The Dynamics of Lone Parents, Employment and Poverty in Great Britain

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Abstract

Lone parents are a growing group in Great Britain and elsewhere, and one with high rates of poverty and receipt of social assistance. This article investigates some of the links between lone parenthood, economic activity and social background. It also provides longitudinal and event-history analysis of life-history data from mid-1990s Great Britain, to look at transitions between different family types, and across difference economic states. It finds that there is no simple one-way causation between family change and low rates of economic activity (and hence poverty). Rates of paid work were quite low before the transition into lone parenthood, and hardly rise among those leaving lone parenthood. The answer may be found in the generally poorer economic circumstances of those becoming lone parents. Poor socio-economic backgrounds are strongly associated with moves into lone parenthood (via births to single women and partnership breakdown) – as is shown using multivariate analysis of transition rates.

Contents

1   INTRODUCTION

In Britain and often elsewhere, lone parent families are disproportionately poor families (Rowlingson and McKay 2002, Garcia and Kazepov 2002). But what causes lone parent poverty? The clearest answer is that the main cause of lone parent poverty is lack of employment, or employment on low earnings (Millar and Ridge 2001). This means that many lone parents have to rely on state benefits which are often set at low levels. To this list we might also add low rates of receiving child support from ex-partners (the father of any children), and relatively low rates of child support even among those receiving any (Marsh et al 2001).

This simple analysis raises the further question of why lone parents in Britain have relatively low rates of participation in the labour market.   The question of why state benefits are too low to prevent poverty is beyond the scope of this paper[1]. However, we might distinguish two main competing explanations for why lone parents are poor through labour market exclusion. These may only be reliably investigated through the kinds of longitudinal methods of analysis discussed elsewhere in this edition.

However, the focus in this paper is on the links between lone parenthood and poverty. It is widely accepted that poverty is a consequence of lone parenthood. But poverty is itself also a *cause* of lone parenthood, particularly for single (never-married) lone mothers. In this article we use longitudinal data to investigate some of the dynamic linkages underlying these causal mechanisms

The first set of explanations of the high rate of lone parent poverty we may conveniently label as the 'lone parenthood as cause of poverty' argument. This suggests that the characteristics of lone parents lead to low employment, and in turn to higher rates of poverty. Lone parents in the UK have low levels of education and qualifications. Being mainly women from working-class backgrounds they can only find relatively low-paid work and may need to pay for childcare (and other in-work expenses) from relatively meagre earnings. Paid work may therefore not seem financially worthwhile compared with life on benefit. Lone parents may also have an ideology of motherhood that stresses the importance of mothers staying at home with their children. Even if paid work were financially worthwhile, they might still choose to stay at home with their children.

But this classic argument can be turned on its head, to create what we might call the 'poverty as a cause of lone parenthood' argument. Perhaps lone parents are not poor because of lack of employment but instead lack of employment and poverty leads them to become lone parents. There may be characteristics of some people – typically women – that lead them to become poor. The family status of lone parenthood is what then mediates or perhaps amplifies that poverty. But that lone parenthood is itself a sideshow compared to the true underlying causes of poverty.

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[1] Any answer would be connected to the politics of setting benefit levels and in particular the perceived need to keep taxes low through low social spending. Inadequate benefits might also be received because lone parents' low rates of employment tend to disqualify them from often more generous contributory-style benefits. Widows, always seen as the most deserving group, tend to get higher benefits through contribution-related conditions relating to their former spouse (Bieback 1992). Support for lone parents might also be perceived as a family rather than state responsibility.

There is a further set of issues we may identify as important, but beyond the scope of this paper. That is how far the poverty experienced by lone mothers, or by mothers in general, has effects on children's life experiences – their school achievement, labour market participation, social adjustment, and so on. Does living in a lone parent family have negative consequences for the children in that family? If there are such effects, then the imperative to understand and ameliorate the poverty of lone mothers becomes still more pressing. Evidence based on children born in 1958 strongly suggests that outcomes for young adults (education, early parenthood) are affected by poverty whilst growing up, although without a separate effect for living as part of lone parent family (Gregg, Harkness and Machin 1999). However, such studies pre-date the modern level of lone parenthood by some decades.

Similarly, Hobcraft and Kiernan (1999) argue that childhood poverty begets early motherhood and adult poverty - but that early motherhood also has a significant effect in increasing poverty. Poverty is one of the main systematic causes of single lone parenthood, and disadvantages has long been known to be a cause of divorced among families (Ermisch 1991). Even widowhood is likely to have some link to prior poverty as ill health and death is unevenly distributed towards the bottom end of the income and class distribution.

The question of a link between family of origin and outcomes for children raises considerable methodological difficulties. However, the resolution of those problems will inevitably imply a longitudinal research approach. Such an approach would need to explore the outcomes for children before and after a transition of lone parenthood. It may also need to establish the levels of parental conflict prior to breakdown, to look at the effects of *when* the entry to lone parenthood took place (e.g. at what ages of the children), and how long the family was a lone parent family. These are difficult concepts to measure, but each may be implicated in the effects of changes in family structure on outcomes for children. Children do not usually live in a lone parent family for the whole of their childhoods – they usually spend only part of their lives in a lone parent family. About half of those who become lone parents will have found a partner within six years, as will be shown later in this paper (see also Rowlingson and McKay 1998). However in 1990, it was estimated that about half of all children would have experienced life in a lone parent family by the year 2000 (Kiernan and Wicks 1990). There have been similar estimates, if a little higher, in the US (American Research Council 1989)

1.1   Outline

In this paper, we discuss two substantive areas where longitudinal data may be used to investigate the dynamics of lone parent families, with a focus on lone mothers. First, we look at the effects of entering and leaving lone parenthood on rates of employment. We show that, despite low rates of lone parents working overall, it is not the transition into lone parenthood itself that appears to trigger this. Nor does leaving lone parenthood affect rates of employment. This shows that it is other characteristics, other than lone parenthood, affecting rates of employment. Second we look at rates of moving into and out of lone motherhood, to analyse the proximate causes of family change and the systematic influences on family transitions.

