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## Children's Changing Family Context

Ursula Henz<sup>1</sup>

During the last four decades the place of children in the British population has changed considerably and their families have become more diverse. In 2011, 10.5 million children under the age of 16 lived in Britain, constituting 19% of the British population (ONS, 2015a), down from just over one quarter in 1971 (ONS, 2010). At the same time, the second demographic transition has unfolded in Britain, associated with declining fertility rates, increased numbers of children born outside marriage and greater levels of non-marital cohabitation and partnership breakdown, to name just a few aspects (Lesthaeghe, 1995). Children's lives have also been affected by the rising levels of qualifications among their parents, along with new labour-market opportunities, particularly for mothers.

These types of changes are already well documented on the household and family levels, but it is also important to see how family changes are reflected in children's family contexts. Firstly, trends in children's families can differ from trends documented for parents, families or households. For example, the proportion of lone-parent families of all families is not the same as the proportion of children living with a lone parent if lone-parent families tend to have fewer children than couple families. Similarly, the proportion of mothers having three or more children differs from the proportion of children living in families with three or more children. Secondly, the experience of childhood has become more heterogeneous as families have become more diverse. This increasing diversity refers both to structural features and to diversity in the characteristics of parents like their age, ethnicity and labour-force participation.

Yet, with some honourable exceptions (Haskey, 1989; Clarke 1992, 1996; Clarke and Joshi, 2003), few studies have described these transformations from the perspective of the children themselves. This is the primary aim of this chapter, as well as exploring trends in the diversity of contemporary childhood. It goes beyond the previous studies by addressing more recent changes and also by analysing a longer time period. It presents trends in children's family context over the past four decades, taking advantage of the accumulation of 38 years of data from the General Household Surveys (GHS) and General Lifestyle Surveys (GLF) that span the years from 1972 to 2011. These repeated cross-sectional surveys are used to study trends over historical time as well as changes between children's birth cohorts.

Focusing on core demographic processes that can be addressed with the GHS/GLF data, the chapter examines three aspects of children's families: the size of the sibling group; living with a lone mother; and mothers' labour-force participation. After a separate section describing the data sets and the methods used to analyse them, the chapter takes each of the three topics in turn and examines the findings, giving particular emphasis to the changes that have been observed over time and between birth cohorts. The concluding section summarizes the main findings and discusses policy implications.

### Studying Children's Family Context

As just mentioned, this chapter looks at three aspects of children's family context using the combined data of the annual General Household and Lifestyle Surveys from 1972 to 2011<sup>2</sup>. These hold information about 977,008 individuals, of whom 222,866 were aged 15 or under at the time of the respective survey<sup>3</sup> and are henceforth referred to as 'children'. Children are coded into five birth cohorts: 1961-70, 1971-80, 1981-90, 1991-2000 and 2001-10.

The information on these five cohorts varies in its completeness. That for the 1971-80 and 1981-90 birth cohorts is most complete: the data represent children born during each of these calendar years for each year of age from 0 to 15, with one small exception of children born in 1971 who are not observed during their first year of life. For the other birth cohorts, the data include children born during each of these calendar years but for some years they do not cover the whole age range from 0 to 15.<sup>4</sup>

The GHS/GLF assigns each individual household member to a so-called 'family unit', which is either a married or cohabiting couple on their own, or a couple or a lone parent with their never-married children. Anyone who cannot be allocated to such a family is assigned to a separate 'non-family unit'. One household can consist of several family and non-family units. Three-generation families are divided into two separate family units according to the above definitions – the middle generation with children constituting one family unit and the oldest generation forming another family unit. Adopted and stepchildren belong to the same family unit as their adoptive or stepparents, respectively, whereas foster children constitute separate non-family units.

In what follows, family units constitute the basis for identifying children's parents because the information is consistent for all years and applicable irrespective of the size and complexity of the household. Parents are identified as living in the same family unit and being at least 14 years older than their children. Whereas parents and children can be reliably linked in this way over the 40 years, it is not possible to distinguish between biological, step

and adoptive parents. Only since the 1996 survey is it possible to separate marital from non-marital cohabitation, so to ensure consistency since 1972, the paper does not distinguish between married and cohabiting parents, instead using *de facto* marital status. Lone mothers are mothers who are not married and do not live with a partner in the family unit.

Changes in the coding of educational levels over the survey years make it difficult to derive a fully consistent measure for educational attainment over the whole time period. The variable ‘Mother’s Education’ has three categories: low level of education (being qualifications that generally do not give access to upper secondary education), medium level of education and degree. Over the study period the distribution of mothers’ level of education has profoundly changed: in 1972 the vast majority of mothers, 85%, had a low level of education, 8% had a middle level of education and 7% had a degree, whereas the respective figures for 2011 were 14%, 46% and 40%.

Finally, it should be noted that, whilst the vast majority of children live with their parents, some do not. Out of the children covered by the data set, more than 99% lived with one or two parents: 84.5% with a father and a mother, 13.4% with a lone mother and 1.3% with a lone father. About 0.4% of all children lived with a grandparent and about the same proportion lived neither with a parent nor a grandparent.<sup>5</sup> Also, not living with one’s parents becomes more prevalent as children grow older. Whereas only 0.14% of children under age one lived with a grandparent, their proportion increased to 0.62% at age 15. Similarly, 0.21% of children under the age of one lived neither with their parents nor their grandparents, increasing to 0.78% among children aged 15. The percentages displayed in the figures below refer to all children who lived with at least one parent (Figure 6.1) or their mother (Figures 6.2-6.7).

The next three sections deal successively with the three selected aspects of family context – number of siblings, living with a lone mother and living with an employed mother looking at trends over historical time, differences by mother’s level of education and age-cohort trends. The findings displayed in the charts are based on smoothed data, meaning that it is not possible to provide standard errors.

### Number of Siblings

The number of siblings with whom children grow up matters in many ways. First of all, the number of siblings affects the future structure of the collateral kin network; smaller sibling groups will reduce the future number of family relationships. In addition, the number of siblings is a good indicator for one’s own number of children because children from large

families tend to have more children themselves. The number of siblings also has implications for individual well-being. Children who grow up in larger families must share their parents' time and material resources with more siblings. This 'resource dilution' is regarded as one reason for the lower educational attainment of children from larger families (Downey, 1995; Conley and Glauber, 2008). From this perspective, a decline of larger sibling groups might be beneficial for children, whereas an increase would be seen as detrimental.

