using this definition, the sample of lone parents in the Labour Force Survey is relatively small. Around 230 respondents to the Q4 2007 survey were lone parents. This sample size means that analysis can be considered reasonably robust for the population of lone parents as a whole, but where the population is disaggregated (for example, by age) analysis should be treated with some caution.

Lone parents in the North East

- 13 According to our definition, there are an estimated 108,000 lone parents of working age living in the North East. Lone parents account for 7 per cent of the region's working age population, the same proportion as the national average.
- 14 Over 90 per cent of lone parents in the region are female. Just 9 per cent are male.
- 15 There is a marked difference between the age profile of lone parents and that of the working age population as a whole.

Figure 1: Age profile of lone parents in the North East, 2007



Source: Labour Force Survey, Q4 2007

- 16 Around half (52 per cent) of lone parents in the region are aged 35–49 years old, while one in five (21 per cent) are aged 25–34 years old. Both age groups are over-represented among lone parents compared with the working age population as a whole.

In contrast, the youngest and oldest age groups are under-represented among lone parents. In particular, there are very few lone parents aged 16–18 years old in the region – or at least, very few who live alone with their children, and who fit our definition of lone parents.

- 17 In general, lone parents with dependent children tend to be younger than those with non-dependent children. According to the Labour Force Survey, almost all lone parents with non-dependent children are aged 35 or over, compared with only around half of those with only dependent children.
- 18 It is not clear how many lone parents in the region might be from black and minority ethnic communities. Due to sample size, Labour Force Survey data on the ethnicity of lone parents in the North East is not reliable.

At national level, the Labour Force Survey suggests that adults from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are over-represented among lone parents compared with the working age population as a whole. Similarly, research suggests that families with a black mother are more likely to be lone parent families than those with a white mother¹.

- 19 Around a third (32 per cent) of lone parents in the North East have a disability, compared with just over one in five (22 per cent) of all working age

¹ Department for Work and Pensions (2008) *Families with children in Britain: Findings from the 2006 Families and Children Study* (http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_486.asp).

adults. In general, the older a lone parent, the more likely he or she is to have a disability.

The majority of disabled lone parents say their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (such as eating, washing, walking and going shopping) is impaired. Their disabilities also limit the kind or amount of work they might do. Relatively few say their disability only limits the kind or amount of work they might do, without affecting normal day-to-day activities.

Children in lone parent families

- 20 Most lone parents in the region live with dependent children – those aged under 16, or aged 16–18 and in full-time education. Almost three quarters (73 per cent) live with *only* dependent children, while a further 8 per cent live with both dependent and non-dependent children. One in five (19 per cent) live with only non-dependent children.
- 21 Estimates suggest that between a third and half of all children will spend some time living as part of a family headed by a lone parent². In the North East, there are currently around 120,000 children aged under 16 who live with a lone parent – 13 per cent of all children in the region who are under 16 years old.
- 22 Poverty is a significant issue for many children in lone parent families. Children in lone parent families are twice as likely to live in poverty as children who live with both parents. According to the widely accepted definition of poverty as living below 60 per cent of median income after housing costs, half of all children in lone parent families are poor. Nationally, 42 per cent of children living in poverty live in lone parent families, though lone parent families account for only 25 per cent of *all* children.

Studies show that children in lone parent families are at greater risk of poorer outcomes than those who live with both parents. Statistically, children in lone parent families are more likely to experience poorer psychological well-being, to leave school early, to reach lower levels of educational achievement, and to be involved in criminal activity. As adults, they are more likely to be unemployed, to have a low income, and to be depressed. But in reality, these outcomes are by no means inevitable³.

Lone parents in employment

- 23 Around half of lone parents in the North East are in employment (53 per cent, compared with 72 per cent of all working age adults).

There is little difference in employment rates among lone parents with dependent and non-dependent children.

Those aged 35–49 are most likely to be in employment, while the youngest lone parents are least likely to be in work.

² One Parent Families|Gingerbread (2007) *Time to talk: A response from One Parent Families|Gingerbread* (http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/dr_media/opf/October07-time-to-talk_26-Aug-08.pdf).

³ Ibid.

