

Child Poverty in Northern Ireland: the limits of welfare-to-work policies

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“Our historic aim will be for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty.”

(Tony Blair, Beveridge Lecture, 1999)

The boldest commitment from the current U.K. Labour Government was its determination to eliminate child poverty within a generation—defined as 20 years. This article examines the circumstances surrounding children living in poverty in Northern Ireland, the causes of the high levels of child poverty in the region, and explores the extent to which these can be improved by present government policies. It argues that those policies do not take into account the lack of employment opportunities, even for entry-level jobs of the poorest quality, in some areas of the UK, such as parts of Northern Ireland, the North East of England and Wales. Neither do current government policies address the issue of those who cannot work because of disability, long-term illness or because of caring responsibilities, whether for an adult who is elderly, ill or disabled, or for young children.

Background

Labour’s pledge to end child poverty has been replaced by a commitment to “having a material deprivation child poverty rate that approached zero and being among the best in Europe on relative low income” (DWP, 2003a). This would suggest an income poverty rate of between six and nine percent, or almost one in

ten children living in poverty¹. The DWP has developed a list of material deprivation indicators which will be included as questions in the *Family Resources Survey* from 2004. These include indicators of child as well as adult deprivation and are based on research evidence and the views of people living in poverty.

This paper argues that even these far less ambitious child poverty targets will not be met unless there is a fundamental change in the government's approach. In particular, evidence from Northern Ireland suggests that its insistence on work as the primary – if not only - route out of poverty will not lead to a radical reduction in levels of child poverty, even the severe child poverty of material deprivation.

The devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have been described as 'policy laboratories' of the UK. Northern Ireland is a particularly useful region for the examination of social policy initiatives. At 1.6 million, its population is similar to the poorer regions of Northern England. Nonetheless, it exhibits many of the characteristics of a larger region, or even country, with its own peripheral regions in the West, a large conurbation in Belfast, a smaller city, Derry-Londonderry in the North West, relatively large and small market towns as well as a rural population. As a region with its own devolved structures if not, at the time of writing, a functioning Assembly, statistics are available at a highly disaggregated level geographically.

Child poverty levels in Northern Ireland

There is considerable evidence to demonstrate that Northern Ireland has higher levels of children living in poverty than any other region of the UK. Research carried out for the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) found that 38% of children live in households which are in the bottom 30% of household income after housing costs (McLaughlin and Dignam, 2002). That these high rates of child poverty include high rates of material deprivation were confirmed by the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey for Northern Ireland which found 37.4% of children living in households that had equivalised incomes after housing costs below 60% of the median and were lacking in three or more necessities (Hillyard et al, 2003).

To some extent, the higher levels of children living in poverty are due to the greater proportion of children in the Northern Irish population. The 2001 Census reveals that 29.5% of households in England and Wales have children and 11.4% have children aged 0-4. By contrast, 36.5% of households in Northern Ireland have children and 14.4% have children aged 0-4.

Department of Social Development statistics show that 32% of children live in households whose only income derives from benefits (Dept. for Social Development, 2002). This compares with 19% of children in Britain living in families dependent on benefits (DWP, 2002). This third of children totally dependent on benefits, unsurprisingly, are not equally dispersed across the region. In fact, there is a marked concentration of poverty with over half of all children that live in households in receipt of Income Support residing in 16 percent of wards and over three quarters living in just 37 percent of wards (McClelland, 2003). The level of

child poverty in some of those wards, particularly those in the North West periphery of the region, is staggering. One in three wards in the Derry City Council area have a child poverty rate of more than 70 percent. The three worst wards for child poverty in Northern Ireland are in Derry City. The Shantallow East ward has 92.4 percent of its children living in poverty, the Brandywell 91.4 percent and Creggan South 89.4 percent. Two thirds of the thirty wards in the Derry City Council area have a child poverty rate of more than 50%, only three have a child poverty rate of less than 25%. (NISRA, 2001)

High levels of unemployment and underemployment remain a problem in Northern Ireland, despite the official figures suggesting an improvement. The Labour Force Survey shows that long term unemployment as a percentage of total unemployed is much worse for NI than any other region of the UK – 43.5% compared to a UK average of 27.5% and 34.2% in the North East of England, which is the next worst.

