

Analysis in brief

Families and work

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Key points

- In spring 2004 there were 7.3 million working-age families with dependent children in the UK, of which 5.5 million were headed by a married or cohabiting couple and 1.9 million were headed by a lone parent. The majority of working-age families had at least one parent in employment (84 per cent).
- The proportion of couples with dependent children where both partners worked increased by 8 percentage points, to 68 per cent, over the ten-year period to spring 2004.
- The lone parent employment rate increased by 12 percentage points over the same period, to 54 per cent.
- Employment rates were lowest among couple mothers and lone parents with no qualifications, and those with children of pre-school age.
- Employment rates among couple mothers and lone parents with children of pre-school age rose steadily over the ten-year period to spring 2004. This upward trend was largely driven by a rise in part-time working.

Introduction

Work is an important aspect of family life, for several reasons. Work helps to improve living standards within families by providing income. Working parents contribute to the economy and are less likely to rely solely on the state for their welfare. Children with working parents are less likely to live in poverty, more likely to do better at school, and less likely to become disadvantaged adults.¹ In recognition of this, a variety of government policies and initiatives have been aimed at enabling parents, especially lone parents, to enter and remain in employment. These include welfare-to-work initiatives such as New Deal for Lone Parents; in-work financial support, such as Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit; initiatives to improve the availability of affordable childcare; and policies to extend parents' rights to parental leave, statutory maternity pay, and flexible working.

This article describes the employment patterns of families and

parents with dependent children using results from the spring 2004 Labour Force Survey (LFS) household dataset. The household datasets are designed for analysis at the family unit and household levels, and for analyses of individuals that also involve the characteristics of the family unit or household in which people live. The first part of the article describes employment patterns within families (describing family units, rather than people). The second part describes the employment status of parents, by type of parent (describing people as individuals). The final part focuses on employment patterns among two subgroups which historically have had lower than average employment rates: couple mothers and lone parents. Key concepts and definitions are shown in **Box 1**.

Employment within families

There were 7.3 million working-age families with dependent children in the UK in spring 2004, of which 5.5

Box 1

Concepts and definitions

Dependent children are children aged under 16 and those aged 16 to 18 who are never-married and in full-time education.

Working-age parents are fathers aged 16 to 64 and mothers aged 16 to 59 who have one or more dependent children either living with them or away at boarding school or in university halls of residence. Adoptive and step-parents are included in this analysis but foster parents and those who live in a separate household from their children are not.

Working-age families are families headed either by a couple in which both partners are of working age, or by a working-age lone parent.

Workless families are those with no resident parent in employment. Some families may contain working-age children, who may be in employment, but in this analysis the employment status of the family is based on the employment status of the parents only.

The definitions of **full-time and part-time** employment are based on respondents' self-assessment of their employment status, not on hours worked.

Table 1

**Employment status of families^a with dependent children^b by family type;^c
United Kingdom; spring 2004, not seasonally adjusted**

								Per cent
	Age of youngest dependent child				Number of dependent children			All with dependent children
	0-4 years	5-10 years	11-15 years	16-18 years	1	2	3 or more	
Couple families								
Both parents working	56	73	77	76	71	70	52	68
One parent working	37	22	18	18	23	25	38	27
Father working only	34	18	14	12	19	23	35	23
Mother working only	3	4	4	6	4	3	3	3
Neither parent working	7	5	6	6	6	4	9	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Lone parent families								
Working	34	57	65	74	59	53	36	54
Not working	66	43	35	26	41	47	64	46
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
All working-age families								
Two parents working	45	52	54	55	48	56	40	50
One parent working	36	32	32	33	35	31	38	34
No parent working	19	16	14	12	17	13	22	16
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Labour Force Survey household dataset

^a Families headed either by a couple in which both partners are of working age (women aged 16-59 and men aged 16-64), or by a working-age lone parent.

^b Children under 16 years and those aged 16-18 who are never-married and in full-time education.

^c Families with unknown employment status have been excluded from the analysis.

► million were headed by a married or cohabiting couple and 1.9 million (25 per cent) were headed by a lone parent. In a small minority of families with dependent children one or both parents was not of working age (less than 1 per cent). These families have been excluded from the following analysis. Families in which the employment status of one or both parents was unknown have also been excluded.

In spring 2004 most working-age families with dependent children (couples and lone parent families combined) had at least one resident parent in employment (84 per cent) and a half had two parents in employment (50 per cent). Some 16 per cent of all working-age families with dependent children were workless. These proportions varied according to the type of family unit and the number and ages of the children present (see **Table 1**).

