

# Living with a lone mother in Scotland. Do children fare better if their mothers are in work?

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## **Key Points**

- In line with the rest of the UK, Scotland has a large share of families headed by lone parents (11% according to 2011 census), and a changing policy landscape which increasingly expects lone parents to work. What are the implications for the wellbeing of children?
- Using data from the Growing Up in Scotland survey, the research explores the effect of maternal employment on the socio-emotional wellbeing of children living with a lone mother.
- **In Scotland, children living with a lone mother are less at risk of severe socio-emotional problems if their mothers are in work.** Higher levels of household income, greater maternal psychological wellbeing and attendance of ECEC centres are some of the factors contributing to their socio-emotional wellbeing.
- However **not all types of employment have the same beneficial effect.** Only children whose lone mothers work full-time or in higher status occupations show levels of severe socio-emotional problems as low as children in two parent families.
- Findings provide evidence as to whether, and under which circumstances, current measures requiring lone mothers to work support or hinder their children's wellbeing and informs future policies aimed at improving the life experiences of children living in lone parent households.

## **Introduction**

Research has documented that children who do not live with both of their parents fare worse on a variety of outcomes, including health and wellbeing. However, what happens on average to children growing up with lone mothers conceals important differences within this group. Whereas some children will suffer more than others, some circumstances can mitigate the difficulties faced by those living with a lone mother. For instance, do children living with a working lone mother have greater socio-emotional wellbeing than children whose mothers do not work? The simple answer is yes. This study reveals that **in Scotland, children of working lone mothers are less at risk of having severe socio-emotional problems.** Further, it enhances our understanding of why this might be so by investigating whether all types of maternal employment are beneficial to the child's socio-emotional wellbeing, and seeking to understand some of the mechanisms (e.g. household income, maternal wellbeing, childcare) through which maternal employment affects child outcomes. Its findings contribute to the policy debate around current reforms promoting the transition from welfare to work and their impact on lone-parent families.

## **The study**

Using data from 'Growing Up in Scotland' (Scotcen 2015, 2018), children born in Scotland in 2004-05 (Birth Cohort 1) and in 2010-11 (Birth Cohort 2) are followed until age 5. Children experience life with a lone parent at different times in life and for different durations. Some are born to lone mothers, some experience their parents' break up, and others go through more complex trajectories, including living with a step-parent. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on 918 children living with a lone mother (i.e. without their biological father and/or their mothers' other partner) at age 3, and on their socio-emotional wellbeing at age 5.

Socio-emotional wellbeing is measured with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), a widely-used tool to assess conduct problems, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, peer relationships and pro-social behaviours among children aged 4 to 17.

The questionnaire is used to derive a Total Difficulties Score, a valid measure of overall child mental health problems with values above 17 indicating severe mental health problems.

The objective of the study is to assess whether and how maternal employment plays a protective role in children's socio-emotional wellbeing.

The study uses advanced statistical techniques to estimate the 'net' effect of maternal employment on socio-emotional wellbeing. In other words, we are able to quantify the effect of maternal employment over and above the effect of other factors which might explain both mothers' ability to work and their children experiencing greater wellbeing, such as the higher educational level or stronger family support network of working lone mothers. Moreover, we can measure to what extent this employment effect is due to higher levels of household income and to greater psychological wellbeing of working mothers, as well as to their children's higher levels of attendance of ECEC centres.

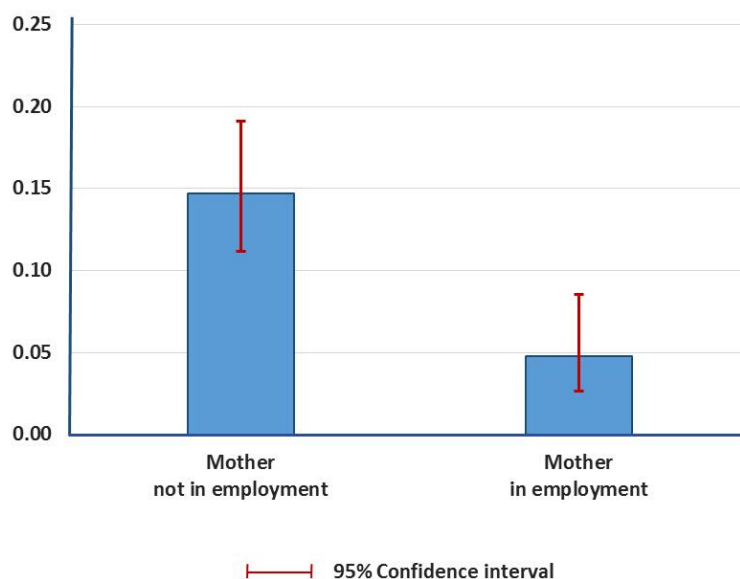
### Main findings

The prevalence of severe mental health problems among children living with a lone mother at age 3 is 12.4%, much higher than the 5.8% observed for the total sample, thus confirming also for Scotland that children growing up without their fathers fare worse in terms of their socio-emotional wellbeing. Not all children living with a lone mother, however, experience the same life circumstances, and this might affect their levels of wellbeing. For example, around 50% of them live with a working mother.

#### ***Does maternal employment make a difference to the wellbeing of children living with a lone mother?***

Figure 1 shows that the predicted probability of severe socio-emotional symptoms is just below 5 percent for children of working lone mothers, as compared to 15 percent for children of lone mothers who are not in employment. The answer, thus, is yes. In Scotland, children of working lone mothers are less at risk of having severe socio-emotional problems.

**Figure 1 Predicted probability of children showing severe socio-emotional symptoms, by mother's employment status.**



Source: Author's analysis of Growing Up in Scotland.

