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Lone parents and welfare-to-work in England: a spatial analysis of outcomes and drivers

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Abstract
Mirroring changes across OECD nations, recent UK governments have redrawn lone parents' entitlement to social assistance benefits ever tighter around participation in the labour market. A radical shift has been the gradual transfer since 2008 of most non-employed lone parents into the 'activating' Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) regime. The enhanced conditionality requirements of this JSA regime have been justified by both paternalistic and contractualist arguments but, however justified, are built on the premise that behavioural factors drive lone parent employment outcomes, a view made increasingly forcefully under the current Coalition government. The present paper uses up-to-date administrative data at local authority level across England to provide a geographical perspective into the sub-national changes in lone parent employment outcomes since the transfer to JSA from 2008 as well as the relevance of the alternative structural and behavioural accounts to these outcomes. The findings suggest that the JSA transfer has increased lone parent employment, that structural rather than behavioural drivers are more relevant causal factors and that there is good reason to be concerned about the effect of the reforms on the wellbeing of lone parents and their children.

Keywords: lone parents; conditionality; welfare-to-work; evaluation; contractualism; paternalism

Introduction

As in virtually every other advanced economy, the UK's social security system has been increasingly 'activating' since the 1990s and lone parents, due to their combination of high child poverty rates and comparatively low employment rates (Bradshaw et al. 1996), have been a priority target of such reforms, an emphasis given additional weight in the UK by New Labour's 1999 commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020. The UK's transformation in welfare-to-work (WTW) policies over this period has combined the development of supports to help lone parents move into paid work (e.g. childcare and flexible working reforms) as well as "creeping conditionality" (Dwyer 2004) to 'push' lone parents into the labour market. Of particular relevance to the present paper's focus is the gradual redefinition since 2008 of most non-working lone parents with older children as 'unemployed' rather than caregivers and their subsequent transfer from an out-of-work benefit not requiring job search activities (Income Support) to one with work-related conditionality requirements (Jobseeker's Allowance).

In many ways the reforms over the past fifteen years – albeit supported by a strong economic backdrop for most of the 2000s – have been a striking success. Lone parent employment is up from 46% in 1998 (Marsh 2001) towards 60% today (Gingerbread 2010:3) and rates of child poverty in lone parent households, although still high, are down from around two thirds of such children in the late 1990s (Gregg et al. 1999) to just under half today (Gingerbread 2012). Despite these improvements, however, although the principle of supporting lone parents into paid work is widely accepted the reforms have been controversial throughout the period, with critics debating in particular the equity and effectiveness of the current conditionality requirements as well as the assumptions of "negative behaviours" (DWP 2010a: 8) asserted beneath such policies. Instead, such critics point to the continued relevance of structural factors – particularly job availability and childcare issues – rather than behavioural factors to lone parents' employment outcomes.

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After firstly setting out the development of the WTW policy context since 1997 the present paper seeks in the empirical analyses to provide an often neglected geographical perspective on the impacts and assumptions of the roll-out of lone parent obligations (LPOs) since 2008. To do so the analyses, conducted across England's 326 local authorities, use specially sourced sub-national administrative data and a mixture of descriptive statistics, cartograms and multilevel regression models. The results offer a timely evaluation of the impact on lone parent employment of the transfer from IS to JSA since 2008 as well as reflections on the debate around the alternative structural and behaviour causal theories and factors driving these lone parent employment outcomes.

Lone parents and WTW reform in the UK since 1997

On the back of a general shift towards 'activation policies' across advanced economies (Lodemel and Trickey 2001) and New Labour's Third Way emphasis on 'no rights without responsibilities' (Giddens 1998: 65) it was no surprise that on arrival to government in 1997 New Labour placed WTW reform at the heart of its new welfare contract (DSS 1998). Within this framework lone parents were an obvious target group due to their comparatively low employment rates and high child poverty rates and a significant early development was the creation of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) employment programme. Initially entirely voluntary, Table 1 outlines how the NDLP – and its various later guises – has experienced "creeping conditionality" (Dwyer 2004) such that by the mid-2000s mandatory work-focussed interviews (WFIs) and action plans were the norm, though there remained no requirement for lone parents to seek paid work at this time.