The majority of working-age couples with dependent children had at least one parent in employment (94 per cent) and over two-thirds had both parents in employment (68 per cent). Where only one of the parents was in employment, this was usually the father. The mother was the sole earner in only 3 per cent of couples. In a small minority of couples neither parent was in employment (6 per cent). Couples with children of pre-school age were much less likely to be dual earners than those with school-age children, and couples with three or more children were much less likely to be dual earners than those with one or two children (see **Table 1**).

Couples with dependent children were less likely to be dual earners than working-age couples without dependent children (68 per cent compared with 72 per cent) but they

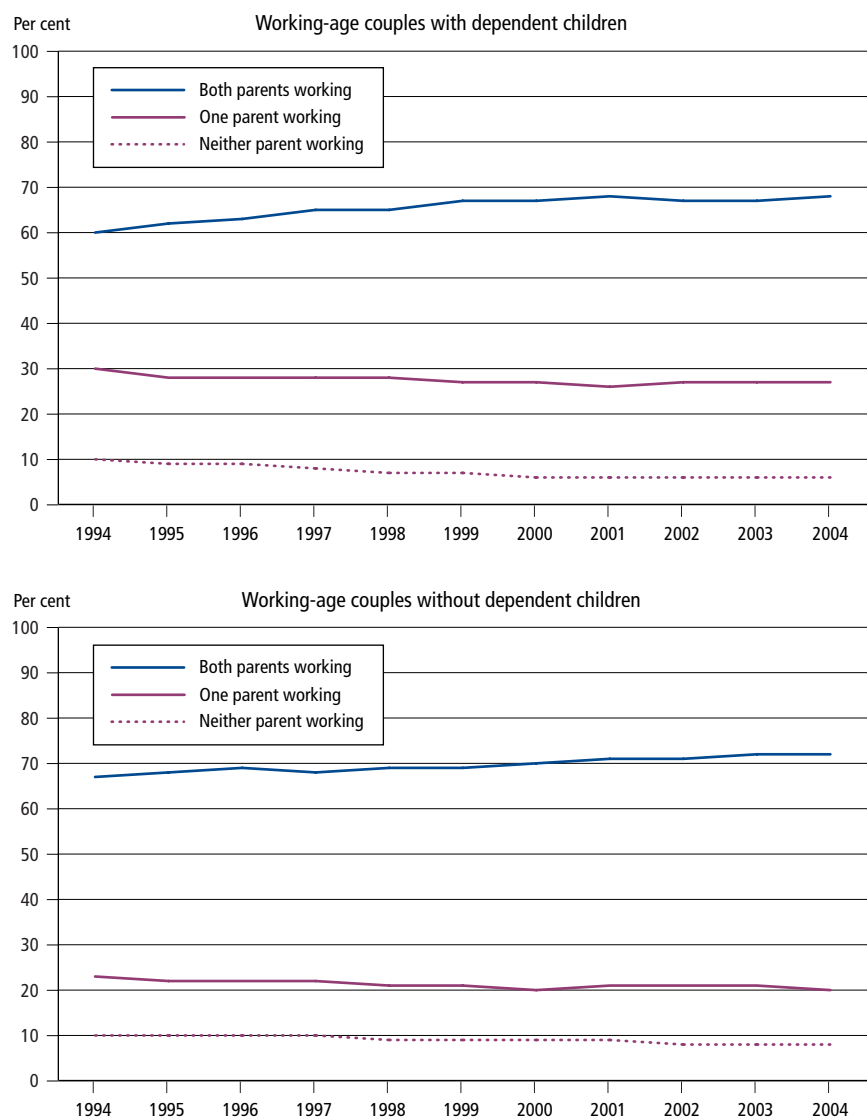
were also less likely to be workless (6 per cent compared with 8 per cent). Over the ten-year period to spring 2004, there was a downward trend in the proportion of workless couples, both with and without dependent children. The decrease was greater for couples with children (down by 4

percentage points) than for those without children (down by 2 percentage points). Over the same period, the proportion of dual-earner couples with and without dependent children increased by 8 percentage points and 5 percentage points respectively (see **Figure 1**).

Lone parent families were much

Figure 1

Employment status of couples^a with and without dependent children;^b United Kingdom; spring quarters 1994 to 2004, not seasonally adjusted



Source: Labour Force Survey household datasets

a Married/cohabiting couples in which both partners are of working age (women aged 16-59 and men aged 16-64).
 b Children aged under 16 and those aged 16-18 who are never-married and in full-time education.