### **Are all type of employment beneficial to children's wellbeing?**

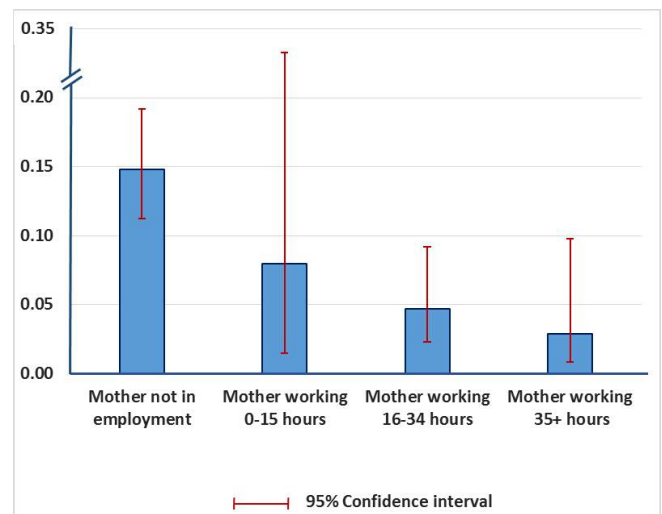
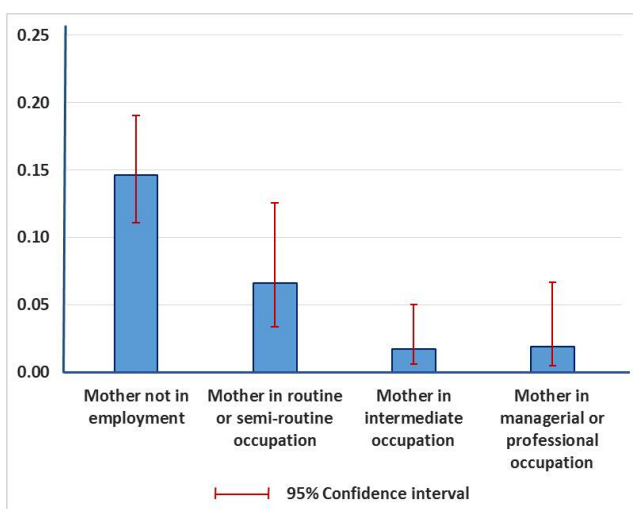
Results from this study indicate that all types of maternal employment benefit the socio-emotional wellbeing of children living with a lone mother – with one exception, namely if the mother works for less than 16 hours a week. On the other hand, the beneficial effects associated with employment are particularly pronounced for children whose mothers work full-time, and for those whose mothers work in intermediate or higher status occupations (such as clerical or professional occupations).

**Overall these findings indicate that maternal employment is not equally beneficial to all children, particularly if their mothers' jobs are low-paid and of poor quality. This points out the inadequacy of simple policy interventions that view parental employment as a goal in itself.**

**Figure 2 Predicted probability of children showing severe socio-emotional symptoms, by mother's occupational status and working hour arrangement.**

#### **a) by mother's occupational status**

#### **b) by mother's working hours**



### **Which factors explain the effect of maternal employment?**

Lone mothers who are in employment tend to declare higher levels of household income and to report fewer difficulties in coping financially. At the same time, working mothers have significantly better mental health than non-working mothers, with a lower percentage showing symptoms of anxiety and stress. Both household financial circumstances and maternal psychological wellbeing are associated with lower risks of severe socio-emotional problems among children and thus contribute to explaining the positive effect of maternal employment. Interestingly, however, mothers in the so-called mini-jobs report worse mental health and greater difficulties to manage financially, which might be a plausible mechanism through which these forms of employment have negative repercussions on child wellbeing.

### **What is the role of formal and informal childcare arrangements?**

Lone mothers' ability to enter and maintain employment depends on whether they can find alternative childcare. Good quality substitute care might, in turn, benefit their children. Findings from this study are not as clear cut. Children of working lone mothers who attend formal centre-based care fare better than those who rely on other childcare arrangements, but the difference is modest in size. Surprisingly, then, results do not show any direct influence on child wellbeing of care from family members. Nevertheless, nearly two thirds of working lone mothers in this sample rely on childcare from relatives, and grandparents' availability to look after the child is one of the significant predictors of maternal employment. Thus help from family members still plays a crucial role in the wellbeing of lone mothers' families.

### **What are the implications for policy?**

The current UK Government emphasis on lone parents' welfare-to-work transition needs to be supported by initiatives to enhance the employability of lone parents and their ability to seek work, as well as their material circumstances – both through good quality, stable jobs that pay a decent income and through measures of income support. Moreover, funded and high-quality childcare has the potential to impact on children's wellbeing both indirectly, easing the work-family balance and enabling more lone-parents to work, and directly, offering a nurturing and stimulating environment for children when their parents are at work. Some positive actions in this direction have already been undertaken in Scotland. Devolved powers provide the opportunity to develop a two-generation approach that not only promotes lone parents' employment but also ensures that their children benefit from adequate material and non-material resources.

### **Conclusion**

This study suggests a positive effect of lone mothers' employment on their children's socio-emotional wellbeing. Motivated by an interest in the potential effects of recent policy developments (the lowering of the child's age at which lone parents are expected to work, and the increase in funded childcare for children aged above 3), the study focused explicitly and solely on maternal employment when the child was aged 3.

While findings are significant and could be used by policy makers to improve the lives of children in Scotland, research should continue to investigate the impact of potentially harmful features of lone mothers' jobs, such as their instability, to gain a fuller understanding of whether, and in which circumstances, promoting lone mothers employment can help or hinder their children's life chances.

### **References**

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