

## Millennium Cohort Study Briefing 10

# Parental employment

Based on Chapter 6 of *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*  
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### About these briefings

This Briefing is one of 14 that distil the key findings of the first three surveys of the Millennium Cohort Study, as collected in *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*.

The study has been tracking the Millennium children through their early childhood and plans to follow them into adulthood. It covers such diverse topics as parenting; childcare; school choice; child behaviour and cognitive development; child and parental health; parents' employment and education; income; housing; and neighbourhood.

It is the first of the nationwide cohort studies to over-sample areas with high densities of ethnic minorities and large numbers of disadvantaged families.

For the first survey, in 2001–2, interviewers visited the families of nearly 19,000 children aged 9 months throughout the United Kingdom. It established the circumstances of pregnancy and birth, as well as the families' social background. The second survey recorded how nearly 16,000 cohort children were developing at age 3. The third survey, when they were age 5, involved almost 15,500 children and provided a uniquely

detailed account of their physical, cognitive and social development in the year they entered school.

The study is housed at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London. It was commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council, whose funding has been supplemented by a consortium of government departments.

*Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*, edited by Kirstine Hansen, Heather Joshi and Shirley Dex, The Policy Press, 2010, can be ordered via [www.policypress.co.uk](http://www.policypress.co.uk)

**Introduction**

Recent decades have seen huge changes to family economies in Western societies. The dominant arrangement today is the 1.5-earner family where fathers work full time and mothers have part-time jobs. However, dominant patterns may hide diverse experiences. Minority ethnic groups in the UK often have different employment patterns from most white families (Dale et al. 2008). Lone parents also differ from the 1.5-earner norm, of course.

This Briefing examines Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) parents' varied employment hours and childcare combinations during the cohort children's first five years. It focuses on diversity linked to ethnicity and to partnership status. The use of flexible working arrangements and their relationship to work–life balance are also considered.

**Policy background**

A raft of new policies and entitlements has been launched since 1997 to reduce the financial and time pressures on UK families. Attempts to help families with no earners enter the labour market and low-income families to stay employed led to the introduction of the Tax Credit system. Help was also provided via the National Childcare Strategy and the Sure Start programme. These initiatives were the backbone of policies aimed at giving parents – particularly lone parents – a financial incentive to take jobs to prevent their children growing up in poverty.

Other initiatives encouraged employers to offer more flexible working arrangements. Employee parents with children under 6, for example, now have the right to ask employers for flexible arrangements of their choice (2003), a request that must be seriously considered. Parents have also received various entitlements – Statutory Parental Leave (1999), enhanced Statutory Maternity Leave (2003) and Statutory (paid) Paternity Leave (2003) – which have extended the time they can take off to care for babies without losing their jobs.

The Millennium children have therefore been growing up at a time of prolific government activity and interventions to assist working families.

**Family economies**

The MCS1, 2 and 3 surveys (at ages 9 months, 3 and 5 years) showed that about a third of families are headed by '1.5-earner couples'. Slightly fewer families – almost a third – had one 'breadwinner', invariably the father, when the cohort child was 9 months. This dropped to one-quarter by age 5. The less traditional family economies where women worked rather than men were much less common (2%). Employed lone parents headed 9 per cent of families at the age 5 survey and 6 per cent at age 3. A further 5 to 6 per cent were no-earner couples while another 11 to 13 per cent were non-earning lone parents, depending on the interview date.

The 1.5-earner family type was common among white (37%) and Indian (36.2%) mothers but fairly uncommon among Pakistani and Bangladeshi (8.4%) or black (12.1%) mothers (Figure 1).

**Family economy transitions**

The MCS1 and 2 surveys enable us to examine how the combination of earners within a family changed over time. Dual earners were the most stable group in terms of family economy and partnership

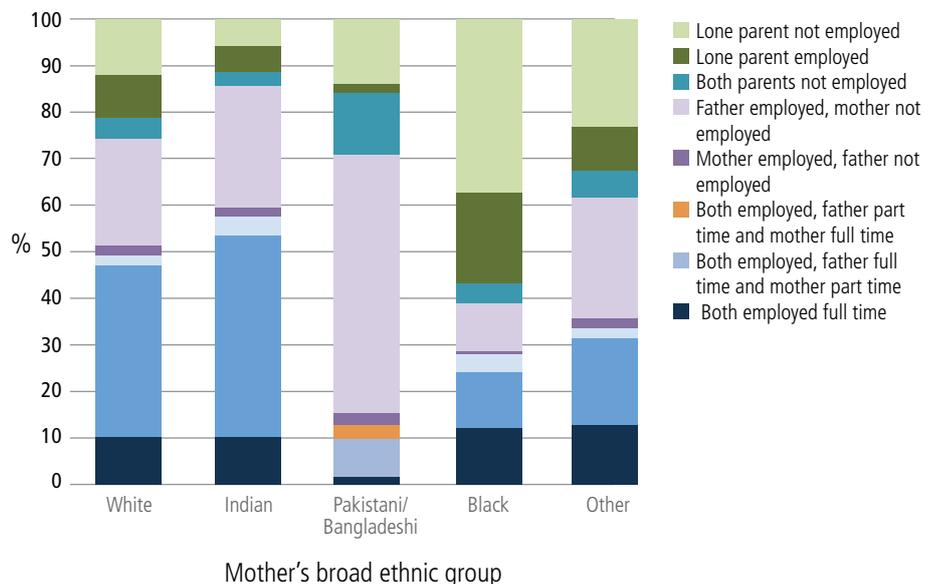
status. About four-fifths of mothers in couples who were employed at MCS1 (or MCS2) had the same employment and relationship status at the next interview. Of the lone parents, it was those starting out as not employed at either MCS1 (or MCS2) who were most likely to remain in the same partnership and employment statuses; two-thirds remained out of work at two successive interviews.