Table 2

Employment rates of people^a with and without dependent children^b by age and sex;^c United Kingdom; spring 2004, not seasonally adjusted

	Per cent				
	16-24 years	25-34 years	35-49 years	50-59/64 years	Total
Mothers with dependent children	35	59	73	68	67
Married/cohabiting mothers	45	63	76	72	71
Lone mothers	25	46	62	55	53
Women without dependent children	62	90	81	68	73
Fathers with dependent children	81	89	92	84	90
Married/cohabiting fathers	82	89	93	85	91
Lone fathers	26	55	72	61	67
Men without dependent children	61	87	85	69	74
All parents with dependent children	45	70	82	78	77
Married/cohabiting parents	57	75	84	80	81
Lone parents	25	47	64	56	54
All people without dependent children	61	88	83	69	74

Source: Labour Force Survey household dataset

a People of working age (men aged 16-64 and women aged 16-59).

b Children under 16 and those aged 16-18 who are never-married and in full-time education.

c Base for percentages excludes people with unknown employment status.

Table 3

Employment rates of parents^a by region;^b United Kingdom; spring 2004, not seasonally adjusted

	Per cent		
	Married/cohabiting mothers	Married/cohabiting fathers	Lone parents
North East	70	83	57
North West	73	90	56
Yorkshire and the Humber	72	91	58
East Midlands	74	92	55
West Midlands	70	91	55
East	71	94	63
London	61	86	42
South East	73	94	59
South West	73	93	62
Wales	71	87	50
Scotland	75	92	55
Northern Ireland	67	87	46
Great Britain	71	91	54
United Kingdom	71	91	54

Source: Labour Force Survey household dataset

a Parents of working age (women aged 16-59 and men aged 16-64).

b Base for percentages excludes parents with unknown employment status.

► more likely to be workless than couple families (46 per cent compared with 6 per cent). Lone parent families with children of pre-school age were more likely to be workless than those whose children were older, and those with three or more children were more likely to be workless than those with smaller families (see Table 1). Trends in lone parent employment rates are described in the following sections.

Employment status of parents

There were 12.8 million working-age parents in spring 2004 (35 per cent of the working age population). These can be broken down into three main subgroups: couple mothers (5.5 million); couple fathers (5.5 million); and lone parents (1.9 million). Lone parents can be further divided into lone mothers (1.7 million) and lone fathers (173,000).

Table 2 shows that there are clear differences in employment rates between parents and non-parents, between mothers and fathers, and between couple parents and lone parents. In spring 2004 working-age mothers with dependent children were less likely to be in employment than working-age women without dependent children (67 per cent compared with 73 per cent). For men, the story was reversed – fathers were more likely to be in employment than working-age men without dependent children (90 per cent and 74 per cent). International statistics published by Eurostat suggest that this pattern is common throughout the European Union.²

Between the different subgroups of parents an employment hierarchy is evident. Fathers as a whole had higher employment rates than mothers (90 per cent compared with ►

► 67 per cent); couple parents had higher employment rates than lone parents (81 per cent and 54 per cent); and lone fathers had higher employment rates than lone mothers (67 per cent and 53 per cent). Differences in employment rates between parents and non-parents, and between different types of

parent, were evident across all age groups (see **Table 2**).

Table 3 shows that the employment hierarchy between couple fathers, couple mothers and lone parents exists within each region. It also shows variations in the employment rates of each type of parent by region. Employment rates for couple

fathers were lowest in the North East region, at 83 per cent. For couple mothers and lone parents employment rates were lowest in the London region, at 61 per cent and 42 per cent respectively.

Employment rates among parents have increased steadily in recent years and the gaps between different ►

Table 4

Full-time and part-time employment rates for people^a with and without dependent children;^{b, c} United Kingdom; spring quarters 1994 to 2004, not seasonally adjusted

Per cent

	Married/cohabiting mothers			Married/cohabiting fathers			Lone parents		
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total
1994	24	40	64	84	2	86	21	21	42
1995	25	41	66	85	2	87	21	21	42
1996	25	42	67	85	3	87	22	22	44
1997	26	42	68	86	3	88	22	23	45
1998	27	42	69	86	3	89	22	24	46
1999	27	43	70	87	3	90	23	25	48
2000	28	42	71	87	3	90	25	26	51
2001	28	43	71	87	3	90	26	26	51
2002	28	43	71	86	3	90	26	27	53
2003	28	43	71	87	4	91	26	27	53
2004	28	42	71	87	4	91	28	26	54