Table 1: Key developments in UK WTW policy for lone parents (1997-2012)

Date	Key reforms
July 1997	The voluntary New Deal for Lone Parents launched in eight pilot areas
October 1998	New Deal for Lone Parents rolled-out to all lone parents (remains voluntary)
April 2001	Mandatory Work Focused Interviews introduced for lone parents
October 2005	Quarterly Work Focused Interviews introduced nationally for lone parents with older children
October 2005	Lone parents required to agree a mandatory action plan as part of their Work Focused Interview
March 2007	Freud Review proposes enhanced conditionality and payment by results
July 2007	DWP's *In work, better off* Green Paper proposes transfer of lone parents with older children from IS to JSA
November 2008	Lone parents with youngest child aged 12+ moved to JSA
December 2008	Gregg review outlines three conditionality regimes for different groups of lone parents dependent upon age of youngest child.
October 2009	Flexible New Deal replaces New Deal programmes and offers greater flexibility to providers in service delivery
October 2009	Lone parents with youngest child aged 10+ moved to JSA
October 2010	Lone parents with youngest child aged 7+ moved to JSA
November 2010	DWP's *21st century welfare* suggest that lone parents with children above five (rather than seven as in Gregg (2008)) are expected to be in paid work
June 2011	Work Programme replaces Flexible New Deal
Early 2012	Lone parents with youngest child aged 5+ moved to JSA.

In 2007 a step-change occurred when the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) indicated a desire to require lone parents with older children to enter paid work (DWP 2007). Following DWP-commissioned reviews by Freud (2007) and Gregg (2008) a three-tiered conditionality regime was proposed whereby lone parents with older children would be transferred from Income Support (IS) to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and required to actively seek paid work. Those with younger children

would remain on IS but would be required to participate in mandatory work preparations and those with infants would face no conditionality requirements. New Labour and, since 2010, the Coalition government have broadly followed this approach so that since early 2012 most lone parents in receipt of benefits and with children aged above five are eligible for JSA rather than IS and are consequently required to actively seek, and wherever possible accept, paid work. Although now treated as part of the mainstream unemployed population, therefore, the policies do recognize through a series of exemptions that lone parents are 'different' in being the sole day-to-day breadwinner and caregiver (Gingerbread 2011a; DWP, 2011). These are important exemptions yet it remains unclear precisely how they will be defined and enforced by front-line staff (Griggs and Bennett 2009), a particular issue given the severity of the sanctions proposed (DWP 2010a:30).

In parallel, these extensions in conditionality since the late 1990s have been supported by dramatic improvements in the range of policies available to support paid work. In particular, New Labour enacted policies which were at the time genuinely radical reforms to 'make work pay' (e.g. National Minimum Wage and Working Tax Credit (WTC)), to improve childcare provision (e.g. England's first ever National Childcare Strategy, Sure Start, Children's Centres, free childcare hours and childcare subsidies within the WTC) and to facilitate flexible working (e.g. Right to Request flexible working legislation and the Part-Time Worker's Directive).

To some extent therefore a balanced approach between push and pull factors has evolved yet whilst there is much support from lobby groups and academics for government policies to help lone parents into paid work the reforms have generated much criticism across a range of issues, in particular the detail of the balance between supports and conditionality.

Some critics have focussed on the partiality of the approach, with 'contributions' defined as paid employment, 'benefits' restricted to social assistance and 'dependency' to receipt of out-of-work benefits (Fitzpatrick 2005; Goodin 2009). Others have questioned the repeated claim within policy documents that work always 'pays', whether financially (Millar and Ridge 2009; Grover 2007) or in terms of broader issues around care (Duncan and Edwards,1999; Williams 2004; Barnes et al. 2006) or wellbeing (Jones 2010; Griggs and Evans 2010). Sitting above these empirical issues, White's (2000) notion of 'fair reciprocity' has been influential in arguing that contractualist WTW policies ought only to be seen as morally just where these policies satisfy broader ethical conditions around equitable application of WTW requirements (i.e. in terms of choice of 'legitimate' activities as well as application to all citizens equally) and fair rewards for efforts, moral considerations which would make it difficult to argue that the UK's WTW framework could at present be considered 'just' (White and Cooke 2007).

