

Caring without sharing

Single parents' journey through the Covid-19 crisis.

Interim Report

November 2020

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In partnership with

 **ies** institute for
employment
studies

About Gingerbread

Gingerbread is the leading national charity working with single parent families. Our mission is to champion and enable single parent families to live secure, happy and fulfilling lives. Since 1918, we've been supporting, advising and campaigning with single parents to help them meet the needs of their families and achieve their goals. We want to create a world in which diverse families can thrive. We won't stop working until we achieve this vision. Whatever success means for a single parent – a healthy family, a flexible job, stable finances or a chance to study – we work with them to make it happen.

About IES

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in public employment policy and HR management. It works closely with employers in all sectors, government departments, agencies, professional bodies and associations. IES is a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, and HR planning and development. IES is a not-for-profit organisation.

**We want
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Acknowledgements

Gingerbread is grateful to the Standard Life Foundation for their support with this report and the Institute for Employment Studies who provided the quantitative analysis and helpful suggestions in the development of our policy asks. Gingerbread would like to thank the single parents who were interviewed as part of our research and who gave valuable insight into their lived experience of working and caring during the COVID-19 Crisis.

Summary

Background

There has been little consideration of the impact of the Covid-19 Crisis on single parents. Our research sought to fill this gap, focusing on those single parent workers who were not defined as 'critical workers' and who are likely to have faced the greatest challenges in terms of needing to work and care simultaneously during Lockdown.



The research involved two strands, an analysis of the official Labour Force Survey (LFS) and qualitative interviews with 40 single parents¹. As part of this research, we will be analysing LFS data up to the end of 2020 and re-interviewing the single parents in January 2021 in order to track the next stages of single parents' journeys through the Crisis and to update and expand our recommendations. The findings of both sets of research will be drawn together in a final report and published in March 2021.

This interim report focuses on the period between March and August 2020. It summarises the analysis of the data and key themes that emerged from the baseline interviews with single parents. On the basis of these data, we make a series of initial recommendations to ensure that the unique position and challenges facing single parents are considered in the context of the continued restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 Crisis.

Key Statistical Findings:

- In early 2020 single parents were less financially secure and on lower incomes than other family types - mothers in coupled households earned almost twice as much per week than single mothers;
- Nearly half (46%) of single parents worked in routine occupations compared to coupled parents (26%). Routine jobs in retail, hotels and restaurants have been particularly impacted by cuts to hours and job losses due to the Crisis;
- Single parents are twice as likely to have a zero hours contract as other family types which puts them at greater risk of job insecurity as a result of the Crisis;
- Whilst the first lockdown saw an increase in those that could work from home, this shift was less pronounced for single parents (22%) than coupled parents (35%);

¹ Further details of the sample of single parents we interviewed and the broader methodology are set out in the Technical Appendix to this report.

- Single parents are more likely to have been furloughed (30%) compared to couple parents (21%), reflecting both single parents' caring responsibilities but also that they are more likely to work in lockdown sectors that will experience further job losses; and
- Single parents were twice as likely to have poor mental health, compared with other family types, immediately before and in the early stages of the Crisis. Overall 51% of single parents reported having depression, bad nerves or anxiety; compared with 27% of couple parents.

Key Themes from Interviews with Single Parents:

- **Changes to working times and location common:** as the UK went into the first Lockdown, the proportion of single parents working from home increased (although this change was less pronounced than for other groups). Attitudes to home working, within the context of Lockdown, were highly polarised. Many single parents changed their hours to fit around caring and home-schooling, although a degree of employer flexibility was needed to facilitate this – and this was not always forthcoming.
- **Furlough - a common outcome but a mixed blessing:** single parents were more likely to be furloughed than other types of non-critical workers. However, there was a lack of clarity about eligibility for the Job Retention Scheme; some single parents with young children were furloughed due to their childcare needs, whilst others did not know this option was available. Being furloughed was seen as a mixed blessing; it facilitated caring and home-schooling but was perceived to have negative impacts in terms of finances and future career development.
- **Multiple challenges of caring during Lockdown:** home-schooling was widely characterised as challenging, due to issues with motivation, a need to work at the same time, problems with online access and patchy provision from schools. Shopping presented particular problems for single parents, due to a lack of online slots and the perception they could not take children into shops with them. As the UK came out of Lockdown, single parents found that available childcare options (both formal and informal) had become more limited – due to, among other causes, nurseries' social distancing requirements and the health concerns of older relatives.
- **Working and caring without sharing - an impossible balancing act:** single parents had to constantly make trade-offs to fulfill their working and caring roles, many of which they were highly uncomfortable with. Employer flexibility played a critical role in easing difficulties, but was sometimes limited or not forthcoming. As a result, reported mental health impacts, for single parents themselves and their children, were widespread. While the financial impacts of the Crisis varied widely, in general they made the financial circumstances experienced by single parent families even more challenging.



- **An uncertain future:** single parents reported considerable uncertainty regarding how they would fulfill their working and caring roles over the next six months, due to a lack of clarity on a range of matters including the timing of returns to offices and the availability of childcare including wraparound care. Beyond the context of Lockdown, there was considerable enthusiasm about continued home working among the single parents who had experienced this, due to associated increases in flexibility and the number of hours they could potentially work. While a number of single parents had lost their jobs or anticipated this outcome, there was a widespread degree of concern about future job security.
- **Greater consideration and clarity required from government:** single parents felt that the unique challenges facing them had not been sufficiently accounted for in policy and guidelines developed in response to the Crisis; there was a widespread perception that they should have been given ‘critical worker’ status, to reflect the fact that many needed to work and care on their own. There was considerable appetite for greater support with education and childcare and for more targeted mental health provision.

Recommendations

Our interim report recommendations are in the context of continued restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 Crisis including the second lockdown.

Our final report will contain broader recommendations for government, policy makers and employers. Our interim recommendations are targeted at supporting single parents through the immediate COVID-19 Crisis and are focused on helping single parents to stay in work, get back to work if they lose their job and to retrain where they work in sectors that may no longer exist. We want the Spending Review to include single parents as a priority in departmental spending.

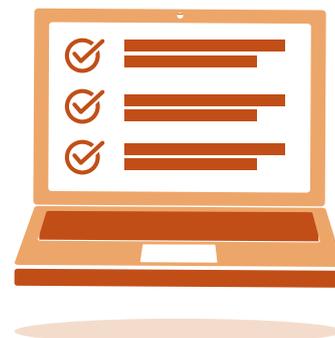
Support to stay in work

The new furlough scheme and the extension to March 2021 are welcome. However, the scheme needs to be used in a more supportive and flexible way to enable single parents to combine work with childcare and other responsibilities. Currently, it is up to employers as to whether a staff member can be part of the furlough scheme. This needs to change so that single parents can have better access to the scheme where they need to for their caring responsibilities including short term furlough when their child needs to self isolate.

In the meantime there needs to be improved financial support for low income single parents who cannot work because of the closure of a child’s class or childcare provider. This could most easily be achieved by simply extending eligibility for the £500 Test and Trace Support Payment to parents in these circumstances.

Support to get back to work

There should be targeted support for single parents who lose their job during the COVID-19 Crisis. Single parents should be identified in guidance as a priority group in the new Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) back to work



programme, and providers encouraged to put in place specialist single parent support, building on the evidence of what has worked in previous programmes such as the New Deal for Lone Parents. Jobcentre Plus offices should use the expansion of work coach capacity as an opportunity to re-introduce specialist single parent advisers and tailored programmes to better support single parents into a job that reflects their skills and caring responsibilities. This should include access to upfront childcare support.

Support to retrain

From our analysis we know that thousands of single parents will have worked in sectors that will not exist in the same way as a result of the COVID-19 Crisis. It is important that single parents are not left behind in opportunities to retrain. The new Lifetime Skills Guarantee is welcome but it must reflect the needs of single parents including matching access to courses with free childcare through Universal Credit and for those with pre-school aged children widening up the 30 hour free offer to those who are in training.

Caring without sharing

There is an evolving body of research examining the journeys of different groups of workers through the Covid-19 Crisis.

However, while there has been some consideration of the links between characteristics such as gender, income and sector, and experiences and outcomes from the Crisis, there has been little consideration to date of single parents as a distinct group.

This report draws on research, funded by the Standard Life Foundation, designed to document the journey through the Covid-19 Crisis of single parents who had to undertake working and caring, largely in isolation. The research involved two strands. Qualitative interviews were undertaken with 40 single parents², who were in work at the point at which the UK went into Lockdown in late March 2020, and who were not defined as 'critical workers' by the government³, enabling them to access key worker childcare and education throughout. In addition, analysis was undertaken of the official Labour Force Survey (LFS), to examine the work characteristics of this group of single parents and the short-term impacts of the Crisis.

