

Is single parenting a social problem?



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Definition

The issue of lone parenting is quite clearly one that is of significant importance and impact in the modern social context. It is also one that has different viewpoints, which are important to recognise in the context of this report. While the actual term of ' lone parenting' is a given, it is important to understand the various views which are taken in order to address this problem. For example, ' New Labour's' social policy towards lone parents is generally governed by the attitudes epitomised in the mantras " reforming welfare around the work ethic" and funding a system that " believes in empowerment not dependency" (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001, p xv). This quite obviously conflicts with the view which was held by previous governments, which is said to maintain the view that poverty is " relieved by cash handouts" (DSS, 1998, p 19). It is also said that the differences between these two viewpoints epitomises the differing views of ' old Labour' and ' new Labour' (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001, p xv), and also highlights the shift between the welfare state policy to a more capitalist approach to addressing the lone parenting issue.

Main Issues

Given the discussion of the United Kingdom's approach to lone parenting, it might be relevant to compare these provisions with those of other jurisdictions. Take, for example, New Zealand which categorises ' solo parents' as:

(a) A woman who is the mother of one or more dependent children and who is living apart from, and has lost the support of, or is being inadequately maintained by, her husband:

(b) An unmarried woman who is the mother of one or more dependent children:

(c) A woman whose marriage has been dissolved by divorce and who is the mother of one or more dependent children:...

(e) A woman who is the mother of one or more dependent children and who has lost the regular support of her husband because he is subject to a sentence of imprisonment and is-

(i) serving the sentence in a penal institution; or

(ii) subject to release conditions or detention conditions (as those terms are defined in section 4(1) of the Parole Act 2002) that prevent him undertaking employment:

(f) A man who is the father of one or more dependent children whose mother is dead or who for any other reason are not being cared for by their mother (Social Security Act 1964 (NZ), s 27B(1)).

Arguably, in consideration of the above, it is clear that the New Zealand social security system is geared more towards caring for a woman who may be a lone parent, as opposed to a father. It might also be noted, however, that social security benefits are only paid to lone parents in New Zealand if the parent is of the minimum age of sixteen (16) years, unless emergency circumstances exist (Social Security Act 1964 (NZ), s 27B(2)).

Compare this situation to that across the Tasman Sea in Australia, where the Australian Bureau of Statistics has recorded a three-fold increase in lone parenting families in the last thirty (30) years, from 7. 1% in 1969 to 21. 4%

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in 1999 (ABS census). However given this increase, it might also be worthwhile to note that lone parenting in Australia remains at lower levels than other English-speaking countries, but still higher than some countries in continental Europe (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001, p 61). Further to this, it has generally been the attitude of Australian governments to extend social security benefits to all classes of lone parenting families, irrespective of the cause of the lone parenting situation (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001, p 65). Around 47% of lone mothers were employed in 1999 and around 63% of lone fathers, and approximately 9% of both lone mothers and lone fathers were unemployed (ABS, June 1999). This perhaps symbolises a non-dependency on the welfare system, and that lone parents in Australia generally try to work at least part-time to supplement their welfare incomes and provide for their family.

Key Dilemmas

The key dilemma that has been the recurring theme throughout this paper is the need to balance income support and welfare with the need for non-dependence on the welfare system. There is a conscientious push by governments in the above countries to not encourage reliance upon welfare handouts and to push these people to seek active employment, but also recognises the various situations of lone parents who may be unable to work full time for any number of reasons. The United Kingdom obviously recognises this problem in a social context, and took steps to address it through social policy reform. Some say that this was a more 'heavy handed' approach to the social problem, and this argument may have some merit given the approaches of other countries. New Zealand prescribes certain

circumstances where welfare can be paid, and Australia has a more liberal approach to the welfare system, however all of these approaches seem to function appropriately in their individual contexts.

Conclusion

In consideration of the above points, it is quite clear that lone parents are a significant social problem. However, the more prominent problem is that of how to address the issue. It is quite clear that the United Kingdom has a more recent history of reforming social policy on this issue and limiting the distribution of welfare benefits. Is this the most appropriate course of action? Some would suggest no, given the experience of other countries. However, regard needs to be had for the statistics: approximately one in four of Britain's seven million families are headed by a lone parent, and less than four in ten lone parents in Britain work full time (which is a piecemeal 16 hours a week statistically) (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001, p 11). This only serves to fuel the debate further, and one needs to consider the legislative and policy-based approach of the United Kingdom in context before judgement on this issue can be passed.

Bibliography

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