Between 13 and 15 per cent of lone mothers who were not employed moved into employment during the two-year gaps between interviews; a further 4–6 per cent found a partner and gained employment. Overall, the number of non-employed lone mothers at the MCS2 and MCS3 interviews reduced. Although this was a period when jobs were relatively plentiful, this is still a positive result from the government's perspective.

**Mothers' employment trajectories**

About half of MCS mothers were in work by the time the baby was nine months old. Most of these mothers had taken maternity leave whereas in earlier generations only a small minority was eligible, and an even smaller group took it.

**Figure 1**  
**Parents' partnership and economic status age 5 by mother's ethnicity**



Percentages in this Briefing are weighted to take account of disproportionate sampling and the different rates at which families have been dropping out of the survey.

The largest single group up to age 3 consisted of mothers who had continued in employment until then, having worked during their pregnancy, taken maternity leave, and returned up to 9 months after childbirth. This group made up about 45 per cent of those employed at pregnancy. Mothers employed during pregnancy were more likely to be having their first child. Twenty-three per cent of mothers had had another child by the time the cohort child was 3. These mothers reported the highest rates of intermittent employment and were less likely to be employed at the second MCS survey.

Over 70 per cent of continuously employed women were in the highest occupational groups. Over half the mothers employed during pregnancy and when their child was 9 months old, but who then went on to be employed intermittently, also belonged to these occupational groups.

Mothers who had never worked were least likely to report having a partner – only two-thirds had one – compared with 95 per cent of mothers who had worked continuously. Over half of those with no qualifications had never been employed.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers were the least likely to report continuous employment up to MCS2 (7%), and were more likely to have never worked (Pakistani 49% and Bangladeshi 64%). However, nearly two in five black Caribbean, white and Indian mothers had worked continuously.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, mothers who had spent more time working tended to have fewer children. Around three in ten Indian and black Caribbean mothers had only one child by the age 3 survey, compared with two in ten black African and Pakistani mothers. Just over 65 per cent of Bangladeshi mothers had older children in the household as well as the cohort child, compared to 49 per cent of white mothers.

Mothers who had remained in employment by the age 3 interview were highly likely (at least 70%) to be employed at the age 5 survey. Just under one-third of MCS mothers (30%) were effectively continuously employed over the five-year period covered by this research,

**Table 1**  
**Characteristics significantly associated with mothers' employment trajectories up to age 3 survey**

Trajectory up to MCS2, age 3	More likely to be in this trajectory if:	Less likely if:
Always employed	Higher qualifications Cohort child is first born Used formal childcare at MCS1 Used partner childcare at MCS1 Used grandparent childcare MCS1	Lone mother Age of mother at birth 14–29
Stopped work after pregnancy and no return made by time child aged 3	Age of mother at birth 14–19 Cohort child is first born Additional child born since cohort child	Employed partner Used formal/partner/grandparent childcare at MCS1
Employed during pregnancy, intermittent spells in and out of employment following pregnancy, not employed when child aged 3	Cohort child is first born Additional child born since cohort child Used formal childcare at MCS1 Used partner childcare at MCS1 Used grandparent childcare MCS1	Lone parent Indian
Not employed at MCS3 (intermittent spells of employment, but overall more out than in)	The mother is younger Additional child born since cohort child Pakistani/Bangladeshi, or Other ethnicity	More highly qualified Employed partner Lone parent Cohort child is first born Used formal/partner/grandparent at MCS1 Black Caribbean
Never worked	Age of mother at birth 14–29 Compared with 40+ Additional child born since cohort child Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi, Black African or other ethnicity	More highly qualified Employed partner Lone parent Cohort child is first born Used formal partner/grandparent childcare at MCS1

Base: All MCS mothers in both MCS1 and MCS2

while 6 per cent appear never to have had a paid job since leaving full-time education.

MCS mothers have clearly been returning to employment more quickly than women in previous generations. Almost four in five (78%) had been employed up to the age 5 survey compared with 29 per cent of mothers whose child was born in 1958. However, the employment rates differ by qualification level. Only 45 per cent of MCS mothers with no qualifications had worked by the child's fifth birthday, compared with 90 per cent of mothers with degree-level qualifications.

By far the largest group of mothers (53%) was employed intermittently. Just under a

third of mothers (30%) were effectively in paid employment continuously over the five years, while 22 per cent were never employed in the period.