It is relatively common to think in terms of the effects that family change may have on rates of benefit receipt – how divorce, or widowhood, or extra children may increase the risk of claiming social support. Indeed, such family changes may be particularly significant in triggering claims for social assistance or moves into poverty, even compared to changes in hours of work and wage rates, as has been analysed since Bane and Ellwood's pioneering work (1986). But if we argue that poverty results from family change, this may simply push back the causal questions one stage back. What caused those changes in family formation

patterns in the first instance? Indeed, there has long been evidence and theory that changes in family patterns respond to economic changes (Murphy 1985, Ermisch and Wright 1993), including male unemployment (Lampard 1993), and structural changes in employment and its effects on residency patterns (Wilson 1987).

This paper adds to knowledge in two ways. First, by updating estimates of the duration of lone motherhood with more recent data, and by providing a brief analysis of routes into lone motherhood. Second, by integrating analysis of the duration of lone motherhood with information about changing economic status. In this paper we review some of the findings that relate to the inflows to, and outflow from, lone parent families. We also provide up to date information on transition rates and the duration of lone parenthood, comparing these with existing estimates.

2 METHODS AND DATA

This section discusses some of the methods used to analyse longitudinal data, focussing on those elements most relevant to the study of family change in particular. The statistical methods are described, in a relatively non-technical manner, in Allison (1984)

2.1 Methods
There is considerable information about lone parents, and other demographic groups, available on a 'snapshot' basis from cross-section surveys (e.g. Bradshaw and Millar 1991). This is important information on the number of lone parents, and their characteristics, at a point in time (Haskey 2002 contains latest estimates). However, in order to understand the formation of families, it is necessary to have longitudinal information on the development of families (their formation, their break-up). As epidemiologists would express it, cross-sectional data tells us about *prevalence*, but in understanding causal processes it is necessary to have data relating to *incidence* – the chance of the event occurring among those at risk of it happening, within a given time frame.

Similarly, many of the hypotheses of interest about lone parents relate to change over time, the ideas that lone parenthood leads to lower rate of working, that it may lead to poorer outcomes for their children. Once it is appreciated that lone parenthood is a transitory status, it is important that research hypotheses are framed in this manner. If it is thought that the children of lone parents do less well at school, if this saying that *any* experience of lone parenthood makes a difference, no matter how short-lived or prolonged? Is it important whether the spell of lone parenthood is begun by the death of a parent, compared to divorce, or a single woman having children alone? Does it matter what age the child is when the period of lone parenthood begins and ends? These kinds of questions became apparent only once the dynamic character of family structures is explicitly recognised.

There are two distinct events that may lead a woman to become a lone mother. First, a woman living alone may have a child. Second, the male partner may exit from a couple with children. The first route nearly always means having a birth, and by definition the mother will then have a very young dependent child. This is significant, because the presence of young dependent children is known to be associated with very low rates of female economic activity. The dissolution of couples with children (the second route mentioned) includes divorce, separation and widowhood, among married couples, and the breakdown of cohabiting relationships (so-called 'consensual unions'). Compared to the former group, any

child(ren) present could be of any age, and so on average will be older. One might also plausibly expect that this group will, themselves, be older than the former group.

2.2   Data

The analysis of family histories places great demands on available datasets. Information is needed about precise family structures, and is needed for a long series of points in time. It is possible to work with retrospective life-history data, as used here. Alternatively, long-running cohort studies may supply the information of interest, as may household panel studies.

We begin with some the key information about the dataset used here, the Survey of Family and Working Lives of 1994-95 (King and Murray 1996):

- comprises a representative sample of 9139 individuals aged between 16 and 69 years, in Great Britain, interviewed in 1994-95;
- is based on interviews conducted face-to-face in respondents' own homes, using a mixture of computer-assisted and more traditional methods of interview, and conducted by Research Services Limited;
- includes information about many significant events in people's lifetimes up to the date of interview, including:
    - ◊ living arrangements;
    - ◊ children entering and leaving the household;
    - ◊ work, and all jobs that people had previously;
    - ◊ education and training;
    - ◊ receipt of benefits;
    - ◊ a range of other activities, including disability, caring, time spent abroad and so on.
- also collected a great deal of information about current circumstances, including family formation and employment decisions of women around the time of having children;
- where possible collected information about current partners, using a shorter form of event history and main questionnaire, with events recorded from the date of living with the main respondent.

The survey collected information about the life-histories of a cross-section of the current population. As a result, there are more years' worth of information collected from older than from younger respondents. This is rather different from cohort studies (such as the National Child Development Study) or panel surveys (like the BHPS) that collect information covering essentially the same length of time for each survey participant. The schematics of the approach may be illustrated by Figure 1.

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Figure 1   Design of Life-history Data Collection
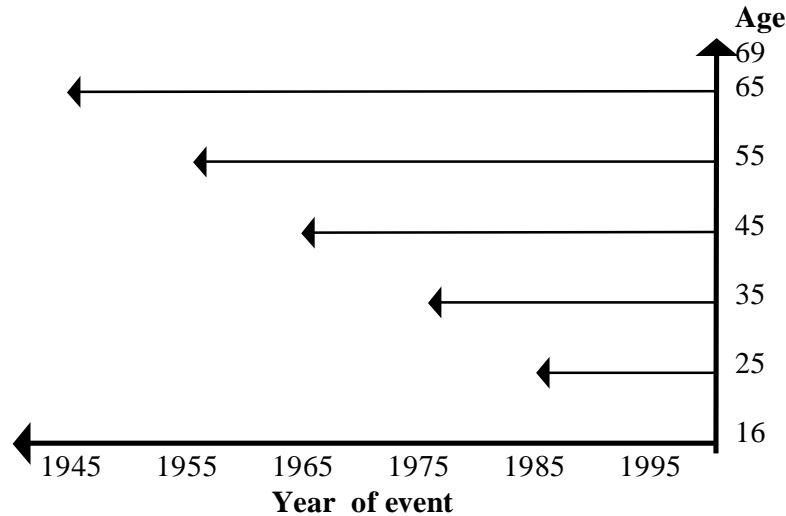
Comparisons between the Survey of Family and Working Lives and other sources concerning family forms are generally reassuring: some are mentioned below in the text. It is also possible to compare the results of analysis of the life-history data with that derived from other longitudinal datasets, to provide a comparison of dynamic and not just snap-shot information.

