

# Centre for Research in Social Policy

BLOG – *Wednesday 6 February 2019*

## “Is it time to reassess strategies for helping lone parents to make ends meet?”

Donald Hirsch

Over one in five children today grows up with a lone parent. Most live with mothers who have no child maintenance arrangement, so depend principally on their own earnings and state support to make ends meet. [Three in four](#) end up with income lower than the minimum needed for an acceptable living standard.

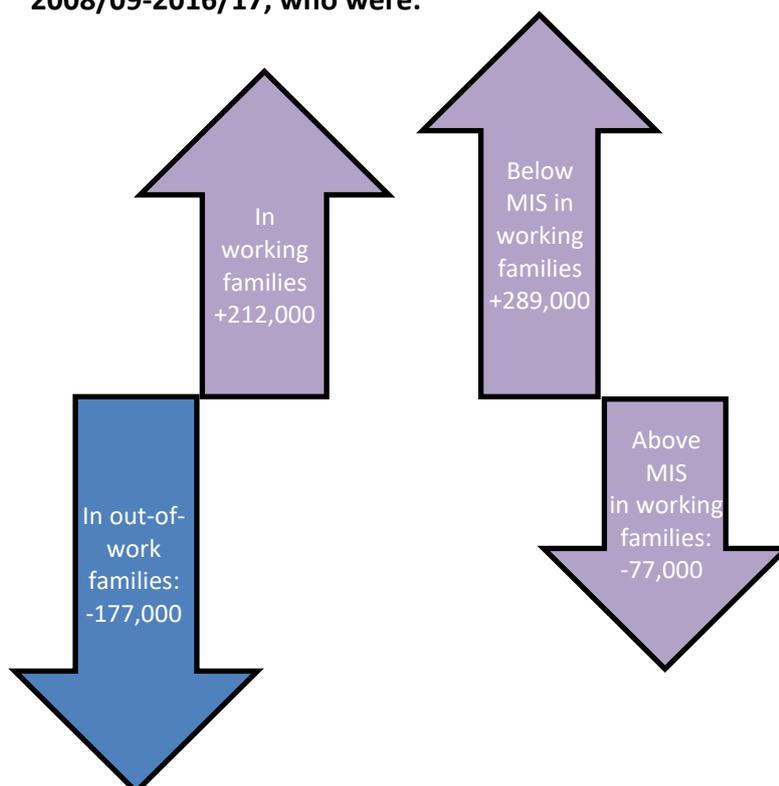
Aware that this is an important driver of child poverty, governments have spent two decades trying to address this situation. A radical departure was the introduction of the tax credit system which gave substantial top-ups to low-income working parents as well as helping to fund their childcare. This policy, combined with various employment schemes, helps explain why the majority (58%) of lone parents work today, compared to the minority (45%) at the turn of the century. The present government continues to base its solution on the mantra ‘work is the best route out of poverty’, but has followed this through with less carrot (by cutting tax credits) and more stick (by requiring parents with ever-younger children to seek work as a condition of getting benefits).

It is becoming ever clearer that policies that succeed in getting more lone parents into work do *not* automatically succeed in reducing poverty or low income. Parents who take part-time, poorly paid jobs and face high costs such as travel and childcare may be little or no better off than before. Working poverty has increased, and now comprises two-thirds of all child poverty. Only a quarter of all lone parents are reaching our [Minimum Income Standard](#).

In our [latest analysis of this problem](#), two statistics are particularly revealing.

The first shows that over the past decade, the growth in the number with low working incomes (below the Minimum Income Standard) has *exceeded* the growth in the number in work:

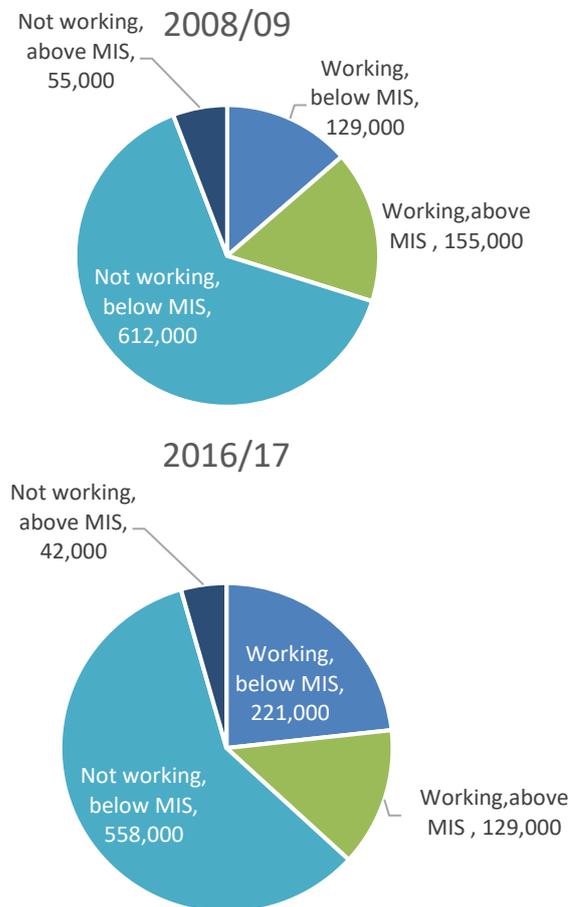
**Change in number of children of lone parents,  
2008/09-2016/17, who were:**



In other words, it is not just that as lone parents move into employment, they fail to raise their incomes above the minimum standard. It's also that more of those already in work are falling below it. The picture is even starker for part-timers: the number of children with part-time working parents who are below MIS has almost doubled over this period. Those cuts in tax credits combined with employment that gives fewer or more erratic hours can help explain this.

The other statistic surprised me considerably. This shows the situation for children of lone parents in families where at least one child is under five. That's around a million children, each living with a lone parent who is trying to juggle looking after a pre-school child and meeting her family's economic needs. For this sub-group, there has also been an increase in work but a fall in the number who work gets above MIS. But what's really striking here is that, because relatively fewer are working and of these only a third get above MIS, over eight in ten such children still end up on incomes that are inadequate. What's more, for the majority of lone parents with young children who do not work, we project that once present policies have fully fed through into the system, no fewer than 86% will be at least 25% below the MIS level – meaning that being a lone parent with a small child will be a recipe for severe hardship if nothing new is done to prevent this.

### Children in lone parent families with at least one child under 5, by working and MIS status



This is a highly depressing outcome of two decades of policy focused on using work as the 'best route out of poverty'. Is it now time to start basing policy on the reality that when children are young, lone parents need the choice of staying at home to look after them without this entailing dire poverty? This means thinking what has seemed unthinkable for recent governments: conducting a proper review of what incomes out-of-work families require to make ends meet. If instead the only focus is on trying to get parents with ever-younger children into work, we'll be condemning another generation of young children to a life of hardship.

[Slideshow summarising the data on lone parents](#)