Whether sibling groups become larger or smaller over time depends, first and foremost, on fertility rates, which have fluctuated considerably over the past 40 years. The UK's total fertility rate (TFR) was 2.4 in 1971, declined rapidly to 1.69 in 1977, then stayed around 1.8 before dropping further in the late 1990s to a minimum of 1.63 in 2001, before rising to 1.91 by 2011 (ONS, 2014a). The TFR, however, is also influenced by the level of childlessness, which dropped from about 13% among women born in the early 1930s to 11% for those born in the early 1940s and 9% in the 1946 birth cohort, steadily increasing thereafter to reach 20% for those born in the 1960s (ONS, 2012a). Because of increasing levels of childlessness, lower fertility rates do not necessarily imply that the average child lives in a family with fewer children. Levels of childlessness only affect the rates of first birth. If the higher order birth rates were to remain unchanged children's number of siblings should not change either. Some higher-order birth rates for England and Wales have, however, fallen (Frejka and Sardon, 2007). We now examine how the combined changes of fertility rates have played out for children.

Analysis of the GHS/GLF data set reveals that, over the last four decades, the average number of co-resident children (aged 15 or under) in families has decreased from 2.0 to 1.7; that is, families with co-resident children have shrunk on average by 0.3 children over the study period. This decrease was smaller than the decrease in the average number of siblings experienced during the same period, which dropped from 1.5 to 1.0.

Figure 6.1a displays the distribution of the number of siblings aged under 16 who lived with the child in the same family unit at the time of the survey. In all years, living with just one sibling was by far the most common configuration, with more than 40% of all children living with one sibling since the late 1970s. The proportion of children who were the only child in a family unit (from now on 'only children') among all children has increased over the last four decades from 19% in 1972 to 29% in 2011. Most of the rise occurred either prior to 1985 or between 2000 and 2008. Since 1979, being an only child was the second most common sibling configuration. The proportions of children living with two, three or

four or more siblings have declined over the observation period from 43% to 24%, though with a moratorium during the 1990s.

<Figure 6.1 about here>

This picture contrasts with trends at the level of families (shown in Figure 6.1b). In 1972, the two largest types of family were families with two children and those with one child, contributing 39% and 37%, respectively, of all families. Larger families were considerably less common, with families with three, four, and five or more children constituting 15, 6 and 3 %, respectively, of all families. By 2011, one-child families had become the most common family type with 46% of families falling into this category. The proportion of families with two children remained quite stable around 40%, whereas the other types declined to 11, 2 and 0.7%, respectively – a similar distribution to that of dependent children reported by ONS (2015c). Altogether, the most common family type in recent years was the one-child family, whereas the most common sibling configuration was living with one other sibling, illustrating the value of the children-focused perspective taken in this chapter.

The number of siblings with whom a child lives can vary over the child's lifecycle and is often lower than the total number of children of the mother. Looking at all children in the data set (not shown here), 24% of them were only children, but as many as 42% were an only child when they were born, dropping to 39% when they were one year old, 29% when they were two years old and 13% when they were 7 years old. From this age onwards, the proportion of only children increased again to 24% at age 12 and 42% at age 15. Correspondingly, the proportion of children who lived with two or more siblings was 22% among children aged under one, rising to 40% among 8-year-olds and decreasing to 24% among 15-year-olds. These variations in the number of co-resident siblings should correspond to a variation in the resources that parents can provide for each child at least as far as time resources are concerned. Thereby the negative effects of large sibling groups on child development might apply differently to each child in a family.

How does the number of siblings vary between families from different socio-demographic groups? Figure 6.2a compares the average number of siblings by mothers' educational attainment. In all survey years, children whose mother had a low level of education tended to have more siblings than children whose mother had attained a higher level of education. In 1972, children of a mother with a low level of education had on average about 1.6 co-resident siblings whereas children from mothers with a degree had about 1.4 siblings and children of mothers with a medium level of education had only about 1.3

siblings. Following a decline in the number of siblings during the 1970s, which affected all educational groups, the differences in the number of siblings between the three groups were at their lowest with a maximum gap of 0.2 around a total average of 1.15 siblings.

<Figure 6.2 about here>

After a period of stability during the 1980s, opposite trends emerged from the early 1990s onwards. In the late 2000s, the number of siblings increased among children born to mothers with a low level of education to a high of 1.4, whereas it decreased slightly for children of mothers with a medium level of education to 1.0 and more strongly to 0.9 among children whose mothers had a university degree. Interestingly, only since about 2000 do the children of mothers with a university degree have fewer co-resident siblings than other children. The increasing gap between children of mothers with a low level of education, on the one hand, and of mothers with medium or high educational qualifications, on the other hand, corresponds to the increasing selectivity of the group of mothers with a low level of education, which switched from the majority group to a rather small minority among all mothers.

The differences by mother's level of education were more modest if they are examined at the family level (Figure 6.2b). Before the year 2000, mothers with different levels of education differed by no more than 0.12 in their average number of children. This small gap increased to about 0.25 at the end of the study period.

Overall, the figures demonstrate considerable change in the number of co-resident siblings. Children are less likely today to live in large sibling groups than they were in the past. Whereas 43% of children lived with two or more siblings in the early 1970s, their proportion has dropped to 24% in recent years. However, they still constitute a sizeable group. The number of siblings varies considerably during the course of childhood. Differences in sibling size by mother's level of education were modest but they increased towards the end of the observation period, pointing to somewhat larger siblings groups among children from low-educated mothers.

### Children Living With Lone Mothers

Lone-parent families have grown from a small minority of 8% of families in 1971 (ONS, 2010) to just over a quarter (26%) in 2011 (ONS, 2012b), though with little of this change occurring in the last 10 years. The increase was associated with the rising trend of childbirth outside marriage and increasing divorce rates. Since the 1960s, the proportion of children born outside marriage has risen from 5.4% in 1960 and 8.4% in 1971 to 47.2% in 2011 (ONS

2015b). Although many of these children were born into cohabiting unions, they still had a higher risk of living with a lone mother at some point of their childhood than children born in marriages because of the lower stability of non-marital unions compared to marriages (Clarke and Jensen, 2004). But even the latter were growing less stable, with divorce rates starting to rise in the 1960s, increasing strongly in the 1970s and remaining at a high level during the 1980s and 1990s before decreasing in the new millennium (ONS, 2011a). About half (49%) of couples divorcing in 2011 had at least one child under age 16 living in the family, but down from 62% in 1970 (ONS, 2011a).

Children growing up with a lone mother have stood out as a particularly vulnerable group in virtually all Western societies. In the UK, they are twice as likely to be severely materially deprived as children living with both parents (ONS, 2014b). Family income in childhood is a strong predictor for future disadvantage. In addition, poverty is often related to higher levels of stress in families, which can in turn affect child development.

The higher levels of poverty in lone-parent families are due to lower levels of employment and lower levels of state transfers to support lone parents. Since 1998, the UK government's 'New Deal for Lone Parents' has encouraged employment among lone mothers, for example through tax credits (Gregg et al., 2009). Although the policy was successful, the difficulties of combining paid work and caring responsibilities still limit lone mothers' access to the labour market and to well-paid jobs (Millar, 2010).