In terms of causal factors, many have argued that it is not behavioural factors – for which conditionality is designed – but rather structural barriers around childcare (Daycare Trust 2011a), demographic disadvantages (e.g. ill health, multiple children) (Haux 2011) or labour market opportunities (Gingerbread 2010) which are relevant. Whilst the reforms focus on boosting the effective labour *supply*, lowering the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment so that inflation can be kept low whilst employment pushes ahead (Grover 2005; Carlin & Soskice 1990), critics have sought to refocus attention instead on inadequate labour *demand* (Theodore 2007). Whilst central to lone parent employment outcomes – particularly given the acute shortage of care compatible job opportunities (Gingerbread 2010) – such labour demand issues are assumed away within the theoretical and policy approach, an approach which Wright (2012) argues is built on a highly individualised account of agency which neglects the social and structural context within which individuals operate.

Building policy stories: paternalism and contractualism in WTW reform

As in many other nations, therefore, conditionality has moved to centre stage within UK WTW policies, though not without criticism. Deacon (2004) outlines that conditionality can be underpinned by at least three alternative ideological justifications – contractualism, paternalism and mutualism – each of which may have differing implications for the design and implementation of resulting policies. Of these, paternalism and contractualism have dominated policy justifications for enhanced WTW conditionality and, to briefly summarize, whilst paternalists argue that conditionality is justifiable because it is indirectly beneficial (given that conditionality is argued to support paid work and paid work is argued to be beneficial) contractualists argue that conditionality is fair because it limits free-riding by requiring everyone to contribute wherever possible via paid work.

New Labour and WTW reform: evolving policies and justifications

In the early New Labour years the emphasis around lone parent employment was one of gradual shifts of a status quo without any work-related activities and paid work was portrayed as both financially and non-financially beneficial (DSS 1999). As a result, mandatory work-focussed interviews (WFIs) (DSS 1999) and, later, mandatory action plans (DWP 2005) were justified paternalistically in terms of ensuring awareness of employment opportunities and benefits so as to support lone parents to "concentrate on *their* longer term goals" (DWP 2005: 96; author's emphasis).

The 2007 Freud Review, DWP's 2007 *In work, Better off* Green Paper and the 2008 Gregg Review together mark a critical development in policy. They also mark a growing place for contractualist justifications alongside the existing paternalistic thread in that improved support in terms of childcare, employment flexibility and employment advice are now argued to justify increased expectations from lone parents in return. DWP (2007) talks explicitly of a "new social contract with lone parents" (DWP 2007: 10) in which "the offer of increased help would be balanced with the responsibility of individuals to make the best use of that support or face a loss of benefit" (DWP 2007: 14), sentiments shared by Gregg (2008: 49). Freud (2007) argues similarly, although interestingly the emphasis here is that enhanced conditionality becomes justifiable "*once* wraparound childcare is in place" (Freud 2007: 91, author's emphasis), suggesting that it is *adequate* rather than simply *enhanced* supports which justify conditionality. Although *adequate* support seems more morally appropriate and, in practical outcome terms, more useful as a contractualist justification for conditionality, it is interesting that the dominant contractualist argument under New Labour nevertheless remained around *increased* supports.

There have been three main concerns in response to contractualist justifications of WTW conditionality. One critique has been the extent to which this contractualist discourse neglects the impact of employment constraints such as ill health, having multiple children and lacking work experience (Rafferty and Wiggan 2011; Haux 2011). Haux (2011) for example finds that around 40% of lone parents with older children experience one of more such disadvantages, rising to 75% amongst those not working.

Second, as noted above it has been argued that the approach is partial in its understanding of key terms such as 'dependency' (only benefit recipients count, and not also for example those relying financially on working partners) (Goodin 2009) and 'benefits' (only social assistance counts, excluding most welfare provision such as schools, hospitals, refuse collection, and so on, which many non-working individuals enjoy without having to fulfil additional work-related requirements) (Dwyer 2004). In addition, the contractualist discourse is partial in that 'contributions' are equated only to paid work, casting other activities such as unpaid care work or voluntary work as valueless (White

2000; White and Cooke 2007). Moreover, *all* paid work is considered to be beneficial, despite the clear *dis*benefits to some paid work evident since the onset of the financial crisis.