A preliminary analysis of the dynamics of cohabitation, compared to findings from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) is encouraging. Results from a simple model of transitions suggested that around 5 per cent of cohabitations dissolve each year, while 13 per cent end in marriage, compared to 6 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively, calculated from the BHPS 1991-93. The similarity of these figures provides some confidence in the reliability of the cohabitation data, and perhaps in the life-event data more generally.

More importantly, the method of data collection for the life-history data appears to have avoided a number of pitfalls of previous surveys. In the FWLS, marriage and cohabitation were treated alike, whilst being separately identified.. And separation and divorce, for those marriages dissolving, were collected as separate events. This compares well with other surveys collecting life-history data. For example, the 1980 Women and Employment Survey (WES) only collected information on marriage, and not on cohabitation. This means that families cohabiting are treated as lone parents, with consequences for measures of the inflows and outflows affecting lone parent families. The 1986 Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) survey did collect information on 'living arrangements' that included cohabitation. However, such arrangements were collected only on a yearly basis, whereas other relevant dates (marriage, the birth of children) were collected to the nearest month. Again, with relatively short durations of lone parenthood, such problems may well affect the estimates provided of the duration of lone parenthood (and entry to non-marital lone parenthood). The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) collected life-history data in 1992, and (being a panel) has collected information on living arrangements on a yearly basis since 1991. It asked about cohabitation separately from marriage, and only counted those cohabitations lasting for at least three months. For marriages that had led to a divorce, only the date of divorce was collected, and not the effective end-date of the marriage. By contrast, marriages that had now separated were asked the date of separation. Therefore, the duration of marriage will tend to be over-stated, and the duration of ex-married lone parenthood understated.

It is also worth noting that the sample size of women in the FWLS is rather larger than in the other surveys mentioned here, particularly once attention is restricted to women of younger ages.

3   LONE PARENTHOOD AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Previous research has ensured there is wide knowledge of the characteristics of lone mothers as they are currently. In this section we look at the point at which they become lone mothers, and at fixed points thereafter. The following characteristics describe lone mothers as they are the month they move into this status.

a) Age group
- 19 per cent were aged up to 19 years
- 24 per cent were aged 20-24
- 19 per cent were aged 25-29
- 28 per cent were aged 30-39
- 11 per cent were aged 40 or more

b) Number and ages of children
- For nearly three quarters (74 per cent) their youngest child was aged 5 years old or less.
- For 18 per cent the youngest child was aged 6-11.
- Nearly two thirds (64 per cent) had just one dependent children

c) Marital status
In the month before becoming a lone mother
- 58 per cent were married;
- 34 per cent were single and living independently;
- 5 per cent were cohabiting;
- 2 per cent were either divorced or separated.

However, the main degree of interest is in changes in employment patterns, associated (or not) with changes to family status. These are shown below (Table 1).

Table 1: **Aggregate Changes in the Economic Status of Those Becoming Lone Mothers**

Row percentages

	Full-time employee	Part-time employee	Others in paid work[2]	Not in work	Base (=100 per cent)
One year before becoming a lone mother	39	13	5	43	1272
At point of becoming a lone mother	22	10	4	64	1272
One year after becoming a lone mother					
Total	27	14	5	53	1196 *
Those still lone mothers	27	15	5	53	1013
Former lone mothers	28	13	7	51	183
Five years later					
Total	32	16	6	45	888 *
Those still lone mothers	34	17	6	44	458
Former lone mothers	31	16	6	47	430

* The sample sizes fall because, for some lone mothers, this point in time would be reached only after the date of interview.

The point of becoming a lone mother, certainly for those having a child, is likely to be a time of very low economic activity. Rates of not working reach their highest at this time, when only 36 per cent were observed to be working. Those least likely to be in work were those with young children, who were youngest at the time of becoming a lone mother, and for those who made the transition since 1990 rather than in earlier years. These factors also overlap considerably - those becoming lone mothers since 1990 are more likely to be younger, and not part of a couple.

It may be more useful to look one year prior to this to gain a better picture of emerging changes in economic activity. This still shows that more than 4 in 10 (43 per cent) were not working one year before becoming lone mothers for the first time, with fewer than this (39 per cent) in full-time work, plus a further 13 per cent in part-time work (defined as 30 or fewer hours in the survey).

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[2] That is, those self-employed plus employees with unknown hours of work.

As lone motherhood continues, rates of working increase but the rate of growth is gradual. Five years after women became lone mothers, rates of paid work had not returned to the levels experienced one year before becoming a lone mother. Table 1 also compares rates of economic activity for those remaining as lone mothers, and those finding a partner (or whose children age beyond dependent age). Rates of paid work were barely affected by whether the women remained as lone mothers, or became part of a couple. Clearly, this may have entailed a move off benefits, if the new partner was in paid work. However this finding should warn against assuming a simple cause-and-effect link between lone motherhood and low rates of economic activity. Instead, low rate of working may be related to the characteristics of those mothers which do not change when they find a partner, more than to the fact of lone motherhood itself. Indeed, this is arguably showing the effect of persisting weak employment opportunities related to poor socio-economic background (Rowlingson and McKay 2002).

There was also, of course, considerable change in economic activity among individuals. The aggregate picture tends to understate the degree of changing status by lone mothers. Only just over half (57 per cent) of lone mothers who were inactive at the point of transition were still inactive some five years later if they stayed as lone mothers. And one quarter of these had moved into full-time work, plus a further 15 per cent into part-time work. Conversely, ten per cent of those who had been working full-time had been economically inactive, as had 19 per cent of those working part-time. Nevertheless, the picture is one of more moves into paid work than out of it. The proportion starting work is, as might be expected, particularly high among those whose youngest dependent child was very young when they became lone mothers, but for whom that child ages slightly.

These results indicate some of the value of adopting a longitudinal perspective in exploring causal mechanisms. It is well known from cross-sectional studies that lone mothers have relatively low rates of economic activity in the UK. However, by tracking individual over time it may be seen that lone parenthood itself is not a decisive influence on rates of working. The groups becoming lone parents already had low rates of economic activity. And, among those becoming lone parents, a movement out of lone parenthood did not increase rates of working. The conclusion is that the reasons for these low rates of working must be found elsewhere. It could be related to low rates of economic activity among mothers in general (with low provision of UK childcare, quite plausibly). It also highlights the relatively poor employment prospects of those women who become lone mothers.