Many lone-parent families get established due to a divorce. A large body of research has identified increased risks of psychological, behavioural and health problems for children after divorce (see Klett-Davies, 2016, for a review). However, recent, more complex, statistical analyses have suggested that many of these problems might not be caused by parental divorce itself but by pre-existing conditions and, also, that many effects of divorce are only temporary (Amato, 2010; Härkönen, 2014). Even if the effects that can be attributed to divorce are more modest than presumed earlier, there is little doubt about the increased levels of vulnerability of children who grow up in lone-parent households.

The results of analysing the GHS/GLF data are broadly consistent with the official statistics mentioned above, with the proportion of children living with lone mothers steadily increasing during the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from 5% in 1972 to 22% in 2001. They differ, however, in their post-2001 trajectory, with the GHS/GLF data indicating a gradual decrease thereafter, down to 19% in 2011, in contrast to the stability of the ONS data. This is perhaps not surprising, given Haskey's (2002) observation of considerable disparities



when using different surveys to estimate the number of children living with lone parents with different surveys, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to resolve this issue.

Figure 6.3 about here

Figure 6.3 depicts the percentage of children living with a lone mother by children's age and comparing each of the five birth cohorts of children. In each subsequent 10-year birth cohort, a higher proportion of children lived with a lone mother during their first year of life. The first full estimate is available for the 1971-80 cohort, where about 6% of children lived with a lone mother during their first year of life. In the 1981-90 cohort, the proportion had increased considerably to 11% and further to 17% in the 1991-2000 cohort. There was no further increase in the youngest cohort.

As children aged, some of them moved between lone-mother and two-parent families through their mothers' separation, re-partnering or, in few cases, widowhood. Figure 6.3 documents how the proportion of children living with a lone mother increased as children aged, reaching about 11% among 15-year old children in the 1961-70 cohort, 15% in the 1971-80 cohort and 21% in the younger cohorts. The cohort comparison suggests that, in each subsequent cohort except the youngest, a higher proportion of children was affected by parental divorce. The large gap between the 1971-80 and 1981-90 cohorts indicates a particularly strong change taking place during the childhood of these children. This might be related to divorce behaviour as during those years parents started to separate more often than before when younger children were involved.

The lines for the youngest birth cohorts suggest that the increase in the proportions of children who live in a lone-mother family has come to a halt or even reversed. A halt would correspond to the overall trends reported by the ONS about no change in the percentage of children living with a lone mother. The evidence for a reversal should be treated as tentative because it occurs in those calendar years when the GHS/GLF surveys report a drop in children living with lone mothers in contrast to the statistics published by the ONS.

Children of lone mothers have a high risk of living in poverty because lone mothers experience more difficulties in accessing the labour market. Figure 6.4a shows the percentage of children who live with an employed mother – one in paid work for at least one hour per week – separately for partnered and for lone mothers. In the mid-1970s, about 45% of children had an employed mother, irrespective of whether the mother was partnered or not. A gap between the two groups of children emerged during the 1980s, when a higher proportion of children of partnered mothers had a mother in employment than children of lone mothers. In the early 1990s, only 35% of children of lone mothers had a mother in employment

compared to about 58% of partnered mothers. However, from the mid 1990s onwards, the increase in having a mother in paid work was stronger among children of lone mothers than among children of partnered mothers, leading to a narrowing of the gap to about 15% in 2011.

<Figure 6.4 about here>

Figure 6.4b shows the percentage of mothers in employment, separately for partnered and lone mothers. A comparison of Figures 6.4a and 6.4b shows that the proportions of children with mothers who are in employment are lower than the proportions of mothers who are employed. For example, only 35% of children of lone mothers had an employed mother in the late 1980s whereas 39% of lone mothers were employed. By 2011, the mothers of 49% of children of lone mothers were employed compared to 55% of lone mothers. These differences reflect the well-known negative relationship between women being in paid work and their number of children. In other words, increases in mother's employment rates do not directly translate into increases in the proportions of children living with employed mothers. It is also noteworthy that the decrease in the employment rates among lone mothers in the early 1980s coincides with a marked increase in the proportion of younger children living with a lone mother (cf. Figure 6.3), which might have contributed to the decrease in lone mothers' employment. The increase in the late 1990s has been related to welfare reforms, in particular the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit and the New Deal for Lone Parents (Gregg et al., 2009), though the exact temporal link is difficult to pin down with the smoothed GHS/GLF data.

<Figure 6.5 about here>

Finally, what relationship is there with the educational level of the mother? Figure 6.5 shows that, whereas the differences between educational groups were small in the early 1970s, they grew strongly thereafter. By the mid 1980s, a child of a mother with a low level of education was twice as likely to live with a lone mother as children of mothers with a university degree (13% versus 7%), and the gap further increased over the later decades. The latter was partly due to the onset of the decline for children of a mother with a degree, which preceded the decline for those with low-education mothers. In the 2000s, up to a third of children of mothers with a low level of education had a lone mother compared to less than a quarter among children whose mother had a medium level of education and, at most, a sixth of children whose mothers had a degree.

In sum, this section has shown, firstly, that living with a lone mother has become more common at all ages of children including the very youngest. Secondly, the newest

cohort of children does not show any further increase in the proportion of children living with a lone mother. Thirdly, over time, the increase in children living with a lone mother is seen to have been most pronounced in families where the mother had a low level of education. Finally, children of lone mothers more often live with a mother who is not employed than children living with a partnered mother, but this gap has narrowed in recent years.

### Children Living With Employed Mothers

This section focuses in more detail on mothers' employment status, as the increased labour-force participation of mothers has also altered children's family context. Women's labour-force participation rose from 53% in 1971 to 67% in 2013 (ONS, 2013). Meanwhile, the gap in employment rates between mothers and childless women has nearly closed in recent years, with 66% of mothers and 67% of childless women being employed in 2010 (ONS, 2011b). Among the reasons for this narrowing are the rising age of motherhood and the decline of employment among younger women during the recent recession (ibid).

Mothers' labour-market participation affects children's lives in a number of ways. Most importantly, children can profit from the additional financial resources of the family, which might improve their health and life prospects. Mothers' employment has also been associated with changes in couples' division of household work and increases of fathers' involvement in childcare. As a result, less traditional gender role ideals might be transmitted to children. On the other hand, mothers' paid work can lead to a decline in the time that parents spend with their children. In fact, according to time-use research on the USA (Sayer et al., 2004), the relationship between mother's employment and time in childcare is more complex than this. Whereas full-time mothers spend less time in childcare than part-time mothers, the decline in childcare hours due to overall trends in mothers' employment has been compensated by a general trend of parents spending more time in childcare. Therefore, concerns about mother's involvement in paid work have shifted to concerns around parents' stress from combining paid work and childcare and its possible effects on children. Increasing hours of mothers' employment also means that more parents rely on an informal network of family and friends for childcare or on formal childcare.