**Flexible working**

Information on mothers' use of flexible working arrangements was collected at all three MCS sweeps. Part-time arrangements were very common on first return to employment for mothers either continuously employed (88%) or predominantly employed but had taken maternity leave (over 80%).

The proportions benefiting from other provisions designed to help working mothers were, however, small. For example, 9 per cent had used financial help for

childcare at age 3 while 7 per cent had used it at age 5; 3 per cent had used a workplace nursery or crèche by age 3 and 4 per cent by age 5; 6 per cent had used after-school childcare at age 5. Time off for family emergencies, which became an employee right in 2000, was taken by 54 per cent of employed mothers at age 3 but by only 39 per cent between the ages of 3 and 5.

The MCS data at age 3 indicate that the public sector is slightly more family-friendly than the private sector. However, by age 5, the use of family-friendly provisions barely differed between the two sectors – perhaps because of public-sector budget cuts.

Mothers in managerial and professional occupations made most use of family-friendly provisions (with the exception of term-time-only working). The size of the difference was large in the case of financial help with childcare vouchers, use of maternity leave, and working at or from home occasionally. Professional and managerial employees were often twice as likely as mothers with the lowest-paid jobs to use such provisions. It appears that mothers in better jobs, who may need them less, have better working conditions tailored to their needs, whereas those with more need to work have less favourable conditions.

**Work–life balance**

About two-thirds of all employed mothers said they were very or fairly satisfied

**Key statistics**

**45 per cent** of MCS mothers with no qualifications had worked by the child’s fifth birthday, compared with 90 per cent of those with degrees.

**74 per cent** of mothers who were small employers or self-employed were satisfied with their work–life balance, compared with 60 per cent of those doing low-level supervisory and technical jobs.

**30 per cent** of MCS mothers continued to be in paid employment during the first five years of the cohort child’s life while 6 per cent were never employed.

**37 per cent** of black MCS mothers were lone parents without employment in 2006 compared with 6 per cent of Indian mothers.

with their work–life balance when their child was 5 (Figure 2). Mothers who had worked full time were least likely to be very or fairly satisfied and those who had used a part-time arrangement were most likely to be very or fairly satisfied. Satisfaction with work–life balance was highest among those who were small employers or self-employed (74%), and lowest among low-level supervisory and technical (60%) and managerial and professional workers (61%).

**Conclusions**

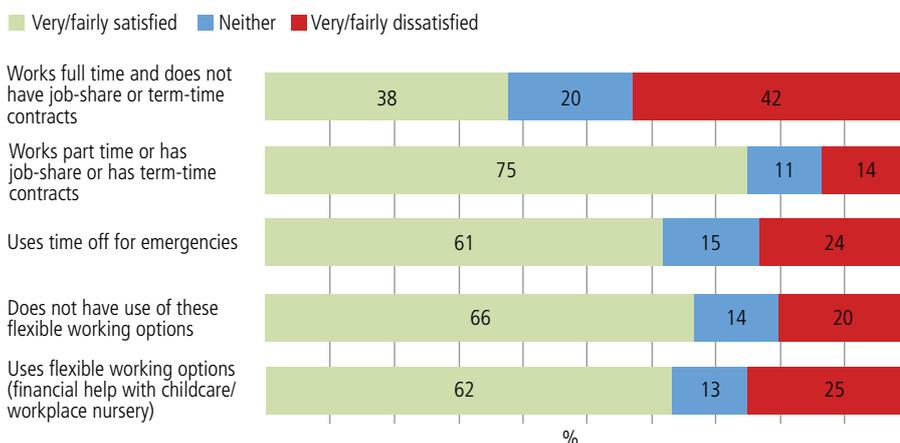
The Millennium children are growing up in a wide range of family economies. Family incomes are therefore very different, as are the amounts of time mothers spend at home. Work arrangements also vary greatly from year to year in many families.

Ethnic cultural differences and parents’ preferences help to shape their decisions about paid work and care. But the economic incentives to continue working are evident for highly qualified mothers who have greatest access to flexible working arrangements. However, another group of mothers, mainly lone parents, are persistently out of the labour market. While some lone parents moved into paid work over this period most members of this non-employed group were raising their children in poverty – even in an era of buoyant job opportunities and government interventions to assist them.

There are also signs that the work–life balance is unsatisfactory for some working mothers. However, the majority of MCS mothers are reasonably content.

Since 2006, the year of the most recent MCS survey reported in this Briefing, policies and statutory entitlements have changed yet again. Statutory Maternity Pay was increased from 26 weeks’ paid leave to 39 weeks in 2007 and the National Childcare Strategy was refreshed in 2009. These changes will form some of the background for the next phase of these MCS families’ lives and decision-making.

**Figure 2**  
**Mothers’ work–life balance at age 5 survey by flexible working used**



**Reference**

Dale, A. Lindley, J. and Dex, S. (2008) ‘Ethnic differences in women’s employment’ in J. Scott, S. Dex and H. Joshi (eds) *Changing patterns of women’s employment over 25 years*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

1 Shirley Dex and Kelly Ward, Institute of Education, University of London. This text has been adapted and shortened to suit the format of these Briefings. Responsibility for any errors therefore rests with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies rather than the chapter authors.