Households with employees in Northern Ireland earn on average 20% less than those in the rest of the UK (HMSO, 2000). Twenty one percent of average household income is derived from social security benefits, compared to 12 percent in the UK generally. As a result of lower wages and greater dependence on benefits, average household income is 22% lower than the UK average. At the same time, providing necessities such as fuel, light and food costs everyone more - 26% of average household income in NI compared to a UK average of 20% (NISRA, 2000). Since these form a far higher proportion of household expenditure in poorer families, the higher cost of fuel, light and food in the region greatly increases the severity of poverty.

Unemployment, low pay, a higher cost of living, slightly larger families and a lack of access by poorer women to the means of limiting their family size, together with even greater levels of inequality than in Britain, all contribute to the high levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland.

Unemployment and long-term unemployment

Levels of unemployment in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in these islands, depend on which figures one accepts. So, in February 2003, the claimant count

Table 1: High unemployment levels in UK by Parliamentary Constituency (%)

Constituency	Claimant count	ILO	CESI 'slack labourforce'
Birmingham Ladywood	15.5	26	45.8
Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath	12.0	20	37.6
Birmingham Hodge Hill	8.2	13.7	27.7
Poplar and Canning Town	10.7	17.3	33.4
Hackney South & Shoreditch	9.5	15.3	30.2
Manchester Central	9.4	15.4	31.8
Manchester Gorton	7.8	12.7	27.2
Liverpool Riverside	9.0	14.7	30.7
Glasgow Shettleston	8.1	13.5	29.0
Glasgow Springburn	7.2	12.0	26.2
Middlesborough	8.9	11.4	28.2
South Shields	8.7	11.1	27.6
Tyne Bridge	8.3	10.6	26.5
Belfast West	9.1	11.9	25.4
Foyle	8.4	11	23.8
North Belfast	7.3	9.6	21
Blenau Gwent	5.5	8.9	22.5
Cardiff South & Penarth	5.5	8.8	22.5

Source: Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion. www.cesi.org.uk

suggested that 4.4 percent of the total workforce were unemployed; the ILO figure that same month was 5.3 percent. The Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (CESI) calculates a 'slack workforce' figure by parliamentary constituency, where the numbers on government training and work schemes, those underemployed and those not registered as unemployed but nonetheless seeking work are taken into account.

Using ILO and CESI figures, unemployment rates in parts of Northern Ireland are high to alarming. However, as Table 1 shows, such high rates of unemployment can be found also in parts of England, particularly Birmingham and London, as well as in Scotland and Wales. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the CESI figure for Foyle is, if anything, an underestimate. For example, a recent recruitment campaign in Derry City, the boundaries of which are co-terminous with those of the Foyle constituency, by Debenhams' department store drew 6,000 applicants for some 200 jobs (Derry Journal, 2003).

While unemployment in Northern Ireland is not as high as some parts of England and Scotland, long-term unemployment (LTU) continues to be considerably above the national average. While overall LTU as a percentage of total unemployed in March to May 2003 stood at 43.5 percent, 52 percent of unemployed men were unemployed for a year or more. Overall, 4.4 percent of those claiming unemployment-related benefits had been claiming for three years or more,

compared to less than 3 percent in the UK generally. This is despite the numbers who avail of, or are coerced into, the New Deal every two years or so.

Analysis of those who left the claimant count in 2002 gives suggests that the 'welfare to work' route simply cannot succeed where there is no employment to go to from welfare. Of the 80,426 claimants who left the count, we do not know where 30 percent went to; some failed to sign, some signed off but their destination is unknown. 42 percent started a job, a little over 10 percent went to education or training and almost 12 percent to another benefit. When those whose destinations are unknown are excluded, 60 percent started a job and 15 percent entered education or training. However, there are distinct differences between District Council Areas in the proportion finding employment. So, while across the region, 60 percent found employment, just 48 percent of those leaving the count in the Derry DCA found employment, compared to 72 percent in the Cookstown² DCA. (DEL, 2003a)³

Table 2: Destination of those leaving claimant count

Year	% finding work	% entering education/training
1998	68.0	7.9
1999	68.0	8.3
2000	65.0	9.8
2001	63.9	11.1
2002	60.2	15.1

Source: DEL *Labour Market Bulletin, No. 17* Note: The proportions in this table are based on figures which exclude those who failed to sign or whose destination was unknown.