According to the GHS/GLF data set, the proportion of children with a mother in employment has increased pretty steadily, rising from 38% in 1972 to 50% in 1980, dropping down to 42% in 1982 following the 1980-81 recession and then increasing again to 64% in recent years. These figures include the many mothers working for less than 15 hours per week; without these, the proportions drop by nearly 20% before the early 1990s and 10%

during the 2000s. Only a small minority of children had a mother who worked more than 35 hours per week – stable at around 10% up to the mid 1980s and then rising slowly to about 16% in 2011. These figures emphasize that most children have grown up in families where parents displayed traditional or neo-traditional gender roles and that change towards a less traditional gender division of paid work has been slow.

Figure 6.6 about here

Figure 6.6 shows how the experience of growing up with a mother in employment (paid work for at least one hour per week) has changed over the course of childhood for children in different birth cohorts. According to Figure 6.6a, mothers' employment rate has increased with the child's age in all birth cohorts. Whereas in the 1971-80 cohort only about 12% of children had an employed mother during their first year of life, this figure increased to 70% by the time the child reached 15 years of age. Figure 6.6a also shows a dramatic increase in mothers' employment rates in the first year of life of the child over the different birth cohorts, rising from about 12% in the 1971-80 cohort to about 48% among children born in the new millennium. The increase was particularly large between children born to the 1981-90 cohort and those to the 1991-2000 one. Care is needed in interpreting the decline of the proportion of children living with an employed mother around age 6 in the youngest birth cohort because of the limited time span so far available for this group.

Changes in the proportion of children with an employed mother at age 15 were comparatively modest, rising from 65% in the 1961-70 cohort to 74% in the 1991-2000 cohort. Another way of describing the trends is by looking at the age by which half of all children in a birth cohort had a mother in employment. This occurred between age 7 and 8 in the 1961-70 and 1971-80 cohorts; dropping to between age 5 and 6 for the 1981-90 cohort and between age 3 and 4 for the 1991-2000 one. In the 2001-10 cohort the proportions for ages 1 and 2 were very close to the 50% threshold.

The effects of mother's labour-force participation on children's lives depend on the number of hours that the mother was in paid work, growing with the hours worked. If one counts only children whose mother worked for at least 16 hours per week, the increase over children's age and cohorts was less pronounced than that shown in Figure 6.6a. The proportion of children with a mother working for at least 15 hours in the child's first year of life increased from 7% in the 1971-80 cohort to 40% in the 2001-10 cohort, while among 15-year-old children the percentage increased from 50% in the 1961-70 cohort to 62% in the 1991-2000 cohort (figure not shown). The changes in having a mother who worked full-time were much more modest (cf. Figure 6.6b). In the 1971-80 birth cohort, the proportion of these

children increased from less than 3% in their first year of life to about 21% at age 15. In the later cohorts, the share of children with full-time employed mothers decreased over the first two years of the child's life because mothers on maternity leave still count as employed. At age 2, the share of children with a full-time employed mother was about 5% in the 1981-90 cohort and increased to between 10 and 12% in the younger cohorts. At age 15, about 26% of children in the 1981-90 cohort and 23% of children in the 1991-2000 cohort lived with a full-time employed mother.

Children in different socio-economic positions differ in their experience of living with an employed mother, as shown in Figure 6.7. In all survey years, children were most likely to have a mother in employment if the mother had a degree. In this group, the proportion of children with an employed mother was above 50% in all survey years and has reached proportions of 75-80% since the mid 1990s. The trends for children of mothers with a medium level of education closely followed the trend for children of mothers with a degree, but at a 10-15% lower level. In contrast to these trends, the propensity of having a mother in employment did not increase among children whose mothers had a low level of education; it even decreased from the 45-50% levels of most survey years up to 2003 to below 40%.

<Figure 6.7 about here>

It is therefore clear that changes in mothers' employment, albeit in terms of part-time rather than full-time work, have also served to alter children's family context, in this case with particular impact on the early years of childhood. Also evident is that the effects are likely to be greater for the children of highly-educated mothers than those of less educated mothers.

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored selected changes that have taken place in the family context of children during the past four decades. In one way or another, all the three topics studied can be linked to precarious living circumstances for children, with implications for their financial, social and emotional wellbeing, both in childhood and in later life. Children in large families, children of lone mothers and children of mothers who are not employed are at a higher risk of poverty than children in other types of families. Two of these circumstances are less common today than they were 40 years ago, which indicates improving conditions under which children have grown up. In contrast, the third circumstance – living with a lone mother – has become more widespread.

The general trend to smaller family size has reduced the pressure on parental resources and might lead to more opportunities for development among children, but also results in a decreasing availability of lateral kin and shrinking family networks, meaning that future adults will have to rely more than previous generations on friends for support. This is of concern because, for example, friendship networks tend to be less involved than family members in providing care to frail or elderly people.

Lone-mother families are exposed to high risks of poverty (Klett-Davies, 2016). Over the last four decades, increasing proportions of children have grown up in lone-mother families. Whereas in older birth cohorts the prevalence of living with a lone mother increased strongly with children's age, more recent birth cohorts also experienced high levels of living with a lone mother from birth. As research evidence about the importance of the early years of life for future life chances is accumulating, the large number of young children who live in a lone-mother family need particular support. This should take the form of financial support where needed, as well as high-quality childcare like that provided in the Sure Start children centres.

The increase in the percentage of children who live with a lone mother has come to a halt in the most recent birth cohorts. This can be regarded as positive for children's well-being, but it is most likely related to increased levels of repartnering among lone mothers. Although the risk of material deprivation is lower in stepfamilies than in lone-mother families, recent research suggests that family instability (Osborne and McLanahan, 2007) and living in a stepfamily (Sweeney, 2010) might also be associated with depressed levels of child wellbeing.

This chapter has shown that, over successive birth cohorts, children lived at an increasingly younger age with a mother in employment; for nearly half of all children in the latest cohort, their mother was employed during the child's first year of life. On the other hand, only a minority of mothers was employed full-time even when children were in their teens. Despite lower household incomes, it might actually be advantageous for pre-school children if their mother works less than full-time as it tends to be associated with better cognitive skills and educational attainment (Ermish and Francesconi, 2001; Han et al., 2001; Hansen et al., 2006; Heinrich, 2014). Whether mothers work full-time or part-time, the availability of affordable high-quality childcare becomes a major concern.

The expansion of early education and childcare including free childcare for the three-to-four-year olds has provided children from all backgrounds with access to high-quality childcare. However, the quality of formal childcare tends to be lower for children in

disadvantaged areas, at least according to Ofsted assessments (Gambaro et al., 2013). Mothers' increased labour-force participation has been accompanied by increased involvement of fathers in childcare. The extension of parental leave policies has supported British parents in their efforts to combine their worker and parent roles but many parents still struggle with inflexible workplaces. If fathers are expected to further increase their involvement in childcare and make up for mothers' rising labour-force participation, work-life policies should be developed that are tailored towards both parents' needs (Daly and Hawkins, 2008).