A third strand of debate, and one implied by the differing messages between Freud (2007) and Gregg (2008) outlined above, has highlighted that whilst there have been considerable improvements in policy supports over the past decade these issues remain far from resolved. In terms of care compatible employment, Gingerbread's (2010) research finds that only a minority of advertised jobs are part-time or job-share and virtually none are school-time and term-time only. In terms of childcare, just over 20 per cent of non-working lone parents cite childcare as their main barrier to employment (Hoxhallari et al. 2007), 60 per cent of Family Information Services across Britain report availability problems (Daycare Trust 2011b) and childcare in England remains amongst the most expensive in Europe (OECD 2010).

Alongside this contractualist justification, paternalism continues to flow through these reports. Gregg (2008) argues that conditionality has been shown to boost employment outcomes and that employment supports wellbeing. Hence, for Gregg conditionality reforms were needed because "more and more families were failing to enjoy the financial and non-financial benefits of paid employment" (Gregg 2008: 10). Although more heavily framed within a contractualist framework, Freud (2007) argues similarly that conditionality is justifiable given that it has been shown to boost employment outcomes and that "work is generally good for physical and mental well-being", a phrase attributed to Waddell and Burton (2006) and cited repeatedly through the report.

Both steps in this paternalistic argument are however somewhat more controversial than presented in these reports. First, the evidence around the effects of conditionality on employment outcomes is weaker than suggested, in part due to methodological difficulties in separating out the independent effects of various factors besides conditionality (e.g. tax credits, broader economic context, childcare reforms) and in part due to the conflation of these various effects into a single 'conditionality effect' within the reports. Those UK and US WTW evaluations which have disaggregated the independent effects of these various factors find that tax credits account for the largest share of the overall employment effects (around one third) whilst general economic conditions and welfare reform (including but not limited to conditionality) each account for a further quarter of the effects (Cebulla et al., 2008; Grogger and Karoly, 2005). Hence, in terms of impacts on employment outcomes conditionality in and of itself is only a minor part in the story.

Second, in terms of work and wellbeing recent longitudinal qualitative research with lone parents finds disappointingly little evidence around financial or wellbeing gains from paid work (Millar and Ridge 2008) and Wright (2011) likewise reports that around a third of transitions from JSA to employment do not result in exits from poverty. Beyond financial outcomes, paid work can also impact on care time, a salient issue given that (lone) parents typically evaluate paid work not in narrow financial terms but normatively in terms of notions of 'good enough care' (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Williams 2004). These spillovers from work to care can be both quantitative (lone parents working atypical hours for example spend just over an hour less with their children each day on average after controlling for other factors (Marsh et al. 2006: 41)) and qualitative (in terms of tiredness, less pure leisure time with children, stress and guilt (Hochschild 1990, 1996; Dex 2003).

It *is* correct to say that econometric studies generally find consistent negative associations between unemployment and wellbeing (Dolan et al. 2008). Much of the available evidence concerns unemployment however and may not directly apply to many lone parents who may well see themselves primarily as caregivers for their children rather than as unwanted workers. Hence, simply because policy has now redefined lone parents as 'unemployed' it does not necessarily follow that

this unemployment effect on wellbeing applies. Additionally, these effects are *average* effects across all employed people and do not disaggregate the estimate by *type* of employment (Waddell and Burton 2006: 10). Jones (2010) highlights that rather than *any* work benefitting wellbeing – as Freud implies – Waddell and Burton state more precisely that paid work enhances wellbeing provided that your job is "a good job" (Waddell and Burton,2006: 34) which you have been able to "choose and are happy with" (Waddell and Burton 2006: 10) . With around 55% of working lone mothers working atypical hours (Marsh et al. 2006: 30), the average lone parent earning just above the minimum wage (Freud 2007:32), significant proportions cycling between work and welfare rather than sustaining paid work (Evans et al. 2003) and conditionality weakening the voluntariness of lone parents' employment decisions it is not clear that 'good jobs' are what employed lone parents necessarily 'enjoy'.