This interim report focuses on the period between March and August 2020. It summarises the key themes which emerged from the baseline interviews with single parents, which focused on their experiences and reflections regarding working and caring, with no or limited support, during Lockdown, with analysis of LFS data employed to contextualise these findings and provide a sense of how widely they apply. On the basis of these data, the report makes a series of recommendations to ensure that the unique position and challenges facing single parents are considered where appropriate in policy development through subsequent stages of the Crisis. As part of this research, we will be re-interviewing the 40 single parents in January 2021 and analysing LFS data up to the end of 2020, in order to track the next stages of single parents' journeys through the Crisis and to update and expand our recommendations.

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Before Lockdown: experience of working and caring

Analysis of LFS data was undertaken to identify the demographic and work-related characteristics of single parents who were in work but not employed in critical occupations in early 2020, and to explore how their characteristics differed from the equivalent groups of couple parent and non-parent workers.

More than 80% of this group of single parents are women. They are relatively younger than couple parents, with an average age of 34, compared with 38. Couple parents are more likely to have two or more children, which may partly reflect the average age difference between the two groups. Couple parents are more than twice as likely as single parents to have acquired high levels of education, while single parents are 1.5 times more likely than couple parents to have low levels of education⁴.

² Further details of the sample of single parents we interviewed and the broader methodology are set out in the Technical Appendix to this report.

³ All of the 40 single parents we interviewed reported that they were not defined as 'critical workers' although, in a small number of instances, we suspect their understanding was incorrect. Across the interviews, there emerged

⁴ Further details of the characteristics of single parents, couple parents and those without dependent children who were in work in early 2020, but were not critical workers, are set out in the Technical Appendix, Table A.2.

Nearly half (46%) of single parents work in a routine or manual occupation, compared with a quarter (26%) of couple parents and 30% of people without dependent children. A striking 37% of single parents are employed in distribution, hotels and restaurants, a sector that was directly affected by the Crisis, compared with 21% and 24% of couple parents and people without dependent children respectively. By contrast, single parents are half as likely to work in manufacturing or construction as other groups (11% of single parents compared with more than 20% of couple parents or people without dependent children).

Across all three types of family formation, more than 90% of those working as employees held permanent positions, and similarly more than 90% were working for the private sector. Single parents were somewhat less likely to be self-employed than other groups (14%, compared with 21% and 18% of couple parents and people without dependent children respectively).

In early 2020, single parents were less financially secure and on lower incomes than other family types. Three-quarters (75%) of single parents reported that they were claiming benefits, compared with 36% of coupled parents. Mothers in coupled households earned almost twice as much per week than single mothers. Single parents were more than twice as likely to live in rented accommodation than other household types, with nearly three-quarters (74%) doing so, compared with only 32% and 38% of couple parents and people without dependent children. Just one in four single parents were owner-occupiers (26%), compared with nearly two thirds (68%) of couple parents⁵.

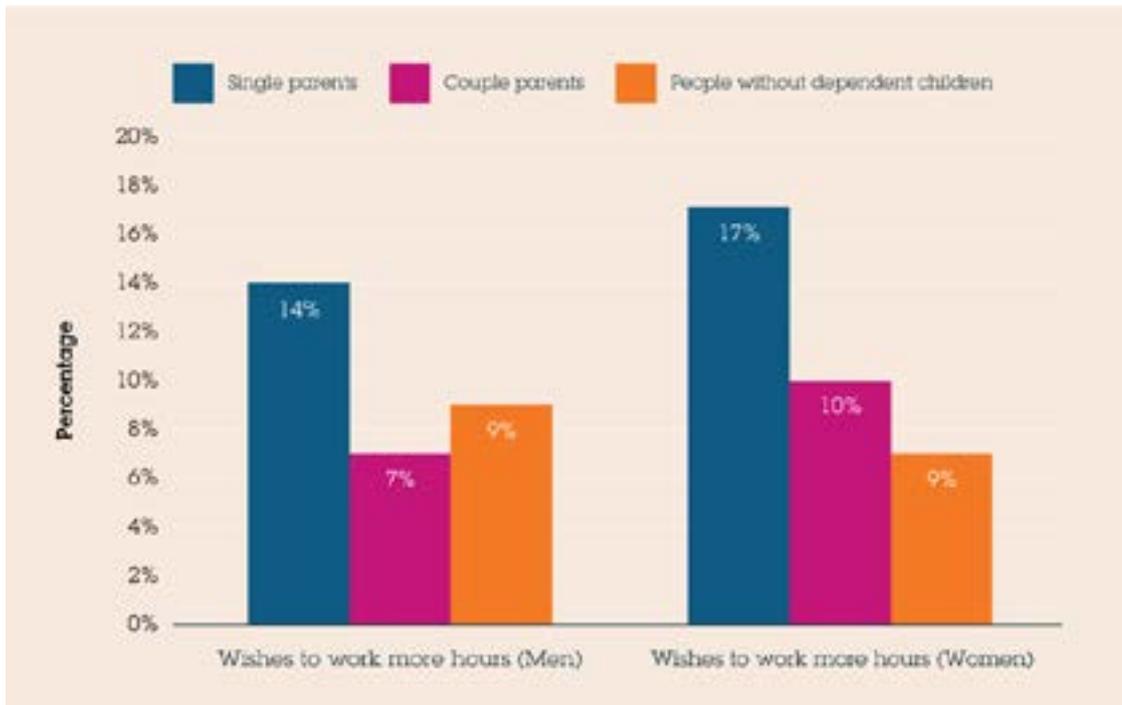


Figure 1:
Underemployment,
by family type
and gender

Source: Labour Force Survey, January – March 2020

Single parent workers of both genders in non-critical occupations were more likely to want to work a greater number of hours each week at their current wage, compared with other family types, as shown in Figure 1.

⁵ Either owned their house outright or had a mortgage

Single parent workers of both genders in non-critical occupations were more likely to want to work a greater number of hours each week at their current wage, compared with other family types, as shown in Figure 1.

Single parents were slightly less likely to use flexi-time working arrangements than other family types, which may reflect their greater likelihood of working in routine and manual occupations and to be relatively younger. However they were about twice as likely to have term-time arrangements, although this only accounts for 4% of this group of single parents. Of more concern is the fact that single parents were more than twice as likely to have a zero hour contract as other family types, putting them at greater risk of job insecurity and of losing hours and income during the Crisis. However this only accounts for 5% of this group.

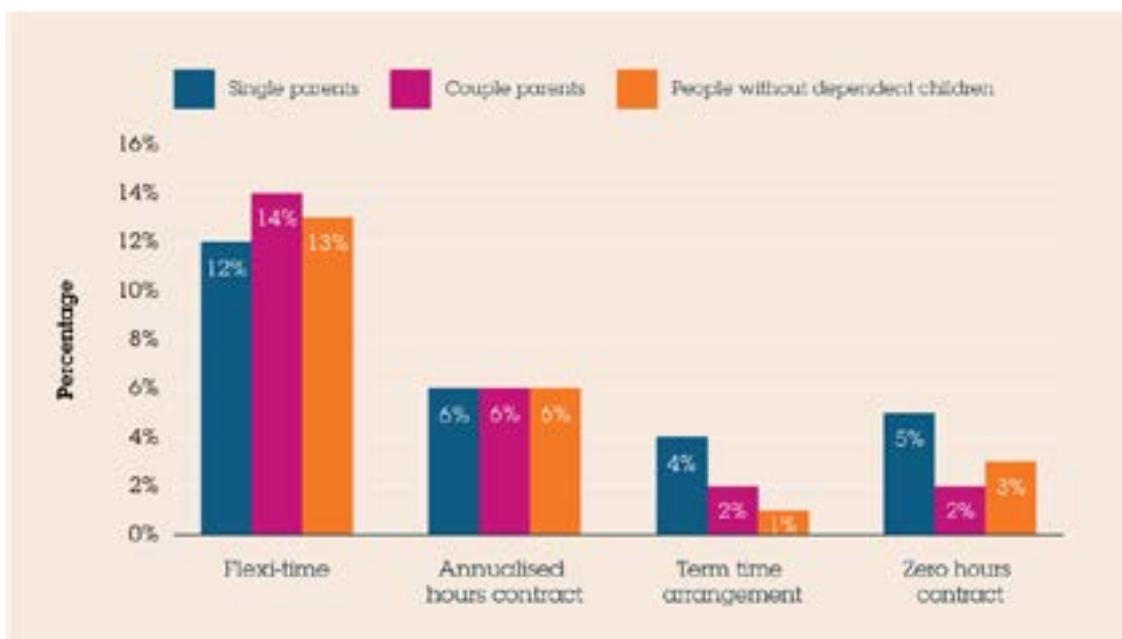


Figure 2:
Alternative working arrangements by family type

Source: Labour Force Survey, October – December 2019

Base: Individuals aged 16-24 who were not defined as 'critical workers'

Our qualitative interviews with single parents found that, at the start of March 2020, they were combining working and caring using a wide range of arrangements. These arrangements tended to involve a great deal of routine and precise planning. In some cases, single parents had made compromises in terms of the level or amount of paid work they were doing to facilitate their caring. While some single parents were finding working and caring relatively straight-forward at that point in time, others were finding it challenging. The availability of ad hoc informal childcare, or the involvement of children's non-resident parents, appeared to do much to ease individual circumstances.