In sum, when looking across the last 40 years at the three aspects examined in this chapter, one notices a widening gap in family circumstances between children of mothers with a low level of education and other children. For the former, the key features are a larger number of siblings and a greater likelihood of living with a lone mother and living with a mother who is not employed. At the other end of the spectrum, children whose mother has a university degree are more likely to have a co-resident father figure, a mother in employment and fewer siblings. Policy interventions should target children of mothers with a low level of education to improve their life chances. Existing policies for giving mothers access to better qualifications should be further expanded as a sustainable way for improving their access to stable jobs.

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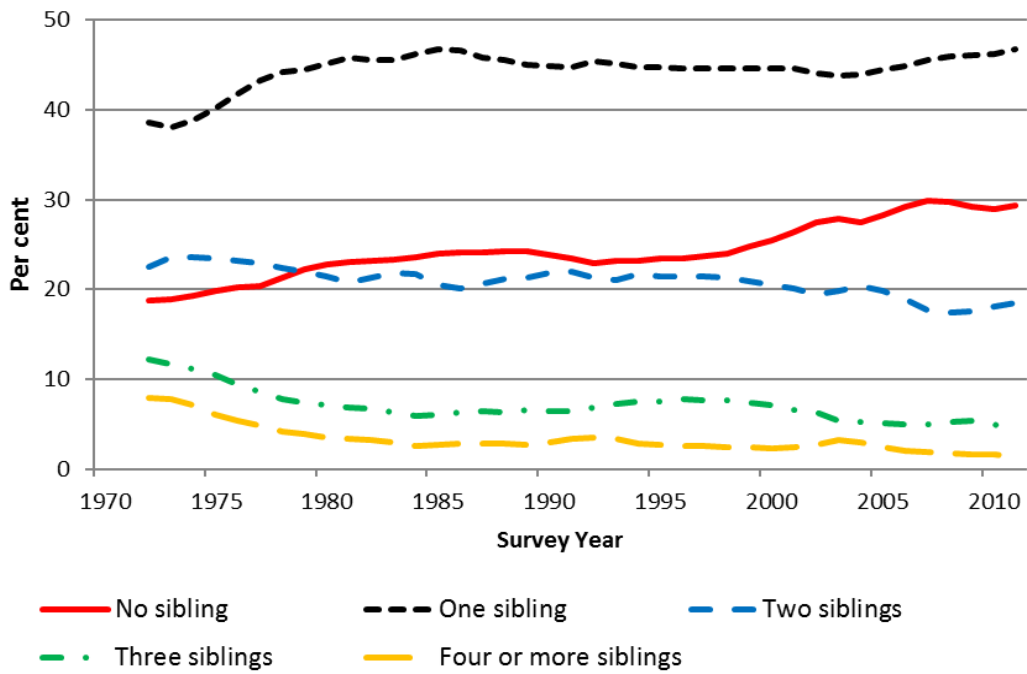
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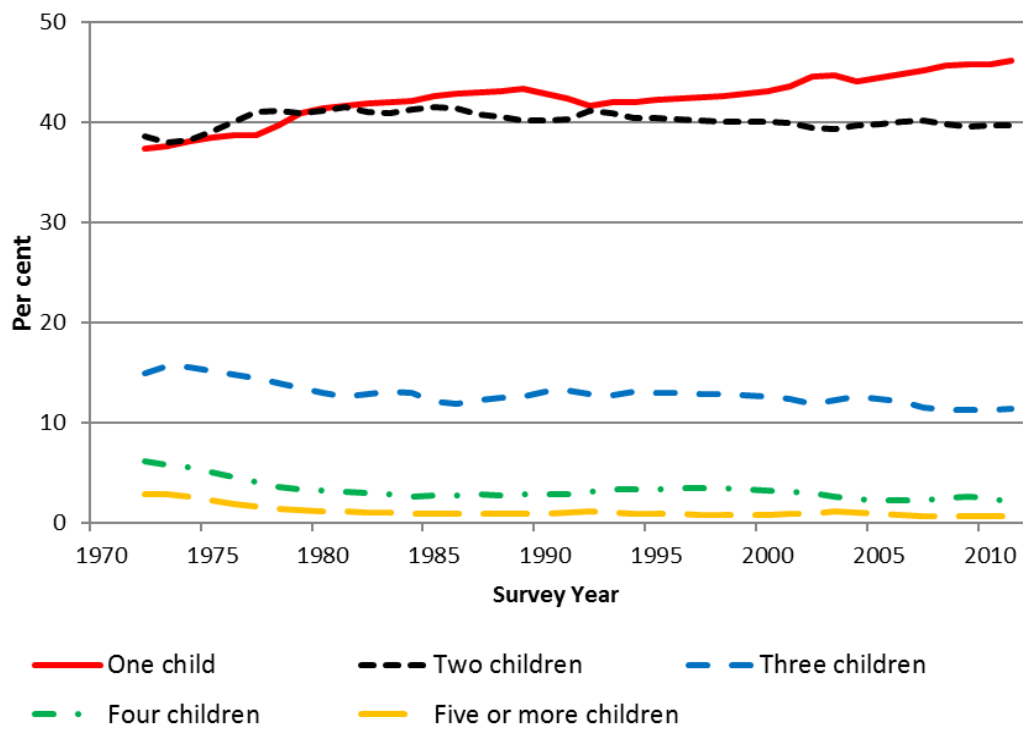
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**Figure 1: Distribution of number of co-resident children/siblings in family unit by survey year**