WTW reform under the Coalition: a regressive step?

Since 2010, whilst key Coalition policy documents present the same mix of paternalistic and contractual justifications at least three significant developments can be identified, potentially indicating a shift in the qualitative nature of WTW policies. First, although the Coalition continue to talk paternalistically in terms of conditionality supporting benefit recipients to enjoy what are stated to be the "clear rewards to taking all types of work" (DWP, 2010a: 18) there is a shift in emphasis towards contractualism, suggesting that wellbeing concerns may be less of a focus in terms of WTW outcomes under the Coalition.

Second, and perhaps related, this contractualism is no longer justified in terms of adequate, or even increased, support but simply in terms of the existence of "*the* support they receive" (DWP 2010a: 6, 28, author's emphasis) – support of unqualified level or change. Leaving aside the 'othering' of benefit recipients implied here, the suggestion seems to be that *any* level of support – rather than *adequate* support or even *increased* support – is now considered appropriate to legitimize enhanced conditionality.

Finally, the nature of the contract under focus has also shifted under the Coalition such that documents move between contractualism as a balance between obligations and employment supports (of whatever level) (DWP 2010a: 6, 28) and as a balance between benefit recipients and taxpayers (DWP 2010a: p6,p18). Although raised previously in Gregg (2008: 10), this latter balance with taxpayers appears to have moved towards a more central position in the Coalition's contractualist discourse. In doing so the implicit suggestion is that benefit recipients are not also taxpayers. Yet even if one is prepared to accept that tax is the only route through which individuals can make social contributions it is erroneous to state that benefit recipients are not also taxpayers in a range of ways (e.g. indirect tax on consumption).

Taken together, these shifts in justification suggest perhaps a qualitative shift in the aims and qualitative nature of WTW policies under the Coalition, with a reduced emphasis on wellbeing and reduced expectations on the state in terms of policy supports in return for work requirements.

WTW conditionality and the place of geography: testing causal theories and policy impact

These differing emphases within the justifications underpinning conditionality can help to indicate the aims and nature of the resulting policy framework. Whatever its justification, however, conditionality at its heart always seeks to alter behaviour (Deacon 2004) and hence implicit – or, increasingly in the UK context, explicit – within conditionality reforms is the belief that behavioural issues play an important part in driving worklessness. This behavioural discourse has become both more forceful and more explicit over the past decade, particularly under the Coalition government which has been comfortable to talk explicitly about the role of "negative behaviours" (DWP 2010a: 8)

and the need for greater conditionality to "promote responsibility and positive behaviour" (DWP 2010a: 18) and to instil a "culture of work in households where it may have been absent for generations" (DWP 2010b: 3). As others have noted, despite the conviction of these statements they do however lack supporting evidence. Indeed, DWP's own research shows that even in a single generation (i.e. ignoring the claim that this is an intergenerational issue) only 1.7% of households have no adults without any work history (DWP 2010c).

However, if the identification of behavioural factors as the policy problem is misspecified, as various scholars have argued is the case (Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992; Walker and Howard 2000; Wright 2011) and other issues – childcare, job availability or health issues for example – are of greater relevance to (un)employment then one would not expect conditionality to be beneficial for WTW participants. The following analyses take an often neglected geographical approach to these issues. In particular, they use a combination of descriptive statistics, cartograms and multivariate models to evaluate the impact of the JSA transfer since 2008 on lone parents' employment outcomes and, in doing so, to contribute to the debate between the competing structural and behavioural factors driving these outcomes.

Data and Methods

The geographical analyses presented below are based on specially sourced administrative data for lone parents in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance (provided by DWP[1]) and Working Tax Credit (provided by HMRC[2]) across local authorities in England[3].

In seeking a sub-national measure of lone parent employment one is necessarily constrained given that administrative rather than survey data are required. These analyses make use of local authority counts of lone parents in receipt of WTC for each April from 2007 to 2011. Only low-income lone parents working more than 16 hours per week are eligible to receive WTC and it is not therefore a comprehensive measure. It is however considered a reasonable indicator, in part because the understanding of 'policy success' for government in terms of WTW is lone parent employment of at least 16 hours per week and given that most lone parents exiting JSA to employment will be earning relatively low wages and will therefore be eligible for WTC. Weighted analyses of the 2551 lone parent responses in the first wave of the Understanding Society survey[4] show that over 85 per cent of employed lone parents work for more than 16 hours per week and 63 per cent of these receive WTC.