Into Lockdown: impacts on work

The move to put the UK into Lockdown in March 2020 had a range of immediate and longer-term impacts in terms of work for the single parents we spoke to, with a number experiencing several impacts successively:

- Many single parents moved to working from home, at least in the short-term, before another outcome took place. In a small number of instances, single parents needed to continue working in offices or other settings, either partially or fully – especially those in public-facing roles.

- Some single parents experienced changes to their terms and conditions, particularly in terms of reduced hours due to a lower demand for their work during the Crisis. Some had to perform their work in a different way, particularly those with public or client-facing roles.
- A number of single parents were immediately or eventually placed on the Job Retention Scheme (JRS - furlough) due to being in shutdown sectors or in response to their childcare needs. A small handful of single parents who were self-employed, and whose work had reduced or stopped, accessed the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), once it went live in mid-May.
- By August, a handful of single parents across all of these groups had lost their jobs, or had been told they were going to be made redundant. This outcome remains widely feared, both by single parents who remain in work and those currently on the JRS



Remaining in work during Lockdown

Changes to terms and conditions; working less hours

Changes to terms and conditions were relatively common, with single parents most frequently being asked to work fewer hours, which raised concerns due to its financial impacts. This was the case for Lindsay⁶, a single parent who worked in administration, who told us that, “Everybody in the company had to have a slight hour reduction and salary cut due to Covid-19, so we had to reduce our hours, so that was a little bit of a shock...all the employees had to agree to this temporary situation, basically, until we know what’s going on with the business and with Covid”.

Similarly, Eleanor, who worked in accounts, reported that, “We were told that we were going to have our hours cut. It went round and everyone had eight hours taken away, and I had six. So I was then from 31 to 25 which was fine, a bit annoying because I would come out with less money”.

For those single parents who were self-employed, a decline in demand for their work similarly impacted on the number of hours they were able to work. Emma, a self-employed personal shopper, recalled that, “It slowed down a hell of a lot, but I had things to do most days, but it did slow down a hell of a lot”, while Kathryn, a self-employed entertainer, reported that “And just as lockdown hit I had to close the theatre school immediately and all of our shows for the year were cancelled and rescheduled for next year”.

Moving to working from home

Analysis of LFS data shows that the shift towards home-working was less pronounced for single parents than other family types. As shown in Figure 3, for couple parents, homeworking increased by 38% between the first and second quarters of the year, while for those without dependent children the rate increased by a half. For single parents by contrast, homeworking rates increased by just a fifth. We can be less confident about the actual rates of home-working, as the LFS question asks respondents whether they work from home in their main job, rather than what they are doing currently meaning we cannot be sure whether answers are based on current situations or contractual

“And just as lockdown hit I had to close the theatre school immediately and all our shows for the year were cancelled and rescheduled for next year.”

6 To ensure anonymity, the names of the single parents we interviewed have been changed throughout.

arrangement. However, we can assume that interpretations of the question were consistent across the three family groups, meaning the proportionate increases are genuine.

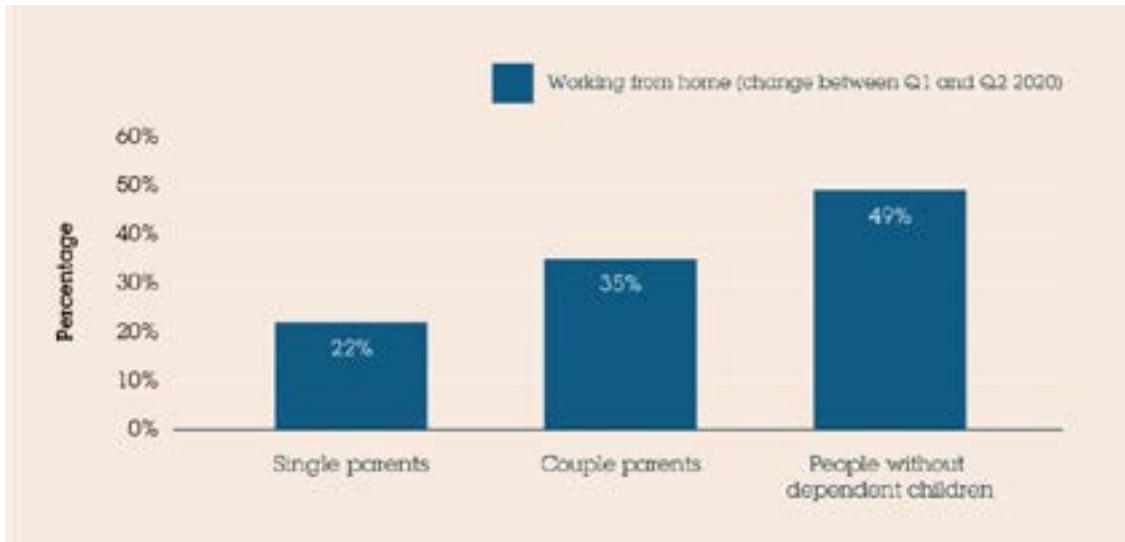


Figure 3: Percentage change in the proportion of workers working from home, by family type, between the first quarter and second quarter 2020

For the majority of single parents we interviewed who moved to working from home, views regarding its ease, benefits and drawbacks, both in the immediate and longer-term, were very polarised. Some single parents greatly appreciated the additional flexibility, ability to work a larger number of hours and reduced commitments in terms of commuting. Some of these advantages were described by Jasmine, who emphasised, “for one, saving petrol. I used to spend £40 a week driving to [LOCATION] for four days but I’d been doing 16 hours a week because obviously having to do it around when she’s in school. So obviously money wise I’ve saved. I can do hours that are quite suited to me, so if I’ve got something silly like a delivery coming between 10 and 11 I know not to work between then, or be on a call. So I can kind of cater it to me”.

However, in addition to the challenges of working and caring at the same time and from the same location and initial teething problems with technology, other single parents found working from home very challenging, primarily because of a lack of social interaction. This was the case for Bethan, who told us that, “I hate it. It went from a job I enjoyed, overnight, to a job that I detest...For me it’s all about the team. A good bunch of people work at [COMPANY], and I haven’t seen them in four months...The isolation has just been vile for me, really hard”.

The lack of social interaction was also seen as making work less efficient; as Bethan told us, “Everything is harder remotely, everything. Everything has to be written up, every conversation, nothing happens easily. If I were at work, I’d pop to someone’s desk if I needed to chat about something work-related, and now you can’t do that, you have to schedule it in”.

A lack of social interaction was also seen as limiting future career opportunities, as explained by Kelly, who, while generally positive about working from home, told us that, “opportunities, I feel, are harder now to come by. And sat at home at a desk on your own you can’t talk to anyone; you can’t integrate with some of the higher levels of management. All that kind of stuff. There are just not as many opportunities available to you, sat at home”.

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As will become apparent, however, the flexibility of employers was often regarded as key to the success of home working. Moreover, once the prospect of home working was removed from the specific context of Lockdown (and the need to care and home-educate concurrently), the balance of opinion shifted, with considerable interest among single parents in continuing this practice in the longer-term.

Working different hours

Single parents frequently moved to working different hours from home, to facilitate their caring and home-schooling responsibilities. Rather than being immediate, such changes were often the result of a process of trial and error; as described by Jasmine, who told us that, “At first I was trying to do what I’d normally do in the school holidays, so stick to two days, but then those two days were way too long for her to have just attention every now and again, so in the end I did four hours in the mornings or sometimes I’d have to do two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening”.

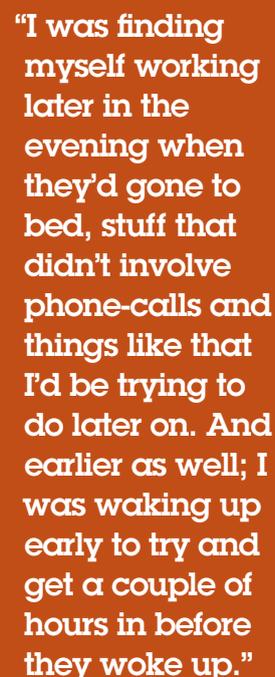
More commonly, these shifts in working time involved working early in the morning and later in the evening, when children were asleep; this was the case for Carla, who told us that, “Because I worked five hours a day, so they said that rather than me doing them between ten and three, which was the core school hours... Obviously I was getting distracted by children asking me questions and me trying to help them with their schoolwork as well. So work said that when the school day had finished, I could do my working day then. So my workday would then start at 3:30 until nine, ten o’clock in the evening”.