- 24 Broadly speaking, lone parents are less likely to work in higher level or skilled trade occupations than the average among all working age adults, and more likely to work in intermediate and low-skilled occupations.
- 25 Just over a quarter of lone parents who are in employment work in higher level occupations (27 per cent, compared with 35 per cent of all working age adults in employment).
- 26 Around half of lone parents who are in employment work in intermediate level occupations (49 per cent, compared with 30 per cent of all working age adults in employment). In particular, Personal Service occupations are over-represented among lone parents in employment. These occupations include jobs such as care assistant, childminder and hairdresser.
- 27 Very few lone parents who are in employment work in skilled trade occupations (just 2 per cent, according to the Labour Force Survey, compared with 13 per cent of all working age adults in employment).
- 28 Slightly under a quarter of lone parents who are in employment work in lower level occupations (22 per cent, compared with 23 per cent of all working age adults in employment). Elementary occupations, which include the lowest skilled manual occupations, are particularly over-represented among lone parents. Almost one in five lone parents who are in employment work in unskilled and very low skilled jobs.
- 29 Almost half of the lone parents who are in employment in the North East work part-time (48 per cent, compared with 28 per cent of all working age adults in employment). National research suggests that the proportion of lone parents working 16 or more hours per week increases as the age of the youngest child in the family increases. Eight per cent of lone parents with a youngest child aged under five years work 16 or more hours per week, compared to 18 per cent of lone parents with a youngest child aged 11 to 15 years⁴.

Worklessness among lone parents

- 30 One in ten lone parents in the region are unemployed and seeking work (9 per cent, compared with 4 per cent of all working age adults)⁵.

Lone parents with only dependent children are most likely to be unemployed and seeking work. Those with both dependent and non-dependent children are least likely to be unemployed and seeking work.

Lone parents aged 19–34 are most likely to be unemployed and seeking work.

⁴ Department for Work and Pensions (2008) *Families with children in Britain: Findings from the 2006 Families and Children Study* (http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_486.asp).

⁵ The figures here relate to the proportion of all working age adults who are unemployed according to the International Labour Organisation definition. This is not the same measure as the official unemployment rate, which is defined as the proportion of *economically active* adults who are unemployed and seeking work.

- 31 Two in five lone parents in the North East are economically inactive (39 per cent, compared with 24 per cent of all working age adults). Economically inactive adults are those who are neither in employment, nor seeking work.
- Lone parents with only dependent children are least likely to be economically inactive. Those with both dependent and non-dependent children are most likely to be economically inactive – the Labour Force Survey suggests that half of this group are neither in employment nor actively seeking work.
- 32 Around one in six workless lone parents (17 per cent) have never had a job. Among those who have previously been in employment, half (51 per cent) have been out of work for five years or more. The length of time many lone parents have spent out of work is likely to disadvantage them on returning to the labour market.
- 33 The previous experience of workless lone parents is concentrated in relatively few occupations. Three in ten lone parents who have previously been in work but who do not currently have a job (30 per cent) say their last job was in Sales and Customer Service occupations. One in five (20 per cent) say their last job was in Personal Service occupations. A quarter (24 per cent) say their last job was in unskilled and very low skilled Elementary occupations.
- 34 More than half (52 per cent) of economically inactive lone parents in the region say they are unable to work because they are looking after their family or home, compared with just a quarter (24 per cent) of all economically inactive adults.
- Lone parents with dependent children are far more likely than those with only non-dependent children to say they are unable to work because they are looking after their family or home.
- Similarly, younger lone parents are far more likely than their older counterparts to say they can't work because they are looking after family or home.
- 35 More than a third (37 per cent) of economically inactive lone parents in the region say they are unable to work because of a long-term illness or disability, compared with a quarter (26 per cent) of all economically inactive adults.
- In contrast to care responsibilities, lone parents with only non-dependent children are far more likely than those with dependent children to say they are unable to work because of a long-term illness or disability.
- Similarly, older lone parents are far more likely than younger lone parents to say they are unable to work because of a long-term illness or disability.
- Employment aspirations among workless lone parents**
- 36 As well as the unemployed lone parents who are seeking work, two in five economically inactive lone parents in the region (40 per cent) say they would like a job, even though they aren't actively looking for one. In contrast, only a

quarter of all economically inactive working age adults (26 per cent) say they want to work.

Economically inactive lone parents with only dependent children are more likely than those with non-dependent children to say they would like a job. Younger economically inactive lone parents are slightly more likely to do so than their older counterparts.

- 37 Around half (48 per cent) of the lone parents in the North East who want to work would like a part-time job. National research suggests that lone parents who want to enter or return to work are often keen to access jobs with short hours, particularly during school hours. For some, this reflects a desire to 'be there' for their children, while for others it reflects a nervousness about work and a desire to return to work gradually in order to ensure that they can continue to cope with their home responsibilities. The cost of childcare can also be a barrier to longer hours.