4   LONE PARENTHOOD AND FAMILY FORMATION

In this section we investigate the routes by which women become lone mothers. What are the particular influences acting upon the transitions into, and out of, lone parenthood.

The methods used in this section are sometimes called 'event-history analysis' (Allison 1984), or 'survival analysis', among other names. The underlying data consist of sequences of different states to which individual belong during a period of time. People may be single, married, and so on, and there are specific dates separating the borders of these different states. There is also information about other characteristics – perhaps their age and occupation over time, and time-constant factors relating to their background.

The change from one status to another is a *transition*, and the chance that people undergo that transition may be modelled as a function of different characteristics of the people at risk of

that change. So, a group of single women may have a child (become a single mother), or form a marriage or cohabiting partnership, or remain single. Using longitudinal data it is possible to model the risk of each transition, whilst taking into account information on those who make another transition (a 'competing risk') or whose status does not change during the period observed ('censored cases').

In this section, we analyse the transition probabilities (strictly, hazard rates) for different family status transitions, and model these in discrete time as a function of a range of time-varying and time-constant variables. We look separately at routes into lone parenthood, and routes out (the duration).

4.1   Becoming a lone mother
4.1.1   Births prior to partnerships
Women are "at risk" of becoming a single mother as soon as childbearing is possible, but the data often imposes a more or less arbitrary age from which information is collected. In the some studies this may be 16 onwards, but in this study we have complete fertility histories dating to the earliest birth. The main alternative life path to having a pre-marital birth is marriage. Of course, some women (probably around 10%) will never marry nor have children, and many more will be observed in this situation at the time of the interview: these important features are taken into account in this analysis.

The various statistical models that have been developed, using different datasets, have tended to reach quite similar conclusions about the circumstances of women that make them more likely to have a pre-marital or pre-partnership child. They are generally markers for disadvantage of various kinds. Ermisch (1991) looked births prior to marriage (cohabitation was not recorded in the 1980 Women and Employment Survey). Pre-marital births were least common among women in education, followed by those in jobs and then those inactive. The risk was higher for those leaving school before the age of 16. Risks peak at around age 19 years. There were also positive effects from higher welfare benefits, and higher unemployment. Böheim and Ermisch (1998) also found this familiar relationship between economic status and pre-partnership births.

Rowlingson and McKay (1998) identified the same inverse-U relationship between age and the risk of a pre-marital birth, using the 1985 Social Change and Economic Life Initiative dataset. They also found higher rates of pre-marital childbearing among those living in social housing at age 14, and stronger effects of the tenure at each month of risk[3]. As before, the economically inactive were the most likely to have a pre-marital birth, but those working were more likely to do so than those remaining in full-time education.

There has been an increase for each successive birth cohort in the proportion of women having children prior to any marriage or cohabiting relationship, as shown in Figure 6. This chart takes out those marrying or beginning to cohabit. So the rise in rates of single motherhood cannot be *simply* a matter of the alleged instability of cohabiting relationships, whatever role that may be playing. In fact, only ten per cent of those becoming lone mothers after 1986 left a cohabitation in the month prior to becoming a lone mother, compared with 34 per cent describing themselves as single and living independently. The figures rise to 11 per cent and 37 per cent, respectively, for those becoming lone mothers in or after 1991. However it is possible that cohabitation may break down prior to this point.

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[3] In fact, the time-varying variables are measured 8 months prior to the birth, to capture effects at conception rather than at birth.

Figure 2   Rates of Births to Women Before Any Marriage or Cohabitation
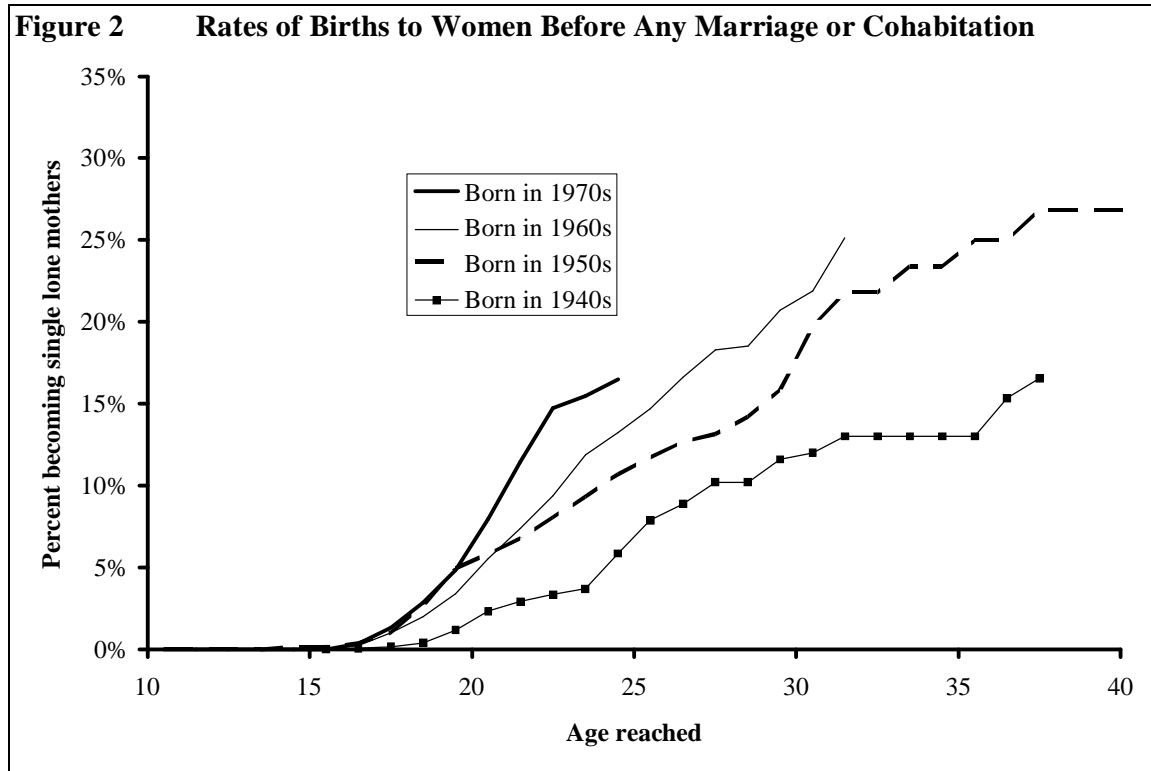
Each woman in the sample is followed from the month after her 12th birthday (the earliest year of birth observed, less 8 months), until she either had a baby or formed a partnership, or the date of the survey interview. However, there were no pre-marital births after the age of 38 years, so this has been taken as an upper age cut-off in the analysis.