Joanna also found her hours moving earlier and later, recalling, “I was finding myself working later in the evening when they’d gone to bed, stuff that didn’t involve phone-calls and things like that I’d be trying to do later on. And earlier as well; I was waking up early to try and get a couple of hours in before they woke up”.

Employer flexibility was key in allowing single parents to work hours that fitted around their other responsibilities. Analysis of time use data has identified similar trends in relation to the working hours of parents in general who worked from home, with these being fitted around their childcare obligations, making work more likely to occur in the morning and at night (Office for National Statistics, 2020b). However, as discussed below, some of the single parents we spoke to had to adhere to office hours due to their involvement in team-work or client-facing roles, or because of a lack of flexibility from employers.

Experiences of being furloughed

Analysis of LFS data suggests that single parents were significantly more likely to have been furloughed during the Crisis than either couple parents or those without dependent children. As Figure 4 shows, on average nearly one third (30%) of single parents reported that they were away from work between April and June 2020, compared with just over one fifth of other family types (21% of couple parents, and 23% of those without dependent children). This means that single parents were about 50% more likely to be away from work during the Crisis than other family types.



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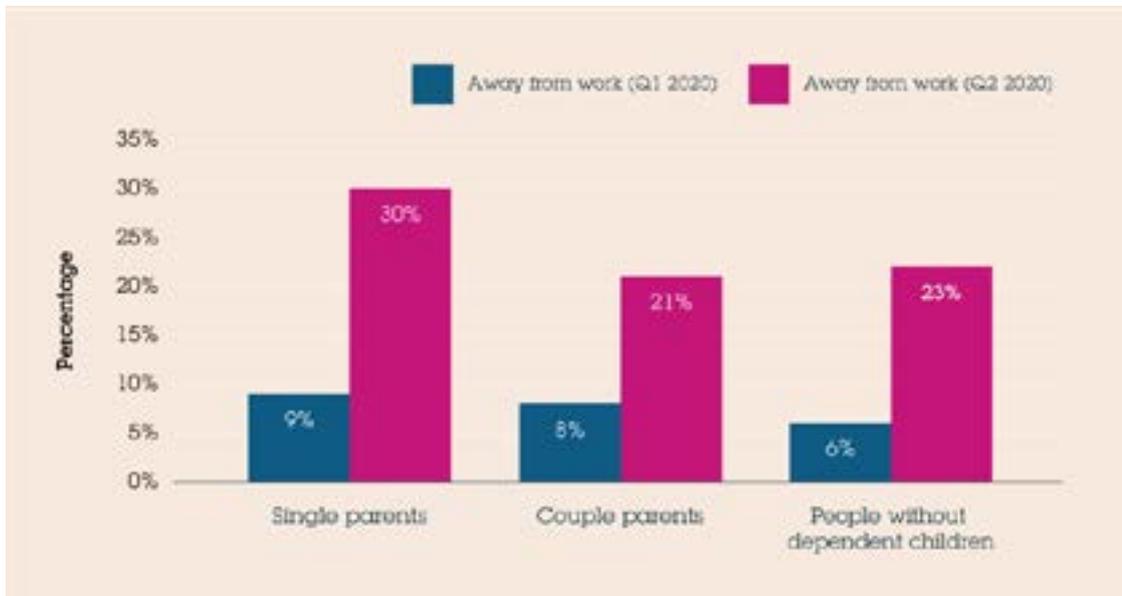


Figure 4:
Proportion of employees who are away from work during the reference week, by family type and quarter

Source: Labour Force Survey, January – June 2020

Base: Individuals aged 16-24 who were not defined as 'critical workers'

The greater likelihood of single parents being away from work reflects both the fact, noted previously, that they are more likely to work in industries and occupations most disrupted by the Crisis – particularly in hospitality and in manual and routine work – and that they will likely have had a greater need to take time off work in order to care for children (with separate research suggesting that mothers were far more likely to initiate furlough during the crisis than fathers or those without children (Adams et al, 2020)).

Lack of clarity

Many single parents were unclear as to how decisions regarding which staff to move to the JRS, both in shutdown sectors and because of childcare needs, were made. This was the case for Shona, who told us that, “I honestly don’t know how they chose who was furloughed. We had a couple of guys in our team that were furloughed for three weeks and then they’d bring them back. One girl had just recently returned from maternity so maybe it made sense for them to put her straight back on furlough....And new business development with the guys, they were all put on furlough, but I don’t know the reason in between of how they chose who they furloughed”.

Similarly, Bethan, who has a pre-school aged child, told us that, “basically they asked for people who wanted to be furloughed, and there were a lot of us that went in for it for childcare etc. And I don’t know how they made the decision, which actually got quite a lot of people’s backs up because it turned out the people who did get furloughed were people without children”.

There was clear evidence of inconsistency in the circumstances in which single parents were offered to be furloughed because of their childcare needs. While some single parents with pre-school aged children and no external support were offered furlough immediately (even when they would have been willing to work around their caring commitments), others were not offered this at any stage – or were not told that it was even a possibility. Esther, who has children at primary and secondary school, told us that, “I wasn’t aware that you could request it. In my experience, people that I know who worked in other places were just told they were going to be furloughed” while Michelle, who has a primary aged child, recalled, “I don’t know how you could be furloughed. I

never looked into it because I thought, there is work there. Ideally, in a perfect world...I would have loved to, but I was needed in the business”.

A mixed blessing

In many cases, single parents in employment regarded the JRS as a mixed blessing; it made it easier to fulfill their caring responsibilities, but caused concern in terms of their long-term job prospects, due to a perceived lack of visibility at work and in terms of its potential financial impact. The pros and cons of moving to the JRS were weighed up by a range of single parents who had experienced different outcomes in relation to the scheme:

“Do you know what, in a way, yes [I would have liked to be furloughed], but then having thought about it and when I’ve spoken to some of my other colleagues, kind of no because it shows I am needed.”

– Shona

“I don’t know, because that would have been a 20% cut in my salary, and I’m part-time as it is and that would have made a big difference. So I’m kind of glad in a way that I didn’t go on furlough, because it would have been really tight.”

– Lindsay

“Then I got furloughed which [sigh] I know it’s a pay cut, but in the same way, it was almost a bit of a blessing.”

– Susan

“If it was a choice of either being furloughed or working in the evenings, to be honest, probably being furloughed was easier because it didn’t mean me staying up all night trying to juggle work around the children.”

– Karen

“I’m mega busy, our team are really busy. There’s been times when I think oh god, I wish you had furloughed me. But I need the money. I need the money.”

– Grace

Into Lockdown: impact on caring

The closure of all schools and childcare settings (except to children of critical workers) on 20th March meant that single parents took on responsibility for the day-to-day care and education of their children, alongside their work commitments, at least until June when education and childcare settings re-opening in some instances, but frequently for much longer.

Experiences of home schooling

Home-schooling was widely depicted as challenging, although the nature of its challenges appeared to be mediated by children’s ages. While younger children needed a considerable degree of help, for older children there were issues with motivation. This was the case for Ruth, who said of her teenage son, “When he’s at school he is fine, he’s doing six hours’ work a day, but ... You cannot get kids to do that at home. They are not going to sit for six hours a day...it’s a totally different environment”.

Some single parents found the content of what children were being taught difficult to understand, or found it challenging to convey; this was the case

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for Kathy, who has a teenage daughter, and who informed us that, “I google everything and then I’ll be like, oh that’s what it is. Yes. And you’ll try and show them something and they are shown differently. I don’t know the logic, hey-ho, but it’s very stressful and we’ve had lots of tears, tantrums and screams and hate yous, you name it”.

Quantitative data collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) confirms that difficulties with home-schooling were common among single parents (and more widespread than among those in couples); single parents were more likely than couple parents to say that their (eldest/only) child was struggling to continue their education (62%, compared with 51%) (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Many families adopted a specific routine at the outset which they gradually abandoned over time, as other commitments and their children’s motivation made it unworkable. This was the case for Katie, who recalled that, “So the first two weeks we stayed in a routine, we got up like normal school hours, done the old Joe Wicks, as I’m sure most people did....Then after the two weeks would have then been the Easter holidays... so I was like, right, we will have a little bit of a rest as we would normally. Then that was it, we never got back into a routine again”.

Similarly, Carla told us that, “it was stressful and that is when the home schooling, for me, just started to ease off. Before, it would be you’ve got to do schoolwork from half past nine until three o’clock and then by the sixth, seventh week, it was just ten o’clock we’d start, we’d do an hour, have some lunch and maybe do another hour or two in the afternoon”.

However, despite the extra challenges facing them, analysis of longitudinal survey data has shown that being a single parent was not significantly related to time spent on home schooling, once other factors such as employment during Lockdown were taken into account (Villadsen et al, 2020). The support provided by schools with home-schooling clearly varied widely – in terms of the nature and regularity of contact, amount and format of work provided and level of interaction with teachers, reflecting the findings of other research in this area (Andrew et al, 2020).