**1a. Number of co-resident siblings**



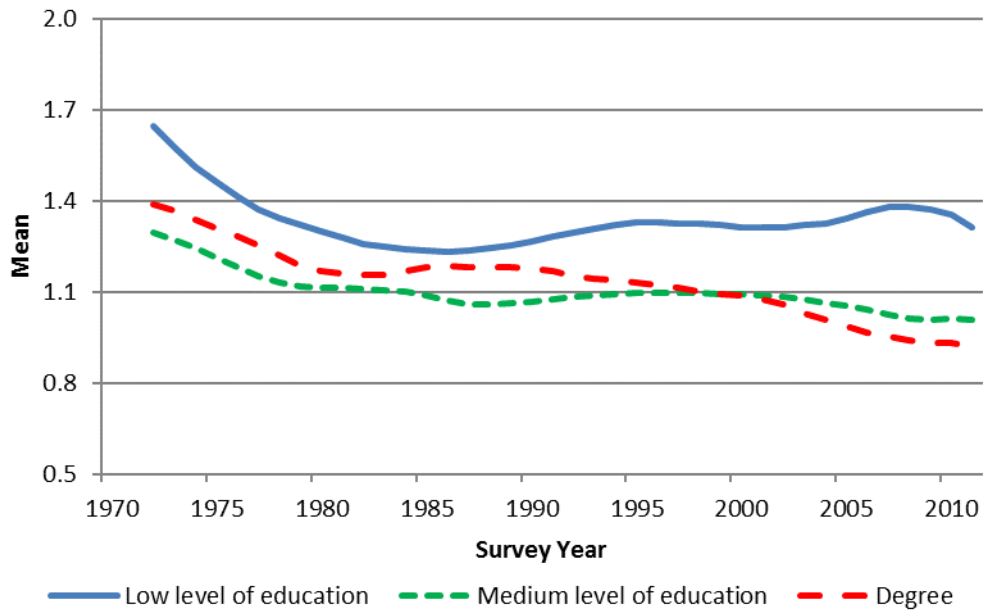
**1b. Number of co-resident children**



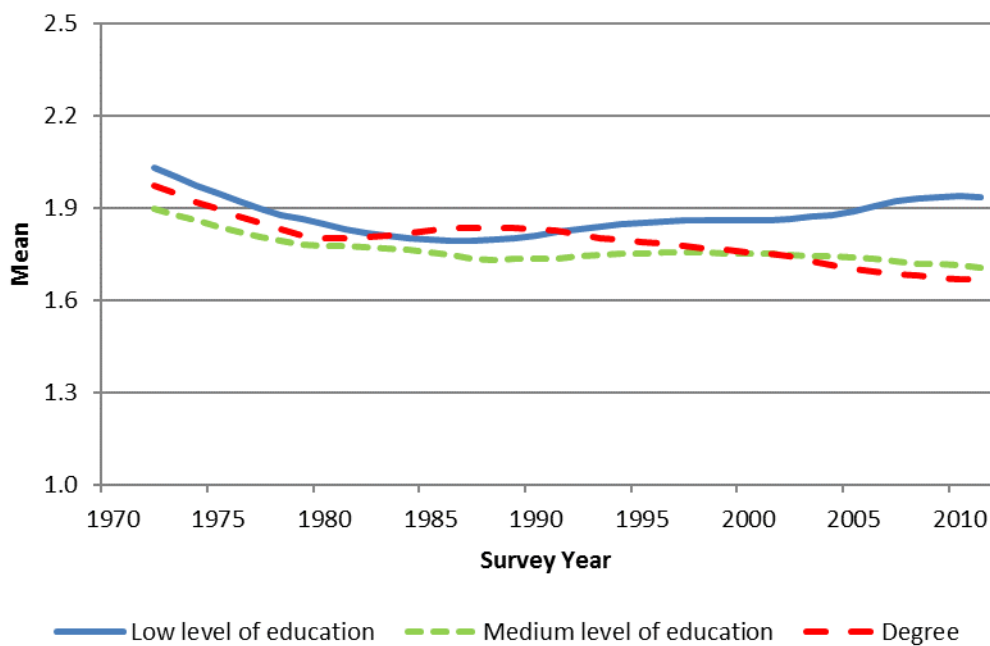
Source: General Household/Lifestyle Surveys, own calculations

**Figure 2: Average number of co-resident children/siblings by survey year and mother's level of education**

**2a: Average number of co-resident siblings**

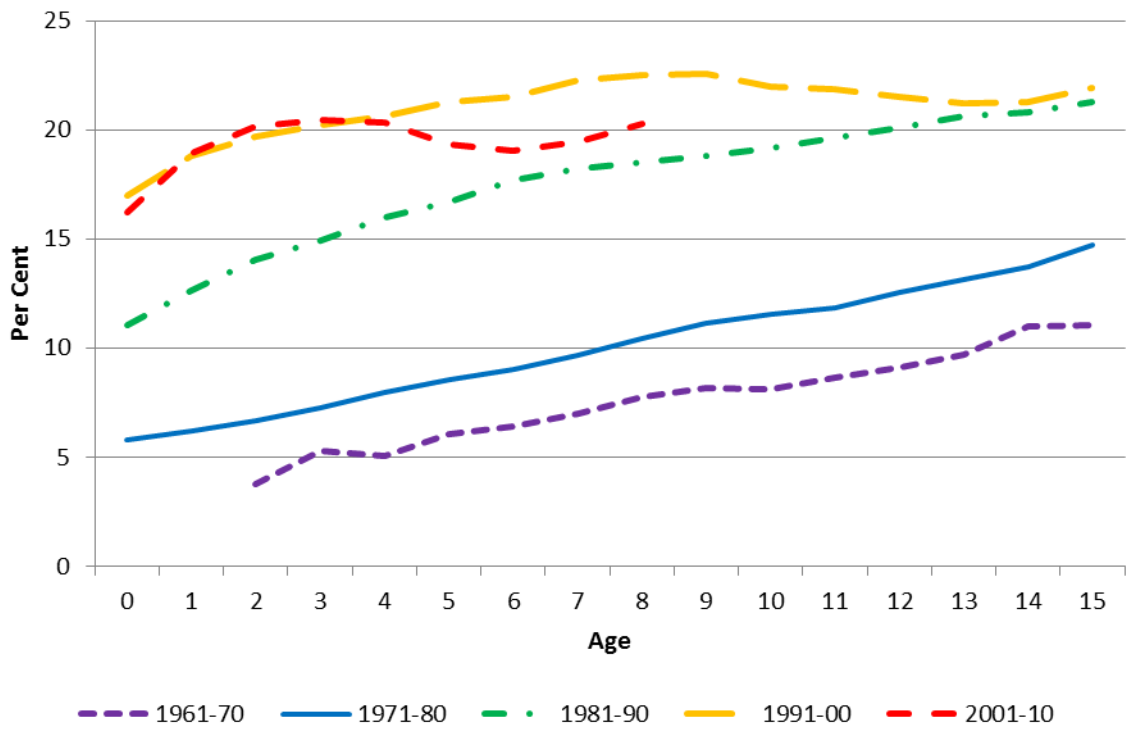


**2b: Average number of co-resident children**



Source: General Household/Lifestyle Surveys, own calculations

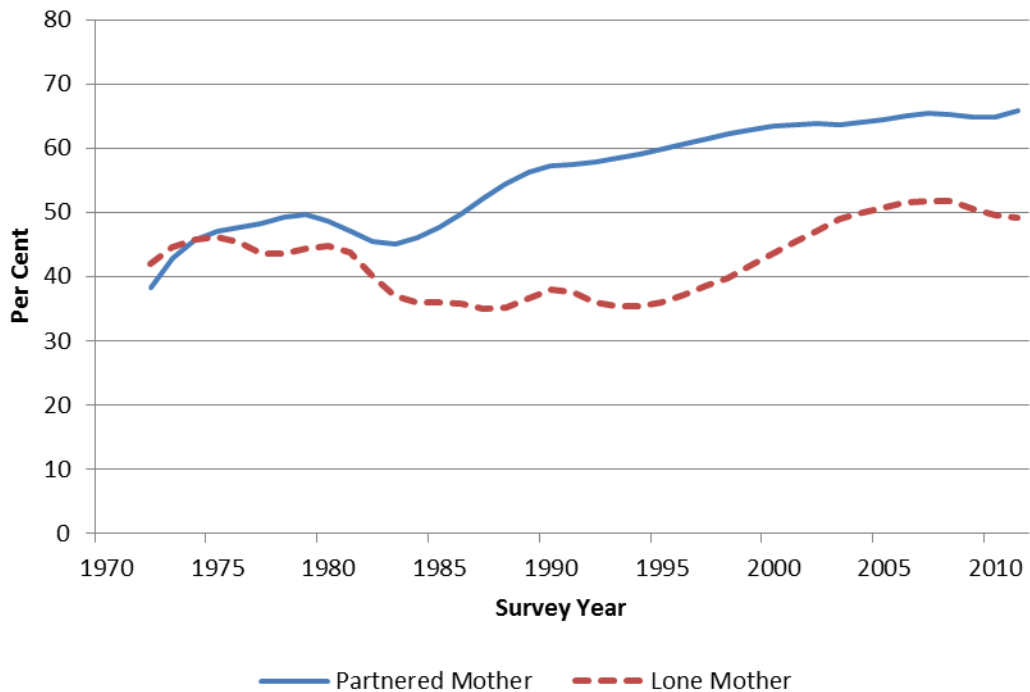
Figure 3: % children living with a lone mother by child age and birth cohort