The birth and partnership outcomes of women are shown in Table 2. There were a total of 437 births prior to *any* cohabitation or marriage, comprising 8.6 per cent of the sample. In a further 34 cases there was a birth and partnership seemingly commencing in the same month.

Table 2   Birth and partnership outcomes

	Number of women	Per cent of women
Total number of women in the sample	5,077	100.0
Birth (before any marriage or cohabitation)	437	8.6
Marry or cohabit prior to any birth	3,805	74.9
Birth and partnership in same month	34	0.7
No cohabitation, marriage or birth (censored by interview date)	801	15.8

The 5077 women in the sample were 'at risk' for a total of 614,479 months (an average of ten years per woman). Since the event in question occurred on 437 occasions, this translates to a

'hazard rate' of 7.1 pre-marital births per 10,000 months. We may use this figure to compare the hazard rates for different groups of women.

First, we consider the effect of birth cohort, and of age. The effect of birth cohort is likely to be reflecting changes in attitudes and behaviour of different generations. As shown in Table 3, the rate of pre-partnership births increases for each younger birth cohort. Compared to the rate across the sample as a whole, those born in the 1930s had one-third (36 per cent) the rate of pre-partnership births; those born in the 1970s had over double the rate (228 per cent). The rate of such births by age shows that the late teens were the most likely ages for such births, with a similar rate for those in their twenties. The rate of births to those aged 12-15 was extremely low, but somewhat higher for those aged 16 or 17. The rate of pre-partnership births then was low in the early 30s, but somewhat higher among the small number of those in their late 30s who had not formed a partnership.

Table 3   Effect of birth cohort and age group on pre-partnership births

	Woman months	Relative risk (100 = 7.11 per 10,000)
Year of birth (fixed)		
1930-39	161846	36
1940-49	107333	51
1950-59	134523	98
1960-69	153541	156
1970-79	57236	228
Age group (time-varying)		
12-15	239931	18
16-17	111100	124
18-19	89009	186
20-24	108587	174
25-29	37173	170
30-34	17312	49
35-38	11367	62

While the reasons behind pre-partnership births are complex, the role of expectations is often said to be important. There is no easy means of measuring such expectations. In the absence of such data, the analyst must use proxy measures, such as characteristics of the family of origin. In Table 4 we show the effect of the father's background on the rate of pre-partnership births. Where fathers were on state benefits, not in work or (particularly) where unemployed, the rate of pre-partnership births of their daughters was more than twice the average.

Looking at social class, there is a clear gradient of a higher likelihood of pre-partnership births, for those from lower social class backgrounds. The rate was only 42 per cent of the average for those from 'upper' middle class backgrounds, and nearly double the average (170 per cent) for those from unskilled working class origins.

Table 4   Effect of father's background on pre-partnership births

	Woman months	Relative risk (100 = 7.11 per 10,000)
Father's status when respondent age 16		
Working	587806	90
Unemployed	5362	315
On a pension	3638	0
On a state benefit	6087	185
Deceased	36789	84
Not working	14720	200
Missing	20077	245
Social grade		
Professional	23723	42
Clerical	109776	72
Skilled manual	44286	86
Semi-skilled manual	153932	140
Unskilled	20709	170

The same analysis may be done for the background of the mother (Table 5), although it is customary to equate social origins with the characteristics of the father rather than the mother. However, this analysis tends to suggest that measured features of the mother have similar explanatory power to those of the father. Rates of pre-partnership births were highest where mothers were unemployed and looking for work; lowest were women were described as not working or as housewives. The social class gradient was at least as steep when based on the occupation of the mother.

Table 5   Effect of mother's background on pre-partnership births

	Woman months	Relative risk (100 = 7.11 per 10,000)
Mother's status when respondent age 16		
Working	304618	109
Unemployed	4041	348
On a pension	573	245
On a state benefit	1643	171
Deceased	17982	70
Not working / housewife	276091	85
Missing	9531	162
Social grade		
Professional	96878	40
Clerical	116625	65
Skilled manual	183758	96
Semi-skilled manual	128962	138
Unskilled	20391	221

The tabular analysis suggests some factors are strongly associated with this route of entry to lone motherhood. However, a multivariate setting is required to investigate further. The outcome of interest was constructed as a simple dichotomy, and so a logistic regression analysis is one standard means of proceeding. Results are shown in Table A1, in the Annex.

The significant variables include many related to the family of origin. The rate of pre-partnership births was significantly higher where the father had a more manual occupation, and lower were the mother had higher educational qualifications.

This multivariate analysis suggests a link between pre-partnership births, and the expectations formed as part of growing up in families of different types. Variables that did not prove significant included mother's social grade, father's highest qualification, and the country of birth of the woman, her mother and her father. These latter conclusions are significant, in that links are sometimes made between 'race' and early pre-partnership parenting. Certainly, there is an effect of ethnic group, but not (it seems) with having a non-British country of origin.

4.1.2   *Separations among couples with children*
Although 'single' lone motherhood has captured the headlines and has produced the fastest growth rate of lone parenthood in the last decade, separation from a partner remains the most common route into lone parenthood. This can include separations from a marriage or separations from a cohabitation. In the past, analyses of lone parenthood focused on marital status rather than living arrangements and so an unmarried mother who was cohabiting might be considered a lone mother. We focus on living arrangements and so if an unmarried, cohabiting mother separates from her partner, she is considered in the same way as if she had been married. Although the focus on living arrangements has greater validity than focusing

solely on marital status, it should be recognised, as mentioned in the previous chapter, that cohabitation is not the same as marriage and can span a variety of relationship types. A mother who separates from a fairly casual or short-lived cohabitation may have more in common with a woman who has a baby while single. We use living arrangements as the main variable for distinguishing between different groups but marital status and other variables may also be important.