“I’ve had an email every week just saying “Just touching in to see if you’re okay,” and that’s been it. And then this week was the last one, just to say “This is the last email.” He’s done no work since March, when the school shut, at all.”

– Susan

“It was a case of the school where they both go, one for actual school, one for sixth form, they were really good. They kept in touch, they would, “Have you done this?” “Have you done that?” sending emails to the children but then sending them to me and then at the end of the week it was a case of they would get some recognition for doing it. As in `your child has been put forward for a whatever award because they completed all their work in time.”

– Tracy

“And my daughter’s school were quite crap actually, sorry [laughter] for using the word, because they didn’t start sending stuff home until June time. We were just doing our own.”

– Dawn

“I’ve had an email every week just saying “Just touching in to see if you’re okay,” and that’s been it. And then this week was the last one, just to say “This is the last email.”

“They’ve been really good, I’m really impressed with the school, and even for my son who has left now, they don’t get the chance to go back but they’ve had so many calls from his teachers as well, and they’re absolutely devastated how it came to an end.”

– Alice

Some families encountered issues with online access. Stacey recalled that, “The school lessons and stuff were online, but someone broke the laptop. I don’t know who broke it. That became a ball-ache because they couldn’t access the work offline”, while Michelle recalled, “the school provided him with some login details, which we couldn’t access every time he logged in because of other people. I don’t know how it happened. We did ring the school and they sent us more login details. However, still to this day I couldn’t get on them”.

Meanwhile, Ruth told us, “Well there’s an email there, so they are told, any problems to email. But to be honest at first it was a total nightmare. The portal was down and he couldn’t get on, he didn’t have his log in, he was waiting two or three days for an email reply”. Data from ONS suggests that such issues were more common among single parent families; when asked to identify the reasons their eldest/only child was struggling to continue their education, 21% of single parents attributed this to a lack of devices, compared with 7% of couple parents or a lack of appropriate resources (36%, compared with 23% of couple parents) (ONS, 2020a).

Single parents had to provide lunches while schools and childcare settings were closed. The continuation of the Free School Meal scheme was generally viewed positively in this regard, although some parents were confused about eligibility and felt this should have been wider. This was the case for Sarah, who told us that, “The only thing that I would say probably the free school meals which has obviously come up for non-working families, obviously I wouldn’t be in that criteria now because I’m furloughed. I think maybe the people that are furloughed should have been included in that as well”.

Access to support with childcare, education and caring

While almost all single parents abided by the government guidelines during Lockdown to not meet with anyone from outside their household, a small number used informal childcare between March and June as they regarded this as necessary to fulfill their work commitments; this is in line with other research, which demonstrates that 24% of parents had reported doing this, with no difference by gender or family type (Fawcett Society, 2020) A small number had access to formal childcare, either because a child had an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), or because the non-resident partner was defined as a ‘critical worker’ – although this support was not utilised in all instances.

Despite some initial nervousness, the re-opening of schools and childcare settings for a limited number of year groups in June was almost universally viewed positively – in terms of its benefits for children and parents’ mental health and in facilitating uninterrupted work time. There is evidence of single parents weighing these considerations up against each other; this was the case for Emily, who told us of her pre-school aged child that, “I was a bit nervous to send her back to nursery, which I only really did because I felt like I couldn’t really continue to work from home”. Considering her son’s return to primary school, Lindsay told us that, “I think it was really good for his mental health as

“...to be honest at first it was a total nightmare. The portal was down and he couldn’t get on, he didn’t have his log in, he was waiting two or three days for an email reply.”



well and his well-being, because he was getting a bit restless, and I think he really needed that transition between nursery and school as well and seeing other kids his age to interact with. I noticed a change in him, and I think it was really good for him to go back in that environment". However, not all single parents with children in the relevant year groups were able to access a school place, and a small number chose not to, due to health concerns for example.

Many single parents had maintained contact with the non-resident parent during Lockdown and established 'support bubbles' to help with childcare from June, both of which were viewed as highly beneficial to both them, their ability to work and their children.

However, because of health concerns, some options for informal childcare (including grand-parents) available to single parents previously were not available once the restrictions eased in June, or going forward. Regarding her son, Emma told us that, "because my dad was shielding, my mum is in her late 70s. Now I just don't feel comfortable leaving him with either of those". On the other hand, Alice did not have access to the usual level of support from her ex-partner at the start of Lockdown, because, "the boys' dad has got asthma, so initially he didn't see them for quite a few weeks because he lives close to his own parents who are in their 80s and were very stressed apparently, which is understandable".

This was also Bethan's experience, she recalled that, "And we were hit at the start because right at the start of lockdown we think that my ex maybe had coronavirus. So basically for the first two weeks, he didn't have the children and that was really tough, because I went from having freedom - he has them one night a week and every other weekend, so having a bit of a break - to all of us being permanently at home. That was horrible, just horrible".

Shopping was an aspect of their caring which a number of single parents spontaneously identified as having been problematic in Lockdown, due to a number of different reasons. In the first place, single parents had concerns about the safety of taking their children shopping; this situation was depicted by Louisa who emphasised that, "there's nothing you can do, he touches everything, and I felt sick taking him. Every time I'd got to take him, I'd stress out about having to take him in with me, because I didn't want to but I had no choice". Other single parents encountered situations where shop or security staff believed there to be a rule in existence that only one person from each family could go shopping; this led to a situation described by Katie where, "I was having to take the children out with me. We had a few issues at some shops where I was told to leave the children outside because it was only one person to go in and I was like... you know, there was a few emotional moments where I was, "I'm not going to leave my 5 and 6-year-old outside a shop". One potential solution to these difficulties, the use of online shopping, was also difficult to achieve, as described by Susan, who told us that, "I couldn't get a slot at [ONLINE] shopping, and I obviously know there are a lot of people that really did need them, but I had to go shopping with...my four-year-old, so all that was really just daunting and worrying". Such difficulties are reflected in the finding from a survey of parents of under-11s by the Fawcett Society, which discovered that 62% of single mothers had struggled to go to the shops due to their children being at home, compared with 50% of coupled mothers and 39% of couple fathers (Fawcett Society, 2020).

62% of single mothers had struggled to go to the shops due to their children being at home, compared with 50% of coupled mothers and 39% of coupled fathers.

Working and caring, without sharing: the challenges

We next consider the impacts of the changes to working and caring reported above, where they interacted to shape single parents' lived experiences throughout the Crisis,

Inevitably, the Covid-19 Crisis led to an increase in the work and caring required of single parents, with no or fewer than usual mechanisms to share these activities in most cases. This led to a number of challenges which were consistently identified by single parents in a range of different circumstances:

More work led to trade-offs

Single parents had to undertake more work overall (paid and unpaid) with generally less support; inevitably, this meant making sacrifices and undertaking trade-offs between their work and caring, some of which single parents were highly uncomfortable with.

"I'm sat at home with a 1-year-old who doesn't understand that Mummy needs to work and why can't he play on my laptop when I'm trying to do things and why can't he talk to the people on the screen [laughs] when I'm having to do meetings and everything. It was really hard, really hard."

– Shona

"In the beginning you were thinking "Yeah, yeah, yeah," and it was fine the first few weeks, but when you're in the middle of doing, say, Maths, and a client rings me, then Maths went by the by. And then I'd feel guilty, so yes, there were tough days when it was really hard."

– Emma

It's difficult. It's a juggling game. I had to go into work yesterday because the first contractor came in yesterday...I had to take my littlun with me because I don't have any choice. There is that pressure that yes, I know I need to go in and the expectation is that I go in, but I am also a mum to two boys and this is their holiday as well. It can be quite stressful, but I can't afford to be out of a job."

– Alison

"Well I'd do two hours work and just think, do you know what, I'm not doing it, and take her out for a walk or something because it did get really hard with having to try and balance the both of them and obviously at the end of the day I think your child is more important than work, so if I had to go without, they had to, I had to stop."

– Jasmine

"(I'm) obviously feeling guilty because she spends most of the day by herself. She'll pop in and out and I feed her but a lot of the time I have to put something by the door and just go, "You need to knock. I've got calls. I'm in meetings. I can't help you"...I've obviously felt quite guilty."

– Grace

Impacts on mental health

During the period of Lockdown, single parents experienced isolation and reported mental health impacts for both themselves and their children, partly as a result of the trade-offs discussed above. This was the case for Shona, in



relation to the need to prioritise her work; she told us that, “And then again you’ve got the guilt because as awful as it sounds, I’d find something he’d like on the telly and I’d just sit him in front of the telly and I always said I’ll not be one of those parents. It got to the point where needs must and my mental health has suffered”.