	Working-age women without dependent children			Working-age men without dependent children			All working-age people without dependent children		
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total
1994	48	22	71	64	6	71	57	13	71
1995	49	22	70	65	7	71	58	13	71
1996	48	23	71	64	7	71	57	14	71
1997	48	23	71	64	8	72	57	15	72
1998	49	23	72	65	8	73	58	15	72
1999	49	23	72	65	8	73	58	15	73
2000	50	23	72	66	8	74	59	15	73
2001	50	23	73	66	8	74	59	15	73
2002	50	23	73	65	8	74	59	15	73
2003	50	23	73	65	9	74	58	15	73
2004	50	23	73	65	9	74	58	16	74

Source: Labour Force Survey household datasets

^a People of working age (women aged 16-59 and men aged 16-64).

^b Children aged under 16 and those aged 16-18 who are never-married and in full-time education.

^c Base for percentages excludes people with unknown employment status.

► types of parents have narrowed. Over the ten-year period to spring 2004 the employment rate for couple mothers, couple fathers and lone parents increased by 7 percentage points, 5 percentage points and 12 percentage points respectively. These upward trends reflect increases in both full-time and part-time employment (see **Table 4** and **Figure 2**). Employment rates for working-age men and women without dependent children also increased over this period, but the increase was greater for parents.

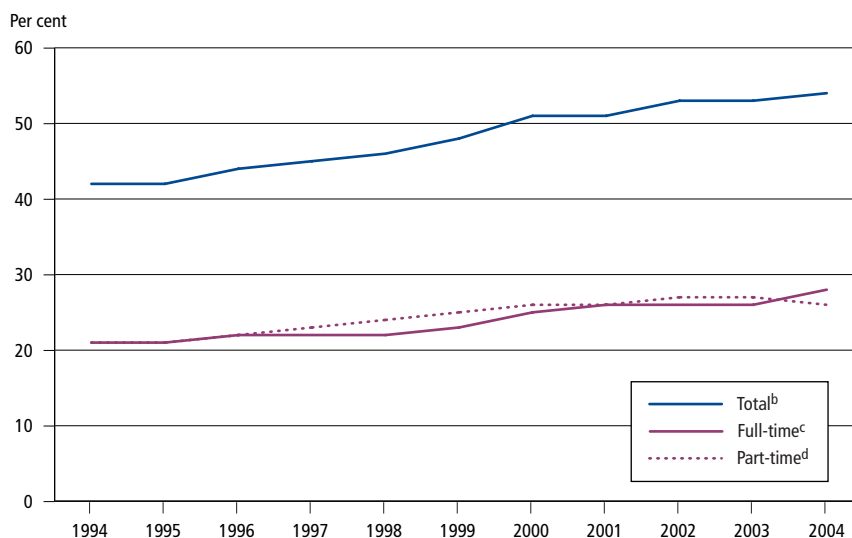
Couple mothers and lone parents

Couple mothers and lone parents have historically had lower employment rates than both couple fathers and working-age people without dependent children. Employment rates among couple mothers and lone parents vary according to both personal characteristics and family characteristics, such as the number and ages of the children within the family.

Educational qualifications appear to be an important factor in the employment status of these two subgroups. Couple mothers and lone parents tend to have lower qualification levels than couple fathers. In spring 2004 17 per cent of couple mothers and only 9 per cent of lone parents had a degree or equivalent qualification, compared with 21 per cent of couple fathers. Over a fifth of lone parents (22 per cent) and 12 per cent of couple mothers had no qualifications, compared with 10 per cent of couple fathers. Employment rates were highest among graduates and lowest among those with no qualifications. Couple mothers and lone parents

Figure 2

Employment rates of lone parents;^a United Kingdom; spring quarters 1994 to 2004, not seasonally adjusted



Source: Labour Force Survey household datasets

a Parents of working age (women aged 16-59 and men aged 16-64).

b Lone parents in employment as a percentage of all lone parents.

c Lone parents in full-time employment as a percentage of all lone parents.

d Lone parents in part-time employment as a percentage of all lone parents.

with a degree or equivalent qualification each had an employment rate of 81 per cent, while couple mothers and lone parents with no qualifications had employment rates of 44 per cent and 29 per cent respectively (see **Figure 3**).