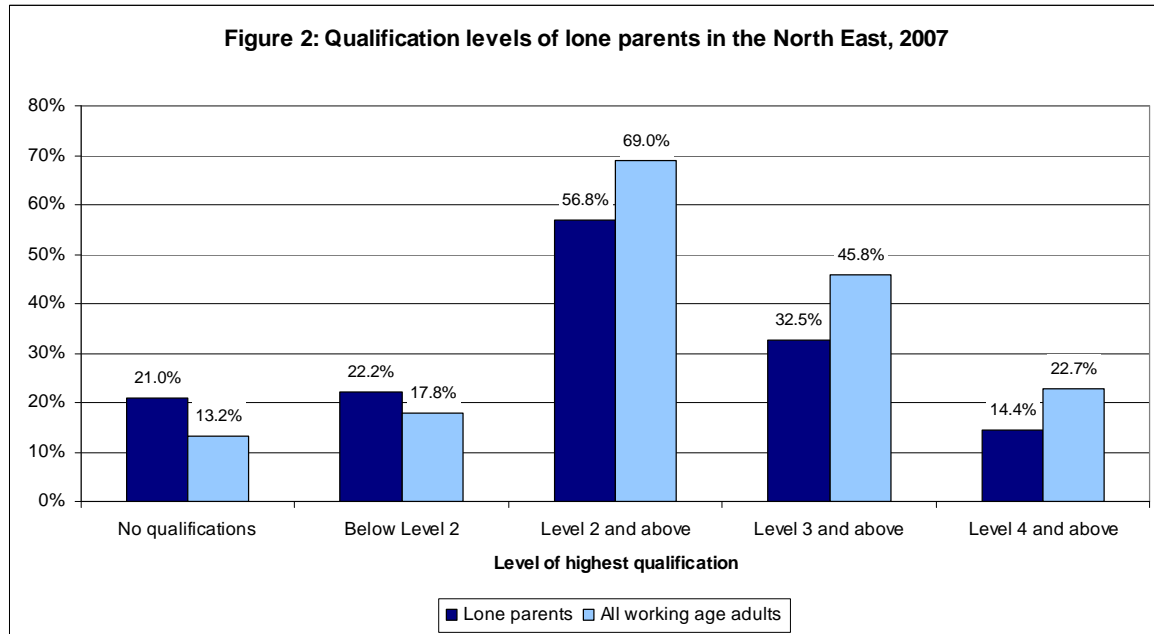
Although research into the extent that short-hours jobs can be a stepping-stone to working longer hours is inconclusive, there are good reasons to believe that any experience of work is likely to improve future chances of employment – particularly for lone parents who have spent long periods out of work. The structure of the current tax and benefits system, however, means that the financial incentives for lone parents to work in jobs of less than 16 hours a week are so poor that many lone parents in part-time jobs work for just four hours a week⁶.

- 38 There is some pessimism among workless lone parents in the region about the likelihood of finding employment in the future. Labour Force Survey data suggests that two in five think they will definitely work in future, and another one in five think they will probably find work. A quarter of workless lone parents, however, think that at best, they are unlikely to work in future. One in ten don't know whether they will do so.
- 39 The Labour Force Survey suggests that most workless lone parents who think that they will work in future expect to get a job within the next five years, though relatively few think they will get a job within the next 12 months. This is likely to reflect their ongoing childcare responsibilities, but may also reflect lack of confidence among some lone parents with regard to their skills, qualifications and experience.

⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) *Lone parents and 'mini-jobs'* (<http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=921>). The research reports that lone parents on Income Support can earn up to £20 a week before the benefit is reduced pound for pound, but must work 16 hours a week before gaining access to the financial support of Working Tax Credit. For lone parents with one child who are eligible for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, the gain to working at minimum wage (before childcare and other work-related expenses) is around £20 a week for four hours' work, around £24 a week for 15 hours' work, but around £44 a week for 16 hours' work.

Qualification levels among lone parents

- 40 Qualification levels among lone parents in the North East are well below average. Fewer lone parents are qualified to Level 2 or above than the proportion among the working age population as a whole.



Source: Labour Force Survey, Q4 2007

- 41 One in five lone parents in the region (21 per cent) have no formal qualifications at all. A similar proportion (22 per cent) have qualifications, but not at Level 2.

Lone parents with only non-dependent children are least likely to have any formal qualifications. Lone parents with both dependent and non-dependent children are most likely to have qualifications below Level 2.

The very youngest and oldest lone parents are least likely to have any formal qualifications. The youngest lone parents are more likely to have qualifications below Level 2 than their older counterparts.

- 42 Fewer than three in five lone parents in the region have qualifications at Level 2 or above (57 per cent, compared with 69 per cent of all working age adults).

Lone parents with only dependent children are more likely to have qualifications at Level 2 or above than those with non-dependent children.

The very youngest lone parents are least likely to have qualifications at Level 2 or above. Lone parents aged 25–34 are most likely to have qualifications at this level, with the likelihood of being qualified to Level 2 or above declining among older age groups.

- 43 A third of lone parents in the region have qualifications at Level 3 or above (33 per cent, compared with 46 per cent of all working age adults).

Lone parents with only non-dependent children are slightly more likely to have qualifications at Level 3 or above than those with dependent children.

Few of the youngest lone parents have qualifications at Level 3 or above. From age 25 up, the likelihood of lone parents being qualified to this level increases with age.