Alison reported a similar reaction to the trade-off of sending her children to school, to facilitate her own working out of the home, recalling, “I turned up to my school in tears constantly for the first couple of weeks because I was so nervous about my children mixing with frontline workers’ children”. Isolation, and the absence of time away from their children, was a key factor to which single parents attributed mental health impacts. This was the case for Susan, who emphasised that, “I felt we wake up together, we go to bed together. It’s overwhelming, isn’t it, to spend that much time. I know that we have children, I’m not under that illusion, but to spend every day”.

This was also the case for Eleanor, who reported that, “Well, the first couple of weeks, I was going mad, I hated it because I couldn’t even go out at that point. You couldn’t even drive anywhere, to go to the shop, you were made to feel guilty for buying food, it was horrible. I think I got a bit depressed to be honest, I even went to the doctor’s about it”.

Analysis of LFS data suggests that single parents were twice as likely to have poor mental health, compared with other family types, immediately before and in the early stages of the Crisis. Overall 51% of single parents reported having depression, bad nerves or anxiety; compared with 27% of couple parents and 30% of those without dependent children. Even after controlling for differences in demographic and work related characteristics the difference between the two groups remains, although it decreases slightly.

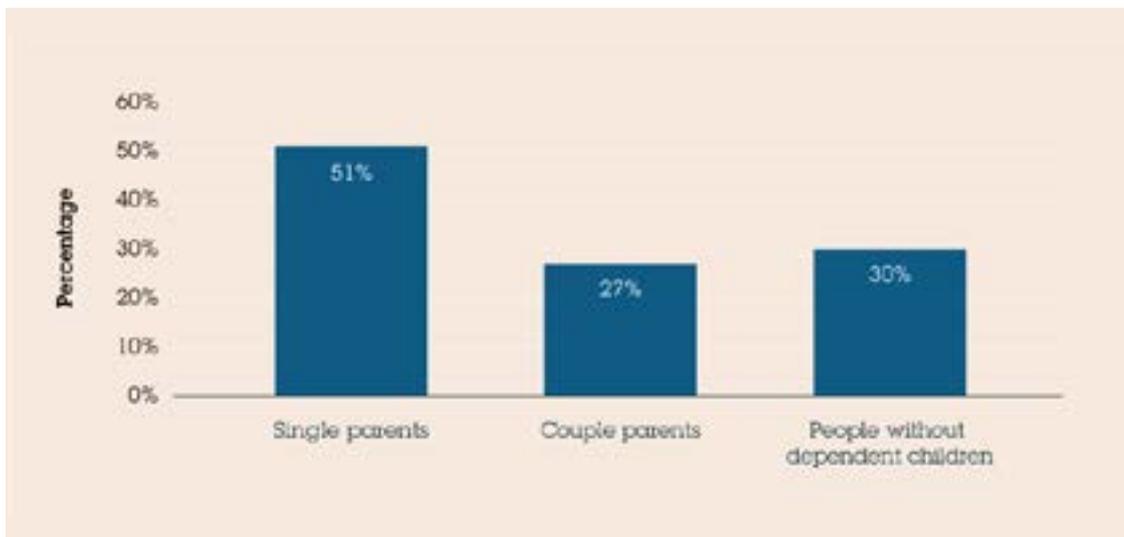


Figure 5:
Percentage of people who suffer from depression, bad nerves or anxiety, by family group

Source: Labour Force Survey, January – June 2020

Base: Individuals aged 16-24 who were not defined as ‘critical workers’

In terms of the impact of the Crisis, reflecting our findings, research with low income families by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the Church of England reported that some interviewees, particularly single parents, were stressed as a result of feeling lonely or socially isolated, and because of the extra caring responsibilities they had taken on during the pandemic (Child Poverty Action Group and Church of England, 2020). Meanwhile, whilst not focusing on single parents specifically analysis of longitudinal survey data has found that the characteristics of being young, a woman, and living with children, especially preschool age children, had a particularly strong influence on the extent to which mental distress increased under the conditions of the pandemic (Pierce et al, 2020); these characteristics are either common to, or particularly prevalent among, single parents – particularly those with the youngest children. Finally, the mental health of children is also a concern, as articulated by some of the single parents we spoke to; a survey from the Fawcett Society reported that 60% of single parents were worried for their children's mental health during Lockdown (Fawcett Society, 2020).

The role of employer flexibility

Employers clearly mediated the experiences of working and caring for single parents, with those who were flexible and understanding significantly easing individual situations. Flexibility was particularly viewed as helpful in relation to allowing single parents to work different hours that better fitted in with their caring responsibilities or to being tolerant of interruptions. Those single parents whose employers had been flexible felt that they had been lucky in this regard, and were very appreciative. This was the case for Bethan, who told us that, “My employer have been really supportive, in all fairness. I think obviously because it's such a big office and a lot of employees have got children, including the managers etc., they've all been really supportive and we've all just had to get our work done when we can, around the kids”. Jasmine's view was similar; she told us that, “They were really supportive actually. Yes. I think I was really lucky with that because I know a lot of people wouldn't be. A lot of people I know, they have their hours to do and they have to do them within that day. But yes, they were really flexible. I was quite lucky with that. If they weren't, I think it would have been a lot harder”.

“They sounded like they were really flexible up to a certain point but then in reality they probably weren't as flexible as they made it sound.”

However, some single parents reported that their employers advocated a flexible approach, but that this was not borne out in reality. This was the case for Esther, who told us that, “They did at one point tell me that it would be more flexible and I could log off and log back on later on if it suited me better, but when I tried doing that they complained to me and told me that I should be working to my hours. I was a bit like, okay then. I am expected to be logged on for my usual working hours and they know. They can see if I am online or not”. Similarly, Emily told us that, “I think they were flexible up to a certain point but then... They sounded like they were really flexible but then in reality they probably weren't as flexible as they made it sound... They would say, “You can only do what you can do,” but then if people hadn't done certain things it would be a problem, so...”. Moreover, a small number of single parents were so concerned about retaining their jobs that they were unwilling to convey to employers the extent of the difficulties they were experiencing.

Financial impacts of changes to working and caring

The changes to the working and caring responsibilities experienced by single parents as a result of the Covid-19 Crisis often had financial impacts.

Many single parents spoke of a re-balancing of spending, with some costs increasing and others reducing. This was the case for Jasmine, who told us that, “Obviously normally she’d have school dinners at school. So I suppose as well with regards to money, the money that I was saving on petrol I was probably spending again on food”. Katie, who had been furloughed, conveyed a similar experience, telling us, “Financially, I suppose again it’s been a bit up and down. Obviously, we haven’t been spending the money on going out, on things or McDonald’s, treats, or go to a restaurant or something like that and also a massive hit with not spending out any petrol for four months... So where obviously I wasn’t getting as much, but my outgoings were then less, so it almost balanced itself out, to be honest”. While single parents’ financial circumstances varied widely, a key theme to emerge was the need to be more frugal with spending, particularly for those who had been furloughed, and were often receiving just 80% of their salaries. This was the case for Kathy, who told us that, “I mean, luckily, I’m quite sort of thrifty anyway and I’ve just been Ebuying just to sort of top my money up and stuff....But we’d normally have a takeaway at a weekend. Well we can have one every four weeks, like once a month. Just being realistic with your money, isn’t it?”.

“Luckily, I’m quite sort of thrifty anyway and I’ve just been Ebuying just to sort of top my money up and stuff. Just being realistic with your money, isn’t it?”

Similarly, Sandra told us that, “I’ve been a lot more conscious of spending, not maybe food shopping, I’ve been doing the food shop exactly the same, but I would say I’ve not been buying anything for me at all. I don’t think I’ve bought anything for myself at all throughout, because I thought that it’s only fair that that percentage of money that I’m not getting is not (CHILD’S) fault and she shouldn’t be punished for that”. These different financial impacts of Lockdown closely mirror the findings of qualitative work undertaken with low-income families (Buzzeo et al, 2020).

A small number of single parents we interviewed had to use informal financial support; this was the case for Anna who, after being furloughed for childcare, told us that, “It was hard. I did have to [borrow] money from my parents just to help towards my rent and stuff”. Quantitatively, we know that single parents families are more likely to be struggling as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, compared with other households; the Standard Life Foundation’s Financial Impact Tracker reported that, while single parents made up 5% of those surveyed, they were over-represented in the two most financially vulnerable groups, constituting 13% of those “in serious difficulties” and 9% of those “struggling” (Standard Life Foundation, 2020).

Looking Forward

Single parents told us about their expectations, hopes and concerns for the remainder of 2020, in relation to their roles working and caring. A number of themes emerged. (We plan to interview the single parents again in January 2021, to explore how their journeys through the next stage of the Crisis have borne out in practice).