There has been an increased availability of employment since the beginning of the Peace Process and this, combined with measures to encourage people into employment, has certainly had some effect on levels of unemployment. However, an historical analysis of the proportion leaving the claimant count because they have found work suggests that the slowdown in net job creation is impacting on the ability of even the most motivated unemployed person to find paid work. As Table 2 shows, the proportion of those leaving the count who found work has decreased steadily since 1998, while the proportion leaving to enter education or training has increased steadily. Over 50 percent of those very long-term unemployed (over three years unemployed) in 2002 left the claimant count for education or training, clearly reflecting involvement in the New Deal for 25+.

Intermediate Labour Markets (ILMs), such as Worktrack, are now being piloted in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the UK, as a potential means of reducing long-term unemployment. One of the criticisms of the workings of Intermediate Labour Markets (ILM) in areas of high unemployment has been that they become 'employers of last resort'. (Finn, 2003) This was certainly the case with the Action for Community Employment scheme which operated in Northern Ireland from the mid-80s to mid-90s. Evaluations of ACE found that taking part in the scheme did not improve participants' "earning ability or their likelihood of finding a more secure job". Further, there were high numbers of people re-entering ACE a second and third time. (CPC, 1998) While criticised heavily when in operation, ACE is now remembered fondly by those in areas of high unemployment as providing a respite from unemployment and allowing parents to take advantage of in-work benefits and tax credits. While this may not be the function of the ILM, it does indicate that there

is a real desire for employment, even poor quality employment such as ACE was acknowledged to be. However, ILMs are unlikely to help improve levels of employment in areas where there is little employment available.

The working poor in Northern Ireland

Although movement into paid work is usually associated with an improvement in income and living standards, this is not necessarily the case – especially when work is short-term or insecure. The OFM/DFM research found that half of all children living below the poverty line were living in families where at least one adult was in employment. (McLaughlin and Dignam, 2002) This compares badly with overall UK figures.(CPAG, 2002)

As mentioned above, households in Northern Ireland earn on average 20% less than those in the rest of the UK. Further, NI is promoted to foreign direct investors as a low wage economy. For example, the Invest NI website tells overseas companies that wages are “up to 32% lower than in the US and 25% lower than the EU average”.⁴

Table 3: Annual wage rates in low-pay regions of UK, 2002

Region	Average	Non-manual employees	Manual employees
Northern Ireland	£20,896	£24,154	£15,857
NE England	£20,716	£22,469	£17,843

Wales	£20,758	£22,884	£17,097
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Source: New Earnings Survey 2002

This means that 38% of manual workers and 20% of non-manual workers in NI earn less than £250 a week, or £13,000 a year and one in ten manual workers earns less than £180 a week, or £9,000 a year, for an average 42.5 hour week.(ONS, 2003)

High levels of inequality in the region disguise the extent of low pay. Thus, the headline figures on earnings show average gross annual earnings in Northern Ireland, as higher than the North East of England or Wales. However, as Table 3 demonstrates, while average gross annual earnings for non-manual employees in Northern Ireland are considerably higher than the North East of England and Wales, earnings for manual workers are considerably lower.

Table 4, showing the relative weekly earnings of manual and non-manual workers, further illustrates the high levels of inequality in earnings in Northern Ireland. Average hourly pay for manual workers reflects the lower wages in Northern Ireland where it is £6.99 an hour, compared to £7.72 in the North East and £7.57 in Wales.

