

Children's mental health worsens after single mothers forced to seek employment, says study

March 16 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

A welfare-to-work reform has increased employment rates for lone mothers but at a cost to her and her children's mental health, new

research shows.

A study by King's College London has found that while welfare-to-work programs do increase employment for lone mothers, the impact this can have on their children and [adolescents](#) is often overlooked.

Prior to 2008, lone parents in the UK who were not at work and had no income were entitled to unconditional Income Support (IS) until their youngest child turned 16. A policy reform introduced in November 2008 led to the Lone Parent Obligation (LPO), which requires the lone parent to be actively seeking employment in order to receive IS.

The same reform also gradually lowered the age threshold of the youngest child to the age of three. Once the youngest child reaches the age threshold, lone parents are no longer eligible for unconditional IS.

The result of this change has led to a ten-percentage point increase in employment for lone mothers. However, researchers in the Centre for Society & Mental Health and the Department of Global Health & Social Medicine have shown the reform has also caused poor [mental health](#) for their children—including adolescent children.

Analyzing data for more than 11,000 children and adolescents from the UK Millennium Cohort Study, researchers Professor Mauricio Avendano Pabon and Dr. Liming Li examined changes in mental health for adolescent children from lone mother families compared to mental health changes for adolescent children from two-parent families.

They found the reform increased lone mother's employment and income, but these potential positive effects failed to translate into improvements in mental health for their [adolescent children](#). The study showed the reform did not reduce the risk of family poverty and it contributed to mothers' psychological distress.

Mothers also reported that time with their children was insufficient and many rated themselves 'low' in terms of their [health](#).

Concerned researchers are calling for government policymakers to assess the overall impacts of welfare-to-work programs, including the potential intergenerational consequences on child and adolescent socioemotional development.

Dr. Liming Li says, "Previous studies have focused on the impact of mothers' employment on very young children. Our study is unique as it examines how a policy reform that incentivises mothers' employment impacts adolescents. Although we found the negative effects on adolescents to be relatively small, our study offers a mixed picture of the benefits of welfare-to-work programs on families and questions the assumption that these schemes improve the developmental outcomes of young children and adolescents."

[Previous research](#) shows an adolescent's socioemotional development can be affected by changes in family income, their mother's mental well-being, the opportunity costs of time, parenting practices and work-family conflicts.

In the UK, the proportion of mothers with dependent [children](#) who are in work has risen dramatically over the last two decades. The largest increase in employment has occurred among lone mothers, rising from 44.2% in 1999 to 65.1% in 2022.

Reasonable steps for seeking employment may include registering with recruitment agencies, writing a CV, and spending a specified number of hours each week looking for work.

Professor Mauricio Avendano Pabon and Dr. Liming Li's study is among the first to investigate the intergenerational impact of lone parent

[employment](#) policies on adolescents' socioemotional development.

The study is published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*.

More information: Liming Li et al, Lone parents' employment policy and adolescents' socioemotional development: Quasi-experimental evidence from a UK reform, *Social Science & Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.115754](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.115754)

Provided by King's College London

Citation: Children's mental health worsens after single mothers forced to seek employment, says study (2023, March 16) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-03-children-mental-health-worsens-mothers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.