In seeking to build rates of lone parent JSA and WTC one obstacle is that lone parent denominators are not publicly available at local authority level and had to be created. For each local authority the lone parent share of the adult population[5] in the 2001 Census was applied to local authority mid-year population estimates for 2007-2011. To add robustness the resulting 2010 denominator was compared to a published ONS country level figure (ONS 2011) which suggested a need to uprate the denominators by 15 per cent to match these published totals.

In creating the WTC rates one known issue is the definitional mismatch between the numerators (the HMRC WTC counts) and the lone parent denominators which results in implausibly high WTC rates (Brewer and Shaw 2006). Brewer and Shaw (2006) find lone parent WTC counts from survey data which are 32 per cent lower than the HMRC WTC counts. Given that the ONS lone parent population figures (and hence the constrained local authority denominators) are based on survey data the WTC numerators are deflated by this amount to produce internally consistent lone parent WTC rates. The resulting rates were cross-checked for robustness against the Understanding Society survey and Family Resources Survey (Gingerbread 2011b:2) which showed respectively that 27 per

cent[6] and 36 per cent of all lone parents state receipt of WTC. This compares to an England WTC rate of 34 per cent within the data used in these analyses.

In terms of controls, the broader local authority JSA rate may be relevant in terms of competition for jobs or as an indicator of inadequate labour demand more generally (Theodore 2007). Local authority JSA rates for each year 2007-2011 were constructed using working age JSA counts (excluding lone parents) from NOMIS and population data from Neighbourhood Statistics. Population data for 2011 were not available and reflect 2010 estimates adjusted according to the percentage change between 2009 and 2010.

Childcare remains a relevant factor in terms of lone parent employment but childcare information at local authority level is not readily available in the UK. Fortunately the Daycare Trust, which conducts the UK's main childcare costs survey, kindly agreed to provide these data for 2011[7]. The childcare costs used relate to the average weekly costs of 25 hours of nursery care for one child below 2 years. Costs for 2007-2010 are based on deflating 2011 values by the annual regional percentage changes costs as provided by the annual Daycare Trust childcare costs reports.

Care compatible employment opportunities are of relevance to lone parent employment and part-time job vacancies notified to Jobcentre Plus in each year 2007-2011, sourced from NOMIS, are therefore included as a percentage of the unemployed population. Although the best such data available it is known that not all part-time vacancies are notified to Jobcentre Plus. Job density is taken as a second labour market indicator and measured as the percentage of the working age population[8] for which there are jobs (whether available or unavailable). The data are available from NOMIS for 2007-2009 and the 2010 and 2011 data are estimated as the average of earlier years.

Although lone parents tend to make employment decisions around normative rather than narrow economic considerations (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Williams 2004) it is sensible to still control for the potential role of these factors. Weekly gross median earnings from part-time employment for the years 2007-2010 taken from NOMIS were therefore incorporated into the modelling. The 2011 data reflect 2010 values adjusted by the change between 2009 and 2010.

It has been argued that a flexible competitor labour supply has been a factor in depressing lone parent employment rates in London (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee 2008: 53) and two such variables are included. First, the youth share[9] of the working age population in each local authority is calculated for each year 2007-2010 from Neighbourhood Statistics data, with 2011 calculated as the average of the previous four years. Second, population turnover is taken as a proxy for a casual labour supply. The annual local authority figures are calculated as population weighted averages of its constituent Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA) population turnover rates – defined as inmigration plus outmigration over resident population – and the unavailable 2010 and 2011 values are calculated as averages of the previous years.

To take account of compositional differences in lone parent populations between local authorities the percentage of lone parents with a youngest child aged above least twelve is included. Finally, and centrally, a series of year dummies (with 2007 as the reference) are included as policy proxies for the impact on lone parent employment of the staggered transfer of lone parents from IS to JSA since 2008 as outlined in Table 1.