Table 4: Relative weekly earnings of workers in NI, NE England and Wales

Region	% Manual earning less than £350 pw	% Non-manual earning more than £450 pw
N.Ireland	72.6	40.4
NE England	61.2	34.0

Wales	64.7	35.0
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Source: New Earnings Survey 2002

The above figures do not include the poorest of the working poor. They refer only to full-time employees on adult rates. Part-time employees, 83 percent of whom are women (DETINI, 2003), often lone parents, are not included, nor are young people under 18 who are not entitled to any minimum wage. Those aged 18-21 whose minimum wage rate is set at just £3.60 an hour are also excluded, although Northern Ireland has a high rate of teenage parenthood.

Lone Parents, employment and childcare

Part of New Labour's 'welfare to work' policy has been targeted at lone parents. In its document *Measuring Child Poverty*, published just before Christmas 2003, the Department of Work and Pensions set a target of getting 70% of lone parents into paid employment by 2010. This target applies also to Northern Ireland. Work carried out in Britain illustrating the difficulties inherent in meeting this target has identified the lack of affordable childcare as the main obstacle to meeting that target (Paull and Brewer, 2003). Childcare is certainly a huge obstacle in Northern Ireland. The region never had the benefit of even the relatively small amount of state-funded childcare enjoyed by children in Britain. However, the lack of well-paid work in the region impacts sharply on lone parents. As a result, even male lone parents are considerably less likely to be in paid employment than their counterparts in England and Wales (see Table 5).

While overall figures for lone parents in paid employment in Northern Ireland are bad, levels of paid employment among lone parents in areas of high unemployment within the region are considerably worse. The 2001 Census revealed that only 9% of female lone parents are in paid employment in West Belfast and just 12.4% in Derry City.

Table 5: Lone parents in paid employment

Region	Male Lone Parents		Female Lone Parents	
	% in full-time employment	% in part-time employment	% in full-time employment	% in part-time employment
N. Ireland	45.24	6.82	17.49	20.93
England & Wales	55.93	6.95	21.43	26.37

Source: Census 2001, Key Statistics Table KS22

Apart from the lack of jobs, the other main obstacle for lone parents who want to be in employment is the lack of childcare. Northern Ireland continues to have one of the lowest provision of childcare not only within the UK but Europe as a whole (ECNI, 2003). So, in 2002, the number of day nursery places per 1,000 children aged 0-4 was 62.4, compared to 95 in England. Day nurseries, however, play a relatively small part in the range of childcare options used by parents in the region. Research commissioned by the Equality Commission on the demand for and supply of childcare in Northern Ireland found evidence that affordability and availability were the main

problems in relation to childcare for working parents. As a result, relatives and friends play an important role in providing childcare (Gray and Bruegel, 2002). Grandparents were found to be particularly important. Around one in five of the children of working parents, and over one in three of children aged 5-11, are cared for entirely by a relative or friend.

Analysis of the costs of childcare revealed that an important reason for this reliance on informal childcare was cost. Gray and Bruegel point to the specific disadvantage faced by lone parents in Northern Ireland as their earnings are about one third lower than the UK average for lone parents.

The research found that the extent to which mothers' employment is supported by formal childcare increases with the mother's earnings. Within the formal childcare arena, childminders are much more likely to be used by lower paid mothers and day nurseries more likely to be used by mothers in professional and managerial occupations. However, it also found that parents who work outside standard office hours have particular difficulty finding childcare.

Lone parents are particularly impacted by this lack of flexible childcare. Women are much more likely than men to have atypical work patterns, such as part-time, short-term or casual employment and working outside normal office hours. 52% of employees in Northern Ireland are atypical workers; 64% are women and 42% are men (Muldoon et al, 2001). In some sectors, this difference is quite marked. For instance, in the hotel and restaurant sector

60% of women, but only 36% of men were atypical workers. Similarly, in public administration, education and health sectors 72% of the female workforce were atypical employees compared to 52% of males. The childcare difficulties facing these women are compounded by the fact that those in atypical work are more likely to have poorer terms and conditions of employment than those in permanent full-time positions.

Disability, long-term illness and caring responsibilities

Some people have a disability or chronic illness so severe they are unable to work, even if there were jobs available for them to access. Within the UK generally, the employment rate for those disabled people who are able to work, if 'reasonable accommodation' is provided, is significantly below the level for the wider population. While people with disabilities generally find it hard to access paid employment, those living in areas of high unemployment have even less chance of finding a job.