Widespread uncertainty about next six months

Uncertainty is widespread among single parents regarding their likely working and caring journeys over the next six months. Particular areas of uncertainty include the timing and nature of the return to offices as opposed to continued home working, the level of demand for their work going forward, the possibility



of job cuts and the availability of childcare, particularly wraparound care. In many cases, these areas of uncertainty are impacting upon each other and limiting single parents' ability to plan; for example, with uncertainty around working hours or the need to commute leading to a lack of clarity about how much wraparound care to commit to. While the September re-opening of schools was generally viewed positively, many single parents were concerned about a second lockdown (which was subsequently announced in November 2020) full or partial school closures, and how this would impact on their ability to work.

“(CHILD’s) meant to be starting school in September. I know he’s got a space, but the logistics of that I don’t know. It’s really difficult, because obviously I don’t know whether to book him into breakfast clubs or after-school clubs, which obviously is a cost, or if I’m not in the office could I then pick him up and drop him? So it’s very unknown.”

– Susan

“Everything is just a little bit uncertain at the moment. You can’t but help think well, what if they don’t do the wraparound care? What if work won’t let me then cut my hours? What if they’re funny with me? There’s a lot of ‘What if...?’ If I had answers I’d feel like I was more settled.”

– Sandra

“If my wage changes, I will need wraparound care because the expectation is I’ll be in school for longer hours, so it’s kind of... It’s a double-edged sword because yes it will be lovely to have a grade change and a pay increase, but it can’t happen if I can’t have the care for the children”.

– Alison

Enthusiasm for long-term home working

There were mixed views about the prospect of long-term working from home, reflecting the polarised views on working from home during Lockdown discussed previously. However, once the challenges of working alongside caring experienced during Lockdown had been removed (with children returning to schools and childcare), the balance of opinion tended to be more positive in favour of home working – although social isolation remained a significant concern for some. A number of parents explained how (at least some) working from home would make their working and caring responsibilities easier to fulfill in practice, and opened up the potential for working more hours. This was the case for Kelly, who told us that, “I would love to have a mix, My thing about not having to go in an office is that, from where I live, in the traffic as it was before lockdown ... I would [add] say another 30 minutes each way to my day. And if I’m working from home I have literally got to drop them at school, nip home within five minutes and then I can log on. I can work more hours working from home, rather than having to accommodate travel time into my working day”.

Jasmine expressed similar sentiments, stating, “Because normally I can only do 10 to 2 because I have to travel an hour, an hour after, whereas I mean I could do 8 to 4:30 every day. All I’ve got to do is just drop her off in between because she can sit there for an hour either side whilst I work. So yes, I could have the advantage of being full-time and getting more money that way”. It is well-documented that one of the factors inhibiting single parents' ability to progress at work is the necessity, in many cases, for them to work part-time (Clery,

“Everything is just a little bit uncertain at the moment. There are a lot of ‘What if...?’. If I had answers I’d feel like I was more settled.”



Dewar and Bivand, 2019); if full-time home working became more widely available, this could open up the range of opportunities available to single parents, although none of those we spoke to were thinking this far ahead, at this point in time.

Concern about job losses

Those single parents who were due to (or anticipated) losing their jobs or faced a reduction in their number of hours were concerned about the immediate financial impact of these changes, as well as the longer-term possibility of securing work in the same field, particularly where these had been hit by the Crisis. Calum explained the financial impact of a cut in hours, stating, “The only thing they could do is reduce my hours to a part time job. Then I would be looking for a different job because I can’t survive on part time hours. I have still got bills to pay. If it was the summer holiday and I wasn’t working, I wouldn’t have after school club and summer camp to pay for, but I still need to eat, I have still got my car to pay for and life goes on. It couldn’t work if they reduced my hours unless it was just by a few. If they halved my hours to 20 a week, there is no way I could survive”.

Fear of job losses and reductions in hours was widespread; as Lindsay stated, “it’s all a bit uncertain for a lot of companies at the moment. The industry we’re in, it’s taken a big dip financially with the whole Covid-19, so it is a bit worrying. I don’t know if we’re going to survive this, but at the moment we’re just taking every day as it comes”. As noted previously, analysis of LFS data has shown that single parents were more likely than other family types to want to work a greater number of hours at the start of the Crisis; the impact of reductions in hours needs to be understood within this context.

Finally, while only a handful of single parents had lost their jobs to date, those who had were finding job-seeking challenging. This was the case for Marilyn, who told us that, “I’m looking for maybe call centre work, customer service, that sort of thing. I just applied for [COMPANY] on Monday. I got so far in the interview stage but not well enough. There were 146 people that applied for that job and they only needed six. I got down to the final 16 but not good enough”. Indeed, even amongst the wider pool of single parents who were nervous about job losses, there was a recognition that they might have to make compromises in terms of the fields where they sought work, the number of hours they worked or the level of childcare they took on to facilitate this.

The role of government support

Views about the role of government support to date and going forward were mixed; there was a widespread recognition that the pandemic was unprecedented and that there was a limited amount the government could do to address the problems it engendered. Nevertheless, a number of persistent themes emerged, relating to areas where the government could have done more – and should do more going forward:

Insufficient recognition of unique challenges facing single parents

It was widely felt that the unique challenges facing single parents (in terms of being, in many instances, solely responsible for caring for their children, alongside working) should have been better recognised in policy and



“I’m looking for maybe call centre work, customer service, that sort of thing. There were 146 people that applied for that job and they only needed six. I got down to the final 16 but not good enough.”

guidance. While some felt that single parents should have been given a status equivalent to critical workers for this reason, giving them access to education and childcare, others felt that these challenges should have been accounted for in policy guidelines, for instance, by enabling them access to online shopping deliveries, making support bubbles available earlier or being reflected in an increase in child benefit for this group, to enable them to reduce their working hours to assist with caring and home-schooling.

“I just probably think they could have offered child care for a single parent, the ones who didn’t have a second parent, because they were allowed to switch households, weren’t they, with the two parents?”

– *Leanne*

“I think there has to be some sort of allowance made for lone parents because if you have to go to work to secure your job or if you are in one of those type of industries or roles like I was where I kind of had a choice but I didn’t have a choice because I was concerned about my job, I just think there has to be... you can’t just say it’s all key workers. So if you work for the NHS you’ve got carte blanche ... your children could go to school, you’ve got free coffees in Costa. But it isn’t just the NHS, you have to consider lone parents, lone working parents and I think that whilst, don’t get me wrong, the NHS had it really tough, I consider that I had it pretty tough as well.”

– *Alison*

“So if there had been an option there, like, okay, you can take a tenth of a week off and the government would support... even if it was they need to support you that your child benefit goes up. I don’t get working credits or child tax credits, so I couldn’t get anything from there, but I guess things like that where there was a slight enhancement which would then allow you to drop your hours but continue to work.”

– *Grace*

“I found it very hard having to go to the shops all the time, it was very difficult, shopping. At the peak there was nowhere I could leave him and nothing I could do. So perhaps [there] could have been more priority with home deliveries; I wasn’t able to get one at all.”

– *Louisa*

Lack of clarity in government guidance

Government guidance was regarded by some single parents as being unclear across a range of areas. Cutting across these views was the perception that guidance should take into account and address the specific day-to-day issues which policy changes are going to create for single parents in practice. Regarding the re-opening of nurseries in June, Bethan stated that, “when she went back to nursery, I’ve had to change her days...because obviously the nursery can only take so many in a day now. I just thought “Right, they’re opening,” but then it turned out they were opening but instead of where they’d have 16 in a room before, they can now only have eight. So, I’ve had to change her day to accommodate the nursery. So when they announced the nurseries were opening, it wasn’t really announced that there were going to be limited numbers in there”. Bethan expressed a similar view regarding information on contact with non-resident parents, stating, “They didn’t make it clear at the start that kids could travel between the parents. I had to scour

“When she went back to nursery, I’ve had to change her days because obviously the nursery can only take so many in a day now.”

to find that, it wasn't there to begin with, so when they initially announced it, I was like good god, am I going to have to do it by myself? I'd say that wasn't massively clear. They also didn't allow for... Like Steve's situation [ex-partner], he doesn't live with his girlfriend, his girlfriend has kids as well".

More support for education and childcare

It was felt that more support could have been provided to single parents in terms of education and childcare. In addition to the greater access to critical worker education and childcare noted above, there was a widespread appetite for greater engagement with and access to teachers during home-schooling. This view was typified by Grace who stated that, "My feedback to them would be great if they did maybe a Zoom lesson even once a week or once a fortnight or whatever just to bring the children [and teacher together].... My daughter does really well in school, but a lot of that is down to that she wants to impress the teachers. She doesn't want to impress me".

As well as motivation, such input was also seen as having the potential to address difficulties single parents were facing with explaining the curriculum. As Clare stated, "A few of the schools did Zoom classrooms, online classes. Ours didn't. They were sending the work, but if they could have sat for an hour with the teacher on a video link - they have all got school iPads - that would have helped because neither me nor my mum are teachers". Linked to the widely held view that different families had been able to contribute vastly different amounts of time and expertise to home-schooling, Rowena concluded that, "What sticks in my mind is that I know that certain parents have been furloughed or they don't work, so they've had all that time to be able to do home-schooling, whereas I haven't. So it would be nice for the people in my position to get extra tuition".