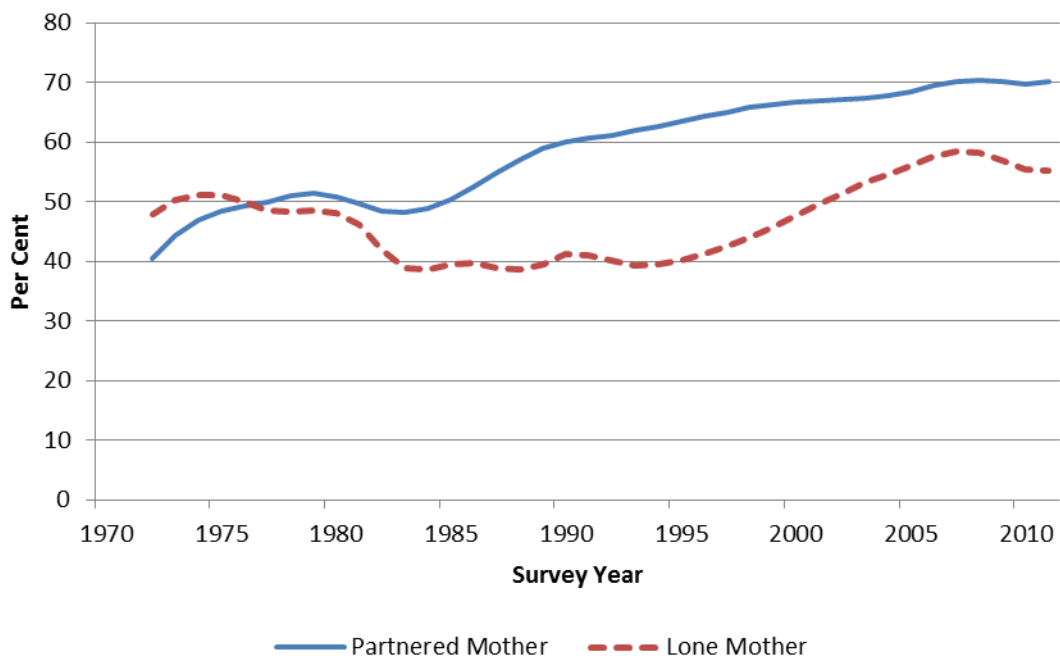
Source: General Household/Lifestyle Surveys, own calculations