There are high rates of disability and long term illness in NI; the 2001 Census revealed that 41% of households have one or more people with a limiting long-term illness or disability. This compares with 34% of households in England and Wales. 21% of all persons in Northern Ireland have a disability, higher than the UK generally (18%) The age structure of NI's population, which is the youngest of all the regions of the UK, would lead us to expect a lower rate of disability. People over 60 make up just 18% of the population compared to 21% in England and 23% in Wales.

Of the 210,487 disabled people in Northern Ireland, only 33.5% are in employment. Although comprising 19.7% of all people of working age, people with disabilities make up only 9.8% of all people in employment. (ECNI, 2001) Again, this compares poorly with the overall UK rate of disabled people in employment, which is 46.9%.

Table 6: Long-term illness/disability and provision of unpaid care (%)

Region	Long-term limiting illness/disability	Providing unpaid care	Providing 50 or more hours unpaid care
United Kingdom	18.5	10.0	2.1
Northern Ireland	21.3	14.7	3.6
England and Wales	18.2	10.0	2.1
Scotland	20.3	9.5	2.3
NE England	22.7	11.0	2.7

Source: Census 2001

As well as people of working age with a disability, 55% (117,595) of people over 65 have a limiting illness or disability and 5% (22,036) of children aged under sixteen. The high level of households with disabled people in Northern Ireland, combined with an acknowledged paucity of services for people with disabilities impacts greatly on child poverty. The lack of services means that much of the care and support for disabled people comes from other family members. As Table 6 illustrates, a considerably higher proportion of people in NI provide unpaid care than in other parts of the UK. Even when compared to the North East of England which has slightly higher levels of disability, the

proportion of those providing unpaid care is significantly higher. While some of these unpaid carers manage to hold down a paying job also, the reality is many cannot and have to depend on benefits.

This dependence on family members for care and support increases the dependence of people with disabilities, especially those with more severe disabilities. (Morris, 1989; Morris, 1993a and 1993b) Morris argues that concentration on the needs of carers, as opposed to the people with disabilities, does nothing to challenge damaging and discriminatory images of passive and dependent disabled people.

Child poverty, larger families and lack of reproductive choice

Across the UK, larger families are at disproportionate risk of poverty. The DWP estimates that 'by 2004 over half of those children in low income will be in large families'.(DWP, 2003b) Recent research published by the DWP found that 'greater hardship was associated with families of three or more children... Couple families with three children were twice as likely to be in hardship compared to families of two children, although the degree of hardship was concentrated at the moderate level. Severe hardship (three or more problems) was substantially greater for families of four or more children' (Vegeris and Perry, 2003). This applied to both lone and two parent families. A study by the Centre for Research in Social Policy, carried out for Save the Children, found that children in families with three or more children were more likely to be in severe and persistent poverty (Adelman et al, 2003). Over a quarter of all families in Northern Ireland have three or more

children, while 43 percent of all families in low-income households have three or more children; 34 percent of these are partnered families, 9 percent lone parents (Dignam, 2003).

The fertility rate in NI has dropped considerably in recent years and now stands at 1.9. Nonetheless, the region continues to have a higher proportion of children in its population than any other part of the UK, with the 2001 Census showing 36.5 percent of all households containing dependent children. While there is a greater concentration of larger families in poorer parts of all regions of the UK, there is at least an element of choice for parents in Britain about family size. However, inequality of access across the region to family planning services, particularly emergency contraception (WHSSB, 2004), combined with the fact that the 1967 Abortion Act has never been extended to Northern Ireland, means that such choice is absent here.

All the research evidence available suggests that sexual activity patterns are no different in Ireland, North or South, to Britain. In other words, relatively casual sexual activity is now the norm. Research in schools in 1997-98 found that one in five 13-15 year olds had had sexual intercourse (HPANI, 2000). A sample of 16-19 year olds revealed that over half were sexually active (NHSSB, 1999).