Various studies have identified factors which are associated with an increasing likelihood of divorce. Most of these studies concern all married couples not just those with children. Nevertheless they are informative. Few studies have looked specifically at separations among cohabiting couples. These may be similar to those for married couples but not necessarily. This is an important point, given the rise in cohabitation. The following factors have been identified as increasing the likelihood of divorce:

- Early marriage
- Pre-marital cohabitation
- Pre-marital birth
- Having children early in marriage
- Couples from poor economic backgrounds
- Couples with low educational achievement
- Couples from different social classes
- Experience of marital breakdown among close family
- Having been married previously
- Experience of living apart
- Access to alternative partners
- Access to an alternative home (eg parents' home)
- Ethnicity, that is, black women have a much higher risk of becoming lone parents compared with white women

As we can see, many factors have been identified as being associated with divorce and there have also been some attempts to explain the nature of the relationship between these factors and separations among couples. Getting married early may lead to divorce because it is related to other factors, such as coming from a poor background and having a pre-marital birth or conception. So the inter-relationship between factors is important and makes it difficult to establish cause and effect.

Divorce law is another factor which is often cited as having an effect on divorce rates. the conviction with which people believe that divorce law has an effect on the behaviour of couples - with any apparent relaxation in the law seen as encouraging people to separate. However, there is very little evidence for this and although it is true that the number of divorces rose drastically after the 1969 Divorce Act, these divorces merely marked in law (de jure) the separations which had already occurred in practice (de facto). The 1984 Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act reduced the minimum period after marriage that a petition for divorce could be filed from three years after marriage to one year. Once again, this may not have had any effect on actual separations but there was an increase in the proportion of divorces which were of marriages of short durations.

The analysis is based on woman who had a child during their a relationship: if more the one, the first such instance. The analysis then follows the women from the date of having children, until either the relationship ends, the children age past 17 or leave home, or the interview date

intervenes. The end of the relationship counts as an event; the other occurrences are treated as censored.

The following variables were found to be insignificant (annex Table A2).
- Whether married or cohabiting (time-varying).
- Whether the relationship began as a marriage or cohabitation.
- Ethnic group.
- Social background characteristics of the woman's mother and father (social grade, employment status, highest qualification, etc).

The main factors associated with the end of relationships were:
- duration (shorter durations more likely to split, with the risk tailing off after about 30 years);
- relationships started at a young age;
- relationships where the conception was before marriage (irrespective of whether the first birth was before or after the marriage date).

The existence of associations of these kind have led some to comment that *"For marital breakdown, it would appear that the answer lies not in our social class (nor our background) but in ourselves"* (Murphy, 1985: 460). In other words, that it appears to be behaviour rather than background that leads to higher rates of breakdown - and this is confirmed here for our sample that is all relationships (whether married or cohabiting) and only involving those with dependent children.

4.2 Leaving Lone Parenthood: The Duration of Lone Motherhood
The rise in lone parenthood could be due to an increase in the number of women who become lone parents and/or an increase in the length of time women remain lone parents. The duration of lone parenthood is therefore key to an understanding of the growth of lone parenthood.

People may stop being lone parents for a number of reasons. Usually this is the result of forming a (new) partnership. The other 'event' that can mean the end of this status is when the youngest child ages beyond dependency (i.e. 16/18 years) or leaves the household through another route (such as death or going into care).

The sample contained 5074 women. In total, 1272 of them had been lone mothers at some point in time. Among this group:
- 1050 had been lone mothers for one spell (83 per cent of them);
- 196 had been lone mothers in two separate spells;
- 24 had been lone mothers on three different occasions;
- 2 had been lone mothers on four separate occasions.

Put another way, the sample generated 1522 *spells* of lone motherhood. To simplify matters in the current analysis, however, the focus is on the first time that women became lone mothers.

People may cease being lone mothers when their children become older (and hence are no longer counted as dependent), or through living with a partner. In some cases, lone mothers were still in this status when last observed at the interview. Overall, 42 per cent of observed spells ended with the lone mother finding a new partner, with the remainder split between

those still lone mothers (37 per cent), and those who children had aged out of dependent range (21 per cent). A breakdown by status at the start of the first spell of lone parenthood is shown in Table 7. Those divorced were the most likely to have re-partnered; the widows the most likely to have seen their children age beyond dependent age.

Table 6   Status at start of lone parenthood, and mode of outflow

Column percentages

	Divorced	Separated	Widowed	Single	All
Re-partner	50	31	31	49	42
Still lone parent at interview ('censored')	24	45	11	42	37
Still lone parent when children reach independent age (16-18)	27	24	59	10	21
Base (=100 per cent)	267	394	94	517	1272

Overall, half of lone mothers would be expected to (re-)partner within 70 months, or a little short of 6 years. The duration of lone motherhood was shortest for single and divorced mothers, at around four and a half years in each case. However it would be more than ten years before half of all widows would form a couple, and almost seven years for those whose marriage ended in a legal separation.

There was clear evidence that the duration as lone mothers, for those counted as 'single', has increased substantially compared to previous evidence. Table 8 compares the results from this study with those based on data from 1980 and 1986. The median duration as a single lone mother (the time within which half would be expected to change status) has risen from around three years, to closer to five years using the most recent evidence. The estimated duration as a lone mother for divorced women appears to have hardly changed.

Table 7   The Median Duration (months) of Lone Motherhood by Marital Status

	Family and Working Lives Survey 1994-95	BHPS panel data 1991-95: from transition rates (Böheim and Ermisch 1998)	BHPS life history data 1992: from transition rates (Böheim and Ermisch 1998)	SCELI life history data 1986 (Rowlingson and McKay 1997)	WES 1980: life history data (Ermisch 1991)
Status of lone mother					
Single	55	55	20	38	35
Divorced	56	} 52	} 64	56	} 59
Separated	82			102	
Widowed	126	-	-	-	-
Overall median duration (months)	70	-	-	-	-

The two BHPS estimates are derived from transition rates. The other estimates are based on life-table estimation.

Whilst summary figures are useful, Figure 7 shows the yearly rate at which people left lone motherhood among those with different living arrangements. After two years, for example, 30 per cent of divorcees and 31 per cent of the singles, but only 14 per cent of those 'separated' and 11 per cent of widowed mothers would have started living with a new partner.