**Figure 4: Mothers in employment by survey year and mothers' partnership status**

**4a: % children living with a mother in employment**

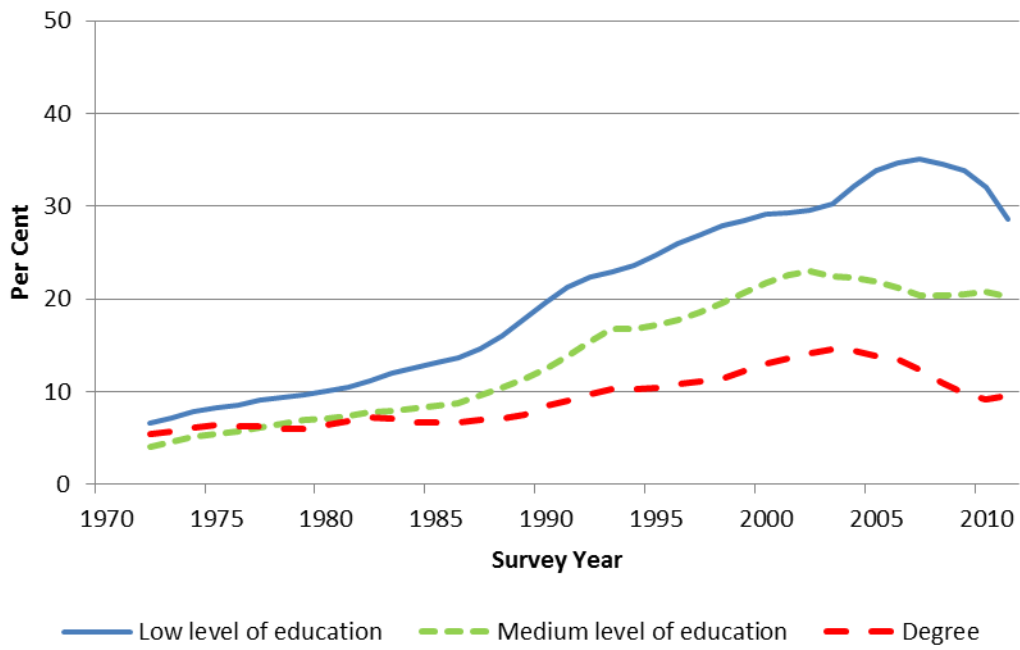


**4b: % mothers in employment**



Source: General Household/Lifestyle Surveys, own calculations

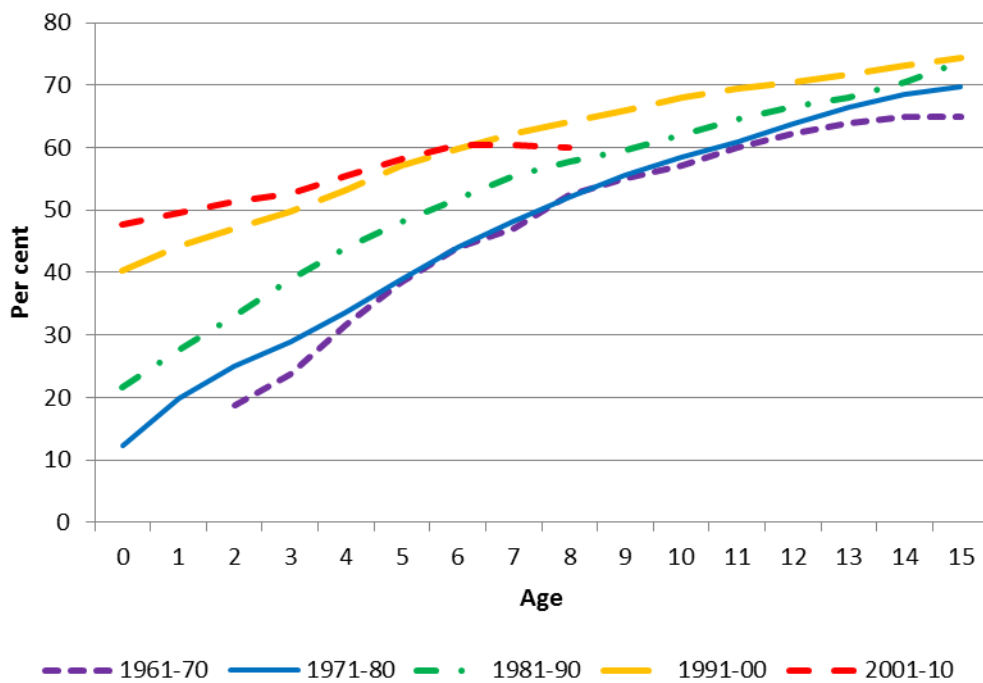
Figure 5: % of children living with a lone mother by survey year and mother's level of education



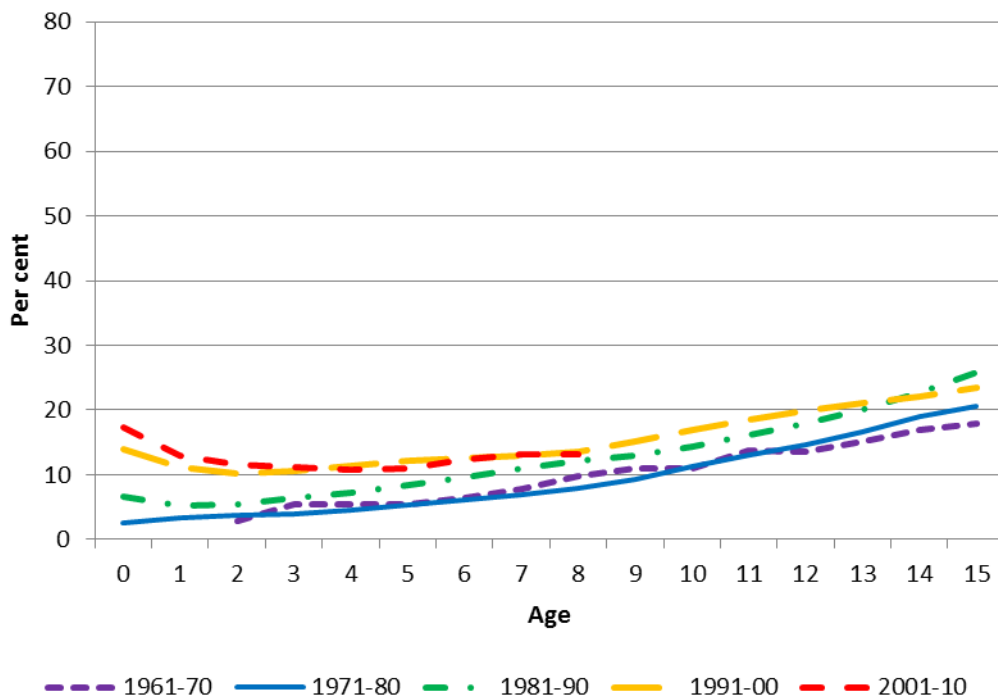
Source: General Household/Lifestyle Surveys, own calculations

**Figure 6: Children living with an employed mother, by child age and child birth cohort**

**6a: % of children living with a mother who is in paid work for at least one hour per week**



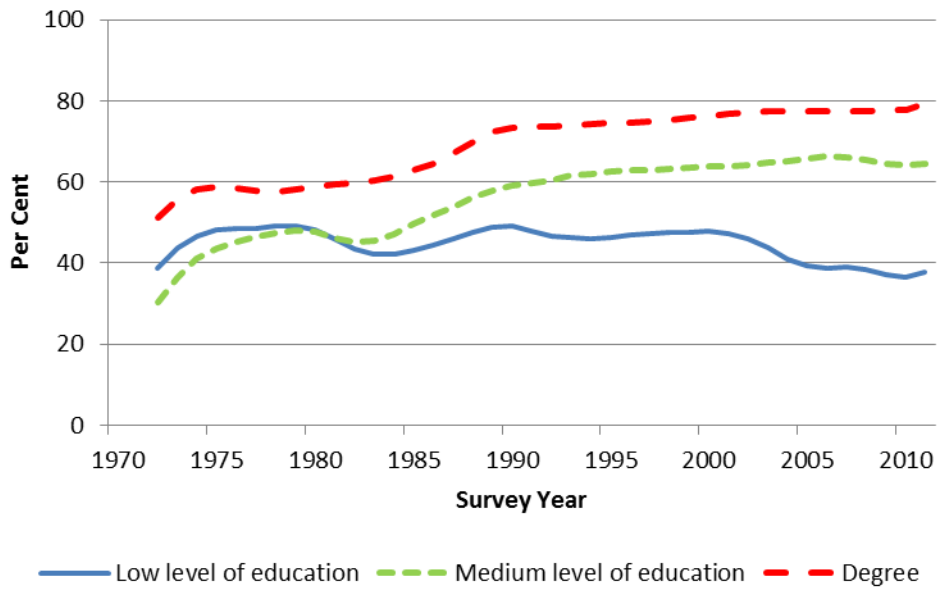
**6b: % of children living with a mother who is in paid work for more than 35 hours per week**



Source: General Household/Lifestyle Surveys, own calculations



Figure 7: % of children with an employed mother by survey year and mother's level of education



Source: General Household/Lifestyle Surveys, own calculations

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<sup>2</sup> There were no GHS surveys in 1997 and 1999. The GLF stopped being a household survey in 2012 and was discontinued after 2012. The data analysed in this chapter extend the GHS Time Series Data from 1972-2004 provided by the ONS (ONS 2007).

<sup>3</sup> By limiting the analyses to children under the age of 16, the reported trends are not affected by the profound changes in educational enrolment and labour-market entry that took place during the study period.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1961-70 birth cohort, the data hold information about children born in all years from 1961 to 1970 for ages 11 and older but observations for younger children tend to be drawn from children born in the later years of 1961 to 1970. Similarly, the data represent children from all birth years for the 1991-2000 birth cohort for children up to age 11 but the sample of older children does not include children from the latest birth years. Finally, for the 2001-10 birth cohort, information about older children is provided only in the earlier years. The underrepresentation of particular birth-year-age combinations in some cohorts means that the estimates for the affected ages in these cohorts are biased towards the adjacent cohort in the data set.

<sup>5</sup> Grandparents and their grandchildren should normally not belong to the same family unit except when the grandparent is responsible for looking after the grandchild.