Almost one hundred thousand women from Northern Ireland have travelled to another part of the UK for abortion since 1967. Abortion is a choice available to few women living in poverty however. This was recognised by the Standing

Advisory Commission on Human Rights which, in 1994, recommended among other things that “the issue of ‘pecuniary advantage’ should be removed from the [abortion] debate” (SACHR, 1994). In 1999, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women expressed concern that the Abortion Act had not been extended to Northern Ireland and recommended that the government “initiate a process of public consultation in Northern Ireland on reform of the abortion law.” There are no plans to address the issue.

Transitions between work and benefits

Welfare to work policies themselves may be impacting on the severity of child poverty in Northern Ireland. Even in areas where there is a notoriously weak labour market, people on benefits, particularly Job Seekers Allowance, are put under severe pressure to take any job however precarious or low paid. A number of policy changes have been introduced to ease the transition from benefits into paid work. However, these changes may not be sufficient to overcome the problems revealed by recent research. Two studies highlight how the transition into and out of paid work can represent pressure points for families struggling to stay out of severe poverty.

A study by the National Centre for Social Research for the DWP found that a combination of low pay, higher costs (especially childcare) and debts meant that some households described themselves as worse off after a move into paid work. Money management was more difficult than when on benefit. Although ‘some

“worse off” families were determined to remain in work and off benefits, others found that the impact of being worse off financially, and psychologically too, became too much over time. Ultimately some households felt forced to leave their jobs and return to benefits as they saw this as being the better option’.(Farrell and O’Connor, 2003)

Levels of severe and persistent child poverty in Northern Ireland are not available, although ongoing analysis of data from the recent *Bare Necessities* poverty and social exclusion survey should yield information on the severity of children’s poverty in the region (Hillyard et al, 2003). Nonetheless, given what we know from Britain about the circumstances in which children fall into severe poverty, it is possible, using government statistics, to gain some insight into levels of severe child poverty here. A study by the Centre for Research in Social Policy, carried out for Save the Children, *Britain’s Poorest Children*, found that almost nine in ten children who were in severe poverty were in households in receipt of Income Support (IS) or Job Seeker’s Allowance (JSA). Almost one in five severely poor children had at least one adult in the household who was in some form of paid employment (Adelman et al, 2003).

One of the most significant findings of *Britain’s Poorest Children* was that persistent and severe child poverty was associated with income volatility, measured as two or more transitions between benefit income and work or other income as the main source of income. ‘Children whose households underwent two or more such transitions were much more likely to be in

persistent and severe poverty than children who did not experience these transitions'.(Adelman et al, 2003) In Northern Ireland, DETI-NI figures show that there is considerable 'recycling' of claimants in and out of work. In 1999, 33% of unemployed claimants in NI who had left the live register had experienced a further spell of unemployment within six months. A further 11% returned to benefits after 6-12 months (DEL, 2001).

This may well be contributing to deepening levels of child poverty in the region. However, more research is needed to confirm this.

Discussion

'Work not welfare' has been the central plank of the Government's child poverty strategy. The increase in employment has contributed to the reduction in child poverty in most of the UK. However, continuing high levels of unemployment in Northern Ireland undermine the government's policies here, as in other areas of high unemployment (Turok and Webster, 1998) Further, the particularly low level of wages in the region makes it even more difficult for families, particularly lone parent families, to pull themselves out of poverty. So, there continues to be a real problem of poverty among those in paid work, which tax credits are only partially addressing.

Given what *Britain's Poorest Children* tells us about the dangers of children falling into severe poverty during transitions (Adelman et al, 2003), there is a clear need for policy to provide greater protection during periods of transition between benefits

and paid work and vice versa. Given that parents, including lone parents, are being encouraged to enter the 'flexible labour market', the benefits system must also become more flexible and cushion families from the effect of these transitions.

As the Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry into Child Poverty pointed out, the structure of benefits for children in the UK disadvantages larger families. The child benefit differential in favour of the first child has been increased significantly under the present Government. It is possible, then, that the current structural bias in favour of smaller families contributes to high levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland. By contrast, policy in the Republic of Ireland is to increase child benefit levels for the second, third and any further children.