- 44 Only around one in seven lone parents in the region have qualifications at Level 4 or above (14 per cent, compared with 22 per cent of all working age adults).

Lone parents with only dependent children are least likely to have qualifications at Level 4 or above. Those with only non-dependent children are less likely to have qualifications at this level than those with both dependent and non-dependent children.

As with qualifications at Level 3, few of the youngest lone parents have qualifications at Level 4 or above, while from age 25 up, the likelihood of lone parents being qualified to this level increases with age.

- 45 Lone parents with disabilities are less likely than average to have qualifications at Level 2 or above. They are more likely than average to have no formal qualifications at all.
- 46 Lone parents who are in employment are more likely to have qualifications at Level 2 or above than those who are unemployed or economically inactive. Unemployed and economically inactive lone parents are significantly more likely to have no formal qualifications at all than those in work.

Participation in learning among lone parents

- 47 According to our proxy measure of participation (described in our paper on adult qualifications⁷), around a quarter (24 per cent) of lone parents in the North East are currently participating in learning or have recently done so. By comparison, almost a third of all working age adults (30 per cent) are currently undertaking learning or have recently done so.
- 48 The relatively low level of participation in learning among lone parents is reflected in engagement with the nextstep service. Just 2 per cent of adults who had seen a nextstep adviser in the North East in 2006/07 were lone parents⁸.
- 49 Lone parents with only dependent children are far more likely to participate in learning than those with non-dependent children, and particularly those with only non-dependent children.

⁷ LSC North East (2008) *Qualification levels of adults in the North East* (<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/regions/NorthEast/Aboutus/strategic-analysis/>).

⁸ In 2006/07, the nextstep service was available only to unemployed adults, and focused on those with without Level 2 qualifications. From August 2008, nextstep is accessible by all adults aged 20 and over. A differentiated and personalised service will continue to be offered to low-skilled adults, providing additional information, advice and guidance (IAG) support.

- 50 The youngest and oldest lone parents are least likely to participate in learning. Lone parents aged 35–49 are most likely to participate, followed by those aged 25–34 years old.
- 51 Lone parents with disabilities are less likely to participate in learning than those without disabilities.
- 52 Lone parents who are in employment are far more likely to participate in learning than those who are unemployed or economically inactive. National research suggests that those who work for longer hours each week are more likely to participate in learning than those who work shorter hours⁹.
- 53 The LSC's learner data does not explicitly identify lone parents, and a clear picture of participation in LSC-funded provision among lone parents is not available. Lone parents may participate in mainstream learning programmes, as well as provision designed specifically for groups such as lone parents or young mothers.
- 54 National evaluation of the Care to Learn programme¹⁰ suggests that young mothers attending specialist provision through programme value a number of different aspects of the provision. Although not all are lone parents, their views offer an insight into what lone parents themselves might value in learning, including:
- the availability of support and advice
 - access to childcare
 - the opportunity to gain qualifications
 - the curriculum, which often covers topics of direct relevance to young mothers, while also enhancing their basic skills and providing vocational or academic lessons as well
 - teaching styles, including the relaxed pace of work, working in small groups and the facilitating and involving styles of teaching used
 - the opportunity to share their experiences with others who understand their situation and do not judge them for being a young mother, and the contribution that learning makes to improving their confidence and motivation.
- 55 According to the evaluation, the main difficulties experienced by young mothers attending specialist provision were around transport. Most often, these difficulties were simply to do with the logistics of travelling on public transport with children. Young mothers in mainstream provision also commented on difficulties covering the additional costs of learning (e.g. for books and equipment) and making time for private study, as well as the lack of flexibility in some providers.

⁹ Department for Work and Pensions (2008) *Families with children in Britain: Findings from the 2006 Families and Children Study*

(http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_486.asp).

¹⁰ Institute for Employment Studies (2007) *Learning for Young Mothers: A qualitative study of flexible provision* (<http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/report.php?id=441>).

56 The evaluation identifies a number of positive strategies for providers working with young mothers that might also be relevant to those working with lone parents, whether specifically targeting this group or engaging lone parents more generally in mainstream provision. These strategies include:

- taking a holistic approach to learning, which addresses some of the wider social and practical issues faced by young mothers, as well as developing their education and employability skills
- tailoring delivery to the needs of young mothers, including offering taster sessions, or developing 'bridging' courses to support progression into further learning
- adopting an informal approach to learning, using small groups and additional one-to-one support
- providing accredited learning, to help build confidence among young mothers in their ability to achieve
- providing free on-site childcare and other forms of learner support, including meeting transport costs
- facilitating progression to further learning, in particular through appropriate information, advice and guidance
- working in partnership, for example with other learning providers, guidance agencies such as Connexions, health workers, etc.

Paper creator

Andrew Rowell

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