Finally, there was some demand for greater government support with childcare going forward, in recognition of the fact that it will be more costly to administer with social distancing. This view was expressed by Penny, who recommended, "Encouraging them to open, have a little bit more subsidy maybe to help them. If they can't take on the amount of children that they would normally need to, maybe the government could help. Because obviously we are going to be back in work, so it's going to all come round full circle I suppose financially".

Support with mental health

Although rarely expressed explicitly, it seems clear that there is some demand for support with mental health – both for single parents and their children, due to the clear evidence of widespread difficulties experienced in these areas, as endorsed by the quantitative analysis of LFS data. This is particularly the case if the experience of working and caring during local or national lockdowns is to be repeated. A particular focus on the needs of single parents would be beneficial, as emphasised by Shona who asked for, "more mailshots or more stuff on social media regarding mental health and things and giving it more links and stuff because that is something that I really haven't seen much of...., the majority of people have been affected some way and whether it's just not seeing your family and that. Someone to talk to. And you see a lot of it aimed at men because obviously there's a big thing about men talking and things, but other people need it as well".

"A few of the schools did Zoom classrooms, online classes. Ours didn't. They were sending the work, but if they could have sat for an hour with the teacher on a video link - that would have helped because neither me nor my mum are teachers."

"More mailshots or more stuff on social media regarding mental health and things and giving more links and stuff because that is something that I really haven't seen much of."

Recommendations

Our interim report recommendations are in the context of continued restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 Crisis.

Our final report will contain broader recommendations for government, policy makers and employers. Our interim recommendations are targeted at supporting single parents through the immediate COVID-19 Crisis and are focused on helping single parents to stay in work, get back to work if they lose their job and to retrain where they work in sectors that may no longer exist. We want the Spending Review to include single parents as a priority in departmental spending.

Support to stay in work

The new furlough scheme and the extension to March 2021 are welcome. However, the scheme needs to be used in a more supportive and flexible way to enable single parents to combine work with childcare and other responsibilities. Currently it is up to employers as to whether a staff member can be part of the furlough scheme. This needs to change so that single parents can have better access to the scheme including short term furlough where they need to so for their caring responsibilities including when their child needs to self isolate.

In the meantime their needs to be improved financial support for low income single parents who cannot work because of the closure of a child's class or childcare provider. This could most easily be achieved by simply extending eligibility for the £500 Test and Trace Support Payment to parents in these circumstances.

Support to get back to work

There should be targeted support for single parents who lose their job during the COVID-19 Crisis. Single parents should be identified in guidance as a priority group in the new Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) back to work programme, and providers encouraged to put in place specialist single parent support, building on the evidence of what has worked in previous programmes such as the New Deal for Lone Parents. Jobcentre Plus offices should use the expansion of work coach capacity as an opportunity to re-introduce specialist single parent advisers and tailored programmes to better support single parents into a job that reflects their skills and caring responsibilities. This should include access to upfront childcare support.

Support to retrain

From our analysis we know that thousands of single parents will have worked in sectors that will not exist in the same way as a result of the COVID-19 Crisis. It is important that single parents are not left behind in opportunities to retrain. The new Lifetime Skills Guarantee is welcome but it must reflect the needs of single parents including matching access to courses with free childcare through Universal Credit and for those with pre-school aged children widening up the 30 hour free offer to those who are in training.



The furlough scheme needs to be used in a more flexible way to enable single parents to combine work with childcare and other responsibilities

Targeted support for single parents who lose their job during the COVID-19 Crisis

It is important that single parents are not left behind in opportunities to retrain.

Appendix

Qualitative data collection and analysis

We undertook retrospective qualitative interviews with 40 single parents in England and Wales who were in work at the start of March 2020 but were not defined as “critical workers” by the government, giving them access to key worker education and childcare. Our sample was designed to ensure diversity on the characteristics known to be associated with single parents’ experiences of working and caring, and the early impacts of the Covid-19 Crisis that would also be likely to affect experiences in these areas. A sampling company (Criteria Fieldwork Ltd) was employed to recruit 40 single parents to be interviewed, reflecting these sampling criteria. The sampling characteristics, and the number of single parents we interviewed with each attribute, are detailed in Table A.1 below.



Table A.1: Qualitative sample of single parents: characteristics sampled and numbers with specific attributes

Characteristic	Attribute	Number of single parents interviewed
Characteristic associated with experiences of working and caring		
Employment status	Employed	32
	Self-Employed	8
Working pattern	Full-time	15
	Part-time	25
Highest educational qualification	Level 2	14
	Level 3	15
	Level 4+	11
Number of children	1	17
	2+	23
School stage of youngest child	Pre-school	15
	Primary	17
	Secondary	8
Early impacts of Covid-19 Crisis		
Impact on work	Moved to Job Retention Scheme or accessed Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (due to lack of childcare)	6
	Moved to Job Retention Scheme or accessed Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (due to working in shutdown sector)	9

	Lost job immediately	2
	Remained in work	23
Access to childcare (March – July 2020)	Formal (due to EHCP or key-worker eligibility)	5
	Informal	15
	None	20

Single parents were recruited through Criteria Fieldwork Limited across the full range of Government Office Regions and were diverse in terms of sex and ethnicity, although these characteristics were not explicitly accounted for in our sample frame.

The single parents who agreed to participate were provided with information in advance about the purpose of the study and ensured anonymity. They were interviewed at pre-agreed times on the telephone in July or August 2020, by one of a team of two researchers. Interviews typically took between 25 and 40 minutes. Participants were provided with a £20 incentive in the form of an Amazon voucher, to thank them for their time. In addition, all participants were asked to consent to be re-interviewed in January 2021.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach, using the Taguette software package (Rampin et al, 2020). Codes and themes were developed iteratively, within a broader analytic framework based around the areas of working, caring, the interaction of these two activities, the role of government and future expectations and concerns.

Quantitative analysis of Labour Force Survey (LFS) data

The LFS analysis used the final quarterly data-set for 2019 and the first and second quarterly data-sets for 2020 (individual), to explore the baseline characteristics of the sub-set of single parent workers on which this report focuses and to track the immediate impacts in terms of working from home and being furloughed.

The LFS data analysis focused on workers (of working age (aged 18-64)) who were not employed in critical occupations, in order to match the sample criteria for the qualitative interviews. For the purpose of the analysis, individuals were assigned to three family type groups - single parents, couple parents or people with no dependent children. The sample sizes for these sub groups in the baseline (first quarter of 2020) were 2,080 single parents, 12,281 couple parents and 20,749 people with no dependent children. The sample sizes for these sub groups at the beginning of the lockdown (second quarter of 2020) were 1,704 single parents, 10,842 couple parents and 18,796 people with no dependent children.

Population weights were used in the analysis. All values presented are percentages, apart from the average age, the median earnings and median working hours. The education levels are constructed using the age that the person finished full time education: low education (if they finished at age 16 or younger); intermediate education (if they finished between the ages 17-20); high education (if they finished at age 21 or older).

The demographic, work and financial characteristics of the three types of workers are summarised in Table A.2.

Table A.2: Demographic, work and financial characteristics, Jan-March 2020

	Single parents	Couple parents	People without dependent children
Gender	%	%	%
Female	81	43	44
Male	19	57	56

Age			
Average age	34	38	43
Number of children	%	%	%
1 child	54	42	0
2+ children	46	58	0
Education	%	%	%
Low education	42	28	37
Intermediate education	43	36	34
High education	16	36	28
Socio-economic status	%	%	%
Higher managerial, admin occupations	26	48	45
Intermediate Occupations	28	26	25
Routine and manual occupations	46	26	30
Industry	%	%	%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	0.2	1	1
Energy and water	3	3	2
Manufacturing	6	11	12
Construction	5	12	9
Distribution, hotels and restaurants	37	21	24
Transport and communication	4	10	8
Banking and finance	22	25	25
Public admin, education and health	12	11	11
Other services	11	7	8
Housing tenure	%	%	%
Owned	7	11	30
Mortgage	20	58	33
Rent/part rent/squatting	73	31	37
Employment status	%	%	%
Employee	85	79	82
Self-employed	14	21	18
Government scheme	0.2	0	0.1
Unpaid family worker	0.4	0.2	0.3
Employment tenure	%	%	%
Permanent	93	96	94
Non-permanent	7	4	6

Private/Public sector	%	%	%
Private	90	91	90
Public	10	9	10
Benefits	%	%	%
No	25	64	85
Yes	75	36	15
Median weekly earnings	£	£	£
Female	190	346	404
Male	350	625	538
Median hourly earnings	£	£	£
Female	9	12	12
Male	9	15	13
Median hours worked			
Female	22	30	37
Male	38	40	38

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