Despite a general antipathy to improving out-of-work benefits, the Government has increased the real value of the children's income support and income-based jobseeker's allowance rates so that, for younger children, they have virtually doubled in real terms over the lifetime of the Government. This is very welcome. A study conducted by the Policy Studies Institute for the DWP found a big reduction in the incidence of severe hardship among non-working families and their children (Vegeris and Perry, 2003). This supports the arguments of anti-poverty campaigners who argue that it is by improving out-of-work benefits for all children that children living in the severe poverty can best be helped.

Government fears that increasing out-of-work benefits will adversely affect work incentives need to be weighed against the evidence that the greater the hardship, the lower morale and self-confidence are likely to be, to the detriment of job-

seeking (Marsh, 2001; Marsh and Rowlingson, 2002). Getting by on inadequate benefits involves hard work that can undermine the motivation needed to undertake training or a jobsearch and drive people to despair and depression. The link between depression and living on low incomes has been well established by large-scale quantitative studies (O'Hare and O'Connor, 1987; Dohrenwend 1992; Turner and Lloyd, 1999; Harris et al, 2003; Goodman et al, 2003; Meertens et al, 2003).

The Government's target of getting 70% of lone parents into employment by 2010 has an underlying assumption that, if childcare were provided, most lone parents would want to work outside the home. However, there is little evidence to support that belief. Even if the eligible proportion of childcare costs in child tax credit was raised to 100% and there was a massive expansion of childcare places in Northern Ireland, that target is unlikely to be met in Northern Ireland. As argued above, the paucity of jobs is a significant obstacle. Further, the quality of the jobs likely to become available is such that they are unlikely to attract lone parents into employment. There are other difficulties and costs associated with working outside the home, including difficulties with transport and distance between workplace, childcare, and schools (Standing, 1999; Horgan 2000; Gray, 2001).

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in reaching the target of 70% of lone parents in employment is that so many lone parents regard work outside the home as detrimental to their children's well-being. Evason and Robinson (1996) found the lone parents they spoke to in Belfast were mostly not willing to look for employment until their children were older. This was because they prioritised

“meeting the needs of their children, mixed in with concern over the strain of combining employment with homecare and childcare.” These lone mothers were also concerned with transitions from benefits to wages and back, especially when, given low wage levels, they are unlikely to be much better off in employment.

Given the moral panics about ‘anti-social behaviour’ by children and young people, it does seem that lone parents cannot win. They are blamed for ‘out-of-control’ children and yet pressurised to accept employment that will leave them little time to supervise their children’s behaviour. Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children have a right to be cared for by their parents (UNCRC, 1989). It is ironic that that right is in danger of being denied by a government target that is supposed to be in the interests of children.

Like lone parents, many carers of disabled or elderly people find it difficult to combine meeting the needs of those they care for with paid employment. Further, disability rights activists have written widely about the need for public services that allow people with disabilities to be independent of family members. They have challenged the discourse of care and caring and sought instead support services that promote independence (Morris, 1989 and 1993b). Advocating support for carers and promoting the rights of disabled people need not be counterposed, however. As the influence of the Disability Rights Movement grows, more carers are starting to look for services that promote independence for their disabled family member but which, as a by-product, provide respite from caring for themselves (McConkey and Smith, 2001). In a region where over a third of the population either has a disability or cares for

someone who has a disability, improving services to promote the independence of disabled people is as much a *sine qua non* of tackling child poverty as is the provision of childcare.

Conclusion

Welfare to work policies cannot eliminate child poverty in areas of high unemployment and low wages. Even in strong labour markets, there will be parents, especially lone mothers, who want to look after their children themselves without having to cope with a paid job. There will also be those who cannot work or who need the support of vastly improved public services in order to take up employment. Policies aimed at ending child poverty must take account of these realities if they are to have any hope of success.

¹ The final footnote of the DWP report suggests that a poverty rate 'between that of Sweden and Denmark' would be 'amongst the best in Europe'.

² Cookstown DCA has a population of 32,500 people and is mainly rural, with a large market town, but within commuting distance of Belfast city.

³ Please note, proportions for DCAs only available excluding those whose destinations are unknown.

⁴ <http://www.investni.com/invest/WhyNI/people.asp>

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