

# Benefits rise will increase single mums

Roger Dobson and Abul Taher The Sunday Times August 27<sup>th</sup> 2006

AN increase of £13 a week in benefits may push up the rate of single motherhood by 2%, according to an EU-wide study that suggests a direct link between the welfare system and the number of lone-parent families.

The analysis of figures in 14 European countries found that Britain has by far the highest proportion of single mothers in the European Union.

The report says that in 2001, more than 8% of British households were headed by a single mother aged 18-35, while the UK also has one of the highest rates of benefits for single mothers.

In 1994 a single mother with two children who worked for about 18 hours a week could expect more than £2,000 a year in benefits. By 2001 the figure had increased to more than £3,500.

The researchers do not say outright that high benefits accelerate family break-up. Others, however, believe the study shows that generous benefits for single motherhood provide an incentive for women to have children alone.

Frank Field, the former Labour minister for social security, said: "I've always believed in a causal link between benefits and the number of single mothers.

"We've got to change so that people don't

"Benefit changes explain some but not all. Wages, the labour market and marriage market conditions may also have an effect."

Many single mothers, however, dismiss any suggestion that women decide to have babies simply to gain benefit money or jump the queue for council housing, for which single mothers are given priority.

Alarrisa Nicholas, 21, lives in a council flat in Exeter with her sons Harlan, three, and Caleb, two. "I used protection when having sex but it didn't work. I used the morning-after pill, and that didn't work either," she said.

Nicholas was studying for a diploma in performing arts but gave up when she became pregnant. Now she has a part-time job as a telephone operator and receives tax credit for being a single mother which, with her job, brings her more than £120 a week. She says receiving benefits as a single mother has made her life bearable.

"Obviously it did make it easier, but it's difficult to get by on what they give you," she said. "It's always been a struggle."

Her friend Abigail Banner, 21, is also a single mother in a council flat in Exeter. She has an 18-month-old son called Cody and is unemployed. She receives more than £100 a week in benefits. Banner said she became pregnant accidentally and decided on moral grounds not to have an abortion.

However, she believes that some girls get pregnant because they will get more money. “Lots of young girls think that it’s going to be an easy ride, just have a kid and we’ll get lots of money, and we’ll even get a new flat.”

Rebecca Greamslday, 20, a single mother from Hartcliffe, Bristol, with a two-year-old son, did not plan to become pregnant, but said she found the benefits helpful. “I live in a nice two-bedroom flat and I don’t pay any rent or council tax. The council gives you free driving lessons if you say you want a job — I love freebies.”

However, Anastasia de Waal of Civitas, the think tank, said: “In Britain we’ve witnessed the worst possible scenario: disenfranchised young women taking up what appears to be a viable ‘choice’ in subsidised lone parenthood. The effect is to perpetuate a cycle of deprivation. Never mind the taxpayer, the outcomes for these women in the long-term — and, crucially, for their children — are overwhelmingly negative.”

Critics said the report gave a simplistic explanation of the increase in single mothers in Britain. “There is still a myth that single parents choose to raise children on their own. It’s just not the case,” said a spokeswoman for the National Council for One Parent Families. “Who would choose to be in poverty? And by the way, most single parents work — about 57%. Many factors have led to the rise of single mothers in Britain.”

Philip Hammond, the Tories’ work and pensions spokesman, said: “We have to be careful with this claim of a causal link. When we are giving benefit to the single mother, we are not giving it to her, it’s to the child. So if you want to end child poverty, then you have to give benefit. Single motherhood is a huge burden. Our approach is looking at how to get single parents back into the workplace.”

become single mothers. For some, they become single mothers by accident, while for others it’s a deliberate choice.”

The study contrasts the situation in Britain and elsewhere in northern Europe with Mediterranean countries such as Spain, where single-mother families constitute less than 1% of the total. Spanish single mothers received £137 in special benefits a year in 1994, which by 2001 had declined to £38.

Spain, along with Greece, Portugal and Italy, have the lowest numbers of single-mother families in Europe.

Latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show single-mother families in Britain have steadily risen from 1% of all households with children in 1971 to 11% in 2004.

Libertad Gonzalez, a Barcelona academic who compiled the research, studied a sample of 6,580 single mothers from the European Community Household Panel. She estimates that for every £675 a state offers in benefits to lone parents, the incidence of single mothers goes up in that country by 2%.

After Britain, Ireland — despite its Catholic heritage — has the highest proportion of single mothers in the EU. In 2001 more than 4% of households were headed by single mothers. Irish lone mothers receive as much in benefits as their British counterparts.

Gonzalez said single mothers received more benefits in Britain and Ireland because they had “liberal” social policies where welfare payments were means-tested, which gave greater assistance to the greatest in need.

By contrast the southern European countries had benefits systems where there was an implicit understanding that family networks should provide assistance.

“The correlation across countries is quite striking,” said Gonzalez. “The countries with the highest incidence of single mothers are also the countries with more generous benefit, and vice versa . . . Spain, Greece and Portugal with small numbers of single mothers also have lower benefit levels. The UK and Ireland are both generous with benefits and have a higher incidence of these families.