Figure 3   Time Taken to Leave Lone Motherhood
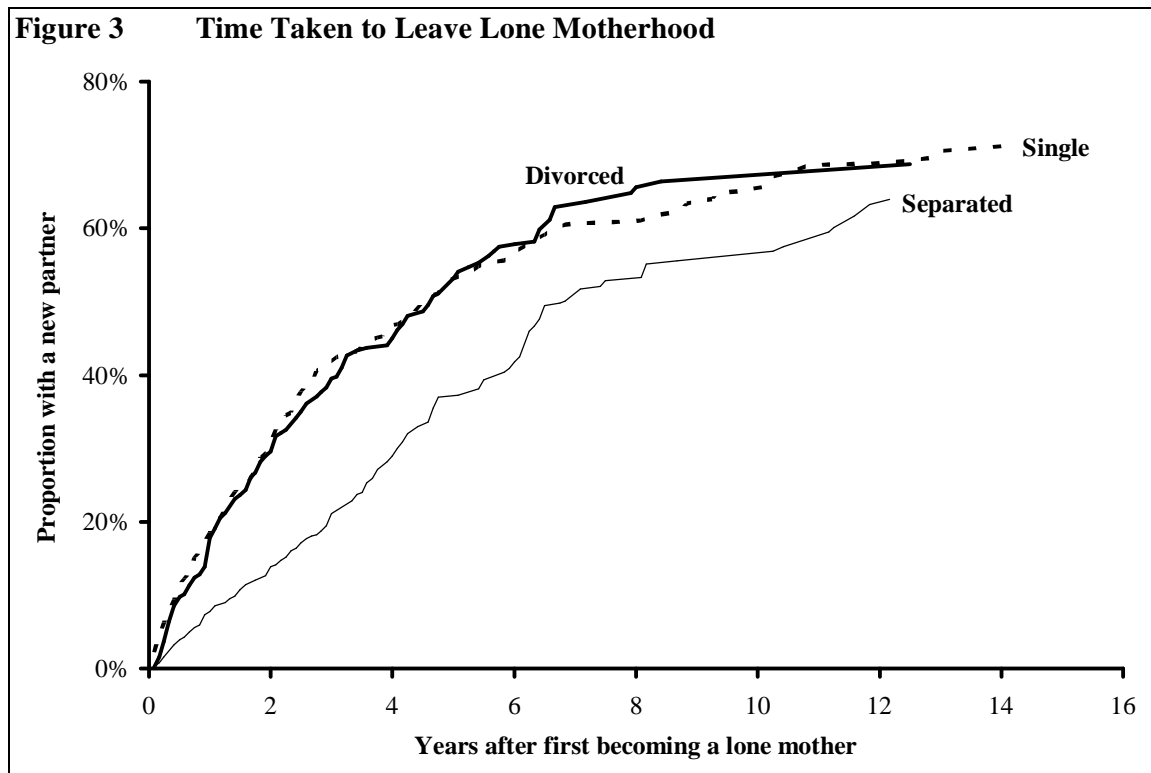
4.2.1   Models of the duration of lone motherhood

Rowlingson and McKay (1998) found that never-marrieds had a higher probability of leaving lone motherhood than the previously married, in line with the life-table estimates. However, most of this difference appeared to reflect experience in the 1960s and 1970s, with similar exit rates by the mid-1980s. Separate estimates were derived for the previously and never-married.

Payne and Range (1998) explored the duration of lone parenthood for the 33 year-olds in the British 1958 Birth Cohort. The likelihood of leaving lone parenthood was greater for those who become lone mothers at a young age, although the negative effect of increasing age appeared to remain constant for those becoming lone mothers in their mid to late twenties.

Those who did not have a partner the month before becoming a lone parent were less likely to leave lone parenthood (though whether that was marriage or cohabitation did not make a difference). The possibility of reconciliation with that partner appeared to be an important explanation of why.

Partnering was more common for women who had children aged at least five when they *became* a lone mother. Partnering was less common for women who had a child at least nine months into the spell of lone motherhood. Living in London and the South (at age 16) tended to shorten the duration of lone motherhood. The likelihood of leaving lone motherhood fell at longer duration, but was more constant past 7 years of lone motherhood. Social tenants (tenure expressed as a time-varying variable), and especially those living in their own parents home, were less likely to leave lone motherhood.

In work on the BHPS data 1991-95, few variables appear to affect the duration of lone motherhood. Among the previously partnered, the chances of re-partnering reduce with age at

20

the start of the spell of lone motherhood, and with the (log of the) duration of the spell. There were the same effects, but of larger size, for never-married lone mothers.

5   CONCLUSIONS

The theme of this article has been that family changes respond to economic changes (including the experience of poverty), and cannot be simply regarded as an input into changes in poverty. The causal links run in both directions.

Lone parents are a growing group in Great Britain and elsewhere, and now represent one quarter of families with children (Haskey 2002). In the longer term, perhaps one half of British children will pass through a non-intact family at some stage in their childhood. Lone parents have been an important area of social policy study, given their high rates of receipt of social assistance. Their low incomes may be traced to low rates of economic activity, low rates of maintenance receipt, and relatively lower earnings when in paid work.

The importance of lone parents as a group lies not only in their high rates of poverty, but also in the potential consequences of poverty and changing family types on the lives lived by children. The issue of outcomes for children is receiving more attention – partly in the light of policies to move lone parents into the labour market, treating lone parents as workers rather than carers. The use of longitudinal methods of investigation is crucial in this latter topic. Family change, employment situation and child well-being are all dynamic concepts.

One way of studying social assistance dynamics is to look at the groups in receipt, and it is customary to find lone parents common among them. Since the seminal work by Bane and Ellwood (1986), it is has become familiar to analyse transitions into and out of poverty using 'employment change' and 'family change' as the main methods of classification. The significant proportion of poverty transitions triggered by family changes have often provoked comments. Nevertheless, demographers have tended to model family change, at least in part, as a response to economic and social change, not merely one factor influencing those changes.