All cartograms are created in ScapeToad and mapped using ArcGIS. The regression modelling uses annual data from 2007-2011 across English local authorities and therefore employs multilevel

models to appropriately reflect the nesting of years (level 1) within local authorities (level 2) (Snijders and Bosker 1999). Models are fitted in Stata with robust estimation of standard errors.

Results

To provide some context to later analyses Figure 1 presents changes in lone parent JSA caseloads across England since 2008. The left pane disaggregates these changes by the age of youngest child (0-6, 7-9, 10-11, 12-15) and shows, inevitably, a gradual increase in the lone parent JSA caseload at the end of each year[10] from around 10,000 in 2008 through to just over 100,000 by 2011 as the reforms have rolled out. Lone parents with youngest children aged five or six began to join these caseloads from early 2012. Over the same time period the number of lone parents receiving WTC has also increased by around 90,000 from just under 750,000 in April 2008 to around 840,000 in April 2011. The right pane of Figure 1 presents a regional overview of these changes across four months (Feb, May, Aug, Nov) since early 2008. Regions are presented in order from London at the far left of the legend having the largest caseload in 2011 down to the North East at the far right of the legend with the smallest caseload in 2011. London has stood out throughout this period but the gap between London and the other regions has widened so that by 2011 London accounts for a quarter of the country's lone parent JSA caseload.

Fig 1: Change in lone parent JSA caseload since 2008

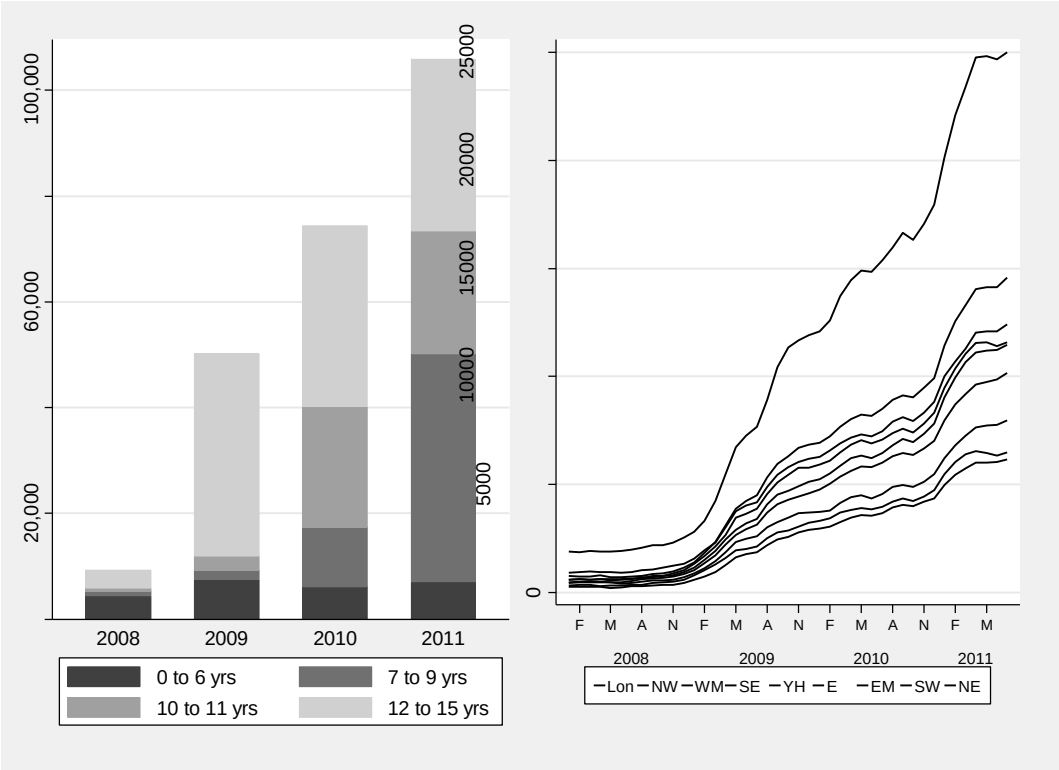