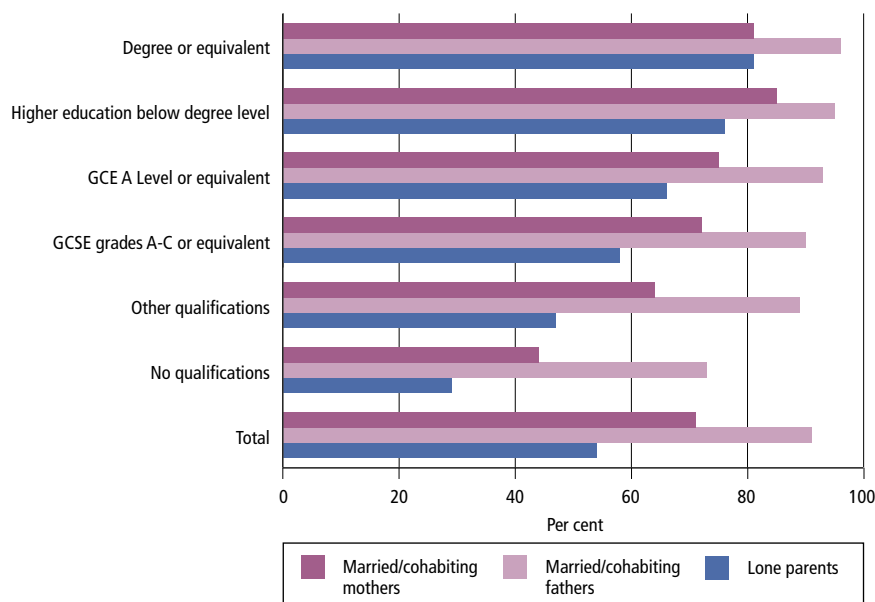
Evidence from other research suggests that the number and ages of the children within the family unit are important factors affecting the employment rates of couple mothers and lone parents but appear to have less impact on the employment status of couple fathers.³ Results from the spring 2004 LFS support this finding. Couple mothers and lone parents with three or more dependent children were much less likely to be in employment than those with one or two children. They were also less likely to be in full-time employment. Only 56 per cent of couple mothers with three or more children were in employment and

only 18 per cent were working full-time. For lone parents with three or more children the overall and full-time employment rates were lower still, at 36 per cent and 14 per cent respectively.

Couple mothers and lone parents with children of pre-school age were much less likely to be in employment than those whose youngest child was of school age. They were also less likely to be working full-time. The overall employment rate for couple mothers with children under 5 years old was 59 per cent. For lone parents with children under 5 years old the employment rate was lower still, at 34 per cent. The full-time employment rates for couple mothers and lone parents with children under 5 years old were 21 per cent and 13 per cent respectively (see **Table 5**).

Employment rates have increased ►

Figure 3

**Employment rates of parents^a by highest qualification;^b
United Kingdom; spring 2004, not seasonally adjusted**


Source: Labour Force Survey household dataset

a Parents of working age (women aged 16-59 and men aged 16-64).

b Base for percentages excludes parents with unknown employment status.

► steadily in recent years among both couple mothers and lone parents with pre-school-age children, and the gap between them has narrowed. Over the ten-year period to spring 2004 the employment rates for couple mothers and lone parents with children under 5 years old increased by 8 percentage points and 12 percentage points respectively. There were increases in both full-time and part-time working over this period, but part-time working increased at a faster rate. For couple mothers with pre-school-age children, the part-time employment rate increased by 5 percentage points while the full-time employment rate increased by 3 percentage points. For lone parents with pre-school-age children the part-time employment rate increased by 7 percentage points while the full-time employment rate increased by 4 percentage points (see Table 6).

Table 5

**Employment rates of parents^a by number of dependent children^b and age of youngest dependent child;^c
United Kingdom; spring 2004, not seasonally adjusted**

Per cent

	Age of youngest dependent child				Number of dependent children			All with dependent children
					1	2	3 or more	
	0-4 years	5-10 years	11-15 years	16-18 years				
Employment rate								
Married/cohabiting mothers	59	77	80	81	75	73	56	71
Married/cohabiting fathers	91	91	91	88	90	93	87	91
Lone parents	34	57	65	74	59	53	36	54
Full-time employment rate^d								
Married/cohabiting mothers	21	27	38	43	37	25	18	28
Married/cohabiting fathers	87	88	87	85	86	90	82	87
Lone parents	13	24	39	57	34	24	14	28

Source: Labour Force Survey household dataset

a Parents of working age (mothers aged 16-59 and fathers aged 16-64).

b Children under 16 and those aged 16-18 who are never-married and in full-time education.

c Base for percentages excludes parents with unknown employment status.

d Parents in full-time employment as a percentage of all parents in the same category.