Certainly, longitudinal analysis of changes in family type and changes in paid work do not reveal a straightforward causal relationship. Among women becoming lone parents, rates of paid work were quite low before the transition into lone parenthood, and hardly rose among those leaving lone parenthood. So low rates of economic activity may not be attributed to lone parenthood, but instead answers lie elsewhere. The answer may be found in the generally poorer economic circumstances of those becoming lone parents. Those from more working class backgrounds are among the most likely to become single lone mothers (the poorest group), and poorer women are more likely to see their partnerships dissolve and see them become lone parents. In this sense, lone parenthood is a cause as well as a consequence of lone parenthood. Lone parenthood 'selects' (Ermisch and Wright 1993) a group of women who would, even without this family transition, be more likely than average to be poor.

Analysis of the dynamics of lone parenthood using data over time on the same people is necessary to develop such conclusions. Cross-sectional analysis tends to provide a picture based more on longer-term prevalence, rather than the flows into and out of lone parenthood. The latter are more crucial in developing causal theories, and require longitudinal data and analytical methods (Allison 1984). In attempting to construct theories about the underlying causes of lone parent poverty, and in looking at the consequences of lone parents being poor,

it is crucial to use longitudinal methods. Cross-sectional methods are not generally capable of identifying the longer term causal paths – often called 'trajectories' – affecting changes in family status, poverty and employment status.

It is often difficult to draw policy conclusions from empirical work of this kind. Should the appropriate policy response be to enable lone parents to more easily combine work and caring (such as through childcare), or to work instead on the proportion of women who become lone parents (such as through measures to strengthen or perhaps reward two parent families)? This is partly a matter of whether policy should be following family changes, or instead seeking to reverse such trends (albeit one might predict likely to have Canute levels of success), or regard them as individual choices not affecting the policy direction.

Until quite recently, policy was neutral towards whether lone parents should work or provide childcare at home. The policy agenda since 1997 has been much more strongly focused on moving all work-capable people into work, whilst removing some benefits that were specifically for lone parents. Even so, in the UK childcare remains predominantly met through private incomes, and seen as a personal rather than collective responsibility, which will put upper limits on the success of such policies.

It is a longer term agenda to alter some of the structural factors affecting routes into lone parenthood, and the ability of lone parents to avoid poverty once there. To date, attempts to alter 'family attitudes' have been directed mostly towards enforcing financial obligations of absent fathers. However, this has met with little success in terms of increased incomes for lone parents – indeed policy is currently reducing the average level of assessments. Nor have attempts to strengthen two parent families been particularly strongly pursued. Perhaps where policies are most effective is in areas where families are treated as a whole, rather than particular groups being targeted for separate attention. Moves towards reducing *child* poverty, rather than expressing this in terms of the poverty of particular adults, are welcome. Even so, most policy reforms will necessarily be about the incomes of those adults. We know from international evidence that countries applying the most selective policies do worst in combating poverty among families, and more solidaristic policies do rather better (Barnes et al 2002).

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Annex Detailed statistical models of routes into lone parenthood

Table A1   Multivariate model of pre-partnership births

	Exp(B) effect on odds	Wald	Significance
Economic activity# (reference group = unemployed)		44.44	0.00
Paid work	0.50	11.17	0.00
Inactive	1.00	0.00	1.00
Missing	0.35	11.86	0.00
Birth cohort (ref = 1960s)		158.39	0.00
1930s	0.30	38.19	0.00
1940s	0.52	11.16	0.00
1960s	1.57	11.59	0.00
1970s	3.02	49.58	0.00
Age group# (ref = 20-24)		222.83	0.00
12-15	0.04	197.90	0.00
16-17	0.47	28.09	0.00
18-19	0.95	0.17	0.68
25-29	1.14	0.56	0.45
30-34	0.38	5.27	0.00
35-38	0.62	1.08	0.30
Ethnic group (ref = white)		26.21	0.00
Black	2.58	20.70	0.00
Indian sub-continent	0.36	4.93	0.03
Other	1.04	0.01	0.92
Missing	0.02	0.09	0.76
Mother's economic activity (ref = unemployed)		16.87	0.01
Missing	0.56	1.12	0.29
Working	0.29	14.17	0.00
Pension	0.37	0.88	0.35
On benefit	0.30	2.37	0.12
Deceased	0.49	1.70	0.19
Not working	0.31	12.41	0.00
Father's economic activity (ref = unemployed)		27.14	0.00
Missing	1.95	2.12	0.15
Working	0.64	1.19	0.28
Pension	0.01	1.09	0.30
On benefit	0.51	2.13	0.14
Deceased	1.10	0.04	0.85
Not working	0.74	0.63	0.43
Mother's highest qualification (ref = clerical qualification)		27.39	0.00
Degree or higher	0.65	0.55	0.46
Professional qualification	1.25	0.33	0.57
Apprenticeship	1.69	0.97	0.33
HNC/D (18+ vocational)	1.15	0.06	0.80
A level (aged 18)	1.23	0.12	0.72
O level (age 16)	0.83	0.20	00.65
None	2.00	5.40	0.02
Missing	2.64	9.39	0.00
Father's social grade (ref = C1, clerical)		55.35	0.00
Higher professional	1.63	1.55	0.21
Associate professional	0.53	1.13	0.29
Skilled manual	0.64	3.31	0.07
Semi-skilled manual	1.49	5.85	0.02
Unskilled manual	2.40	27.34	0.00
Not working	2.90	9.00	0.00
Missing	1.36	0.33	0.56
Constant	(-5.44)	67.32	0.00

# indicates that the variable is time-varying

Table A2   Multivariate model of relationships with children breaking down

	Exp(B) effect on odds	Wald	Significance
Duration in years#	0.740	189.1	0.000
Squared duration in years#	1.003	8.2	0.004
Work status (ref=unemployed) #		13.9	0.003
Paid work	0.965	0.0	0.826
Inactive	0.736	3.7	0.056
Missing	0.594	1.4	0.236
Timing of conception (ref=first year)		88.8	0.000
Pre-marital birth	1.201	2.1	0.147
Pre-marital conception	1.227	3.4	0.067
Years 1-5	0.636	19.2	0.000
Year 5 or later	0.392	37.9	0.000
Age at start of relationship (ref =20-24)		64.9	0.000
16-19	1.499	24.9	0.000
25-29	0.644	10.7	0.001
30-34	0.327	9.7	0.002
35-39	0.286	3.1	0.079
40+	0.977	0.0	0.982
Constant	(-3.129)	272.1	0.000

# indicates that the variable is time-varying