- Part-time working has contributed to the upward trend in total employment rates among couple mothers and lone parents, particularly for those with children of pre-school age. It is much more difficult to assess whether opportunities for flexible working arrangements have also been a factor. The LFS collects information about flexible working arrangements but respondents are not asked whether these working arrangements have affected their ability to participate in work. In spring 2004, 31 per cent of working couple mothers, 26 per cent of working lone parents and 15 per cent of working

Table 6

Employment rates of parents^a by age of youngest dependent child;^{b, c} United Kingdom; spring quarters 1994 to 2004, not seasonally adjusted

Per cent

	Married/cohabiting mothers by age of youngest dependent child								
	Child aged 0-4 years			Child aged 5-10 years			Child aged 11-18 years		
	Full-time work	Part-time work	Total employment	Full-time work	Part-time work	Total employment	Full-time work	Part-time work	Total employment
1994	18	33	51	21	49	70	35	42	77
1995	18	34	53	22	49	71	37	41	78
1996	20	36	55	23	48	71	35	44	79
1997	20	38	58	24	48	72	36	42	78
1998	20	37	57	26	48	74	37	42	79
1999	21	38	60	25	50	75	38	41	79
2000	22	39	61	27	49	76	39	39	78
2001	20	40	61	27	49	76	40	40	80
2002	19	40	59	27	49	76	39	41	80
2003	20	39	59	28	48	76	40	41	81
2004	21	38	59	27	50	77	39	41	80

	Lone parents by age of youngest dependent child								
	Child aged 0-4 years			Child aged 5-10 years			Child aged 11-18 years		
	Full-time work	Part-time work	Total employment	Full-time work	Part-time work	Total employment	Full-time work	Part-time work	Total employment
1994	9	14	23	19	27	45	39	24	64
1995	11	14	25	20	25	45	36	26	62
1996	10	16	26	21	26	47	38	25	64
1997	11	18	29	20	28	48	38	24	63
1998	10	18	28	21	30	50	38	26	64
1999	12	20	32	22	29	50	39	26	65
2000	13	21	33	21	31	52	40	28	68
2001	13	21	33	24	32	55	41	24	66
2002	13	22	35	25	31	56	41	27	68
2003	12	23	34	23	30	53	42	27	70
2004	13	21	34	24	33	57	44	24	67

Source: Labour Force Survey household datasets

^a Parents of working age (mothers aged 16-59 and father aged 16-64).

^b Children aged under 16 and those aged 16-18 who are never-married and in full-time education.

^c Base for percentages excludes parents whose employment status is unknown.

► couple fathers had some type of flexible working arrangement. The figures for couple mothers and lone parents with pre-school-age children were slightly lower than average, at 27 per cent and 22 per cent respectively, but this could be because they achieved the work/family balance through a part-time working pattern instead. The proportions of working couple mothers and lone parents with a flexible working arrangement have remained fairly constant over the past ten years.

The two most common types of flexible working arrangement are flexi-time and term-time-only working. In spring 2004 12 per cent of working couple mothers worked flexi-time and 12 per cent worked in term-time only, while 11 per cent of working lone parents worked flexi-time and 9 per cent worked term-time only.

Conclusion

The LFS household datasets provide a rich source of information about the employment status of families

and parents. Analysis of these datasets suggests that the proportion of dual-earner couples, both with and without dependent children, has increased over the past ten years while the proportion of workless couples has decreased.

Couple mothers and lone parents continue to have lower employment rates than both couple fathers and working-age people without dependent children but the gap between them is narrowing. The upward trend in employment rates for couple mothers and lone parents reflects increases in both full-time and part-time employment.

The number and ages of the children within the family unit appear to be important factors affecting couple mothers' and lone parents' participation in work. Although employment rates among those with children of pre-school age continue to be lower than average, they have increased over the past ten years and the availability of part-time work appears to have been a factor in this.

It is worth noting here that a small

proportion of working-age families with dependent children (4 per cent of couple families and 9 per cent of lone parents) shared a household with other family units, such as grandparents, other relatives, foster children or other non-relatives. The extent to which employment patterns among families varies according to the composition of the households in which they live would be an interesting topic for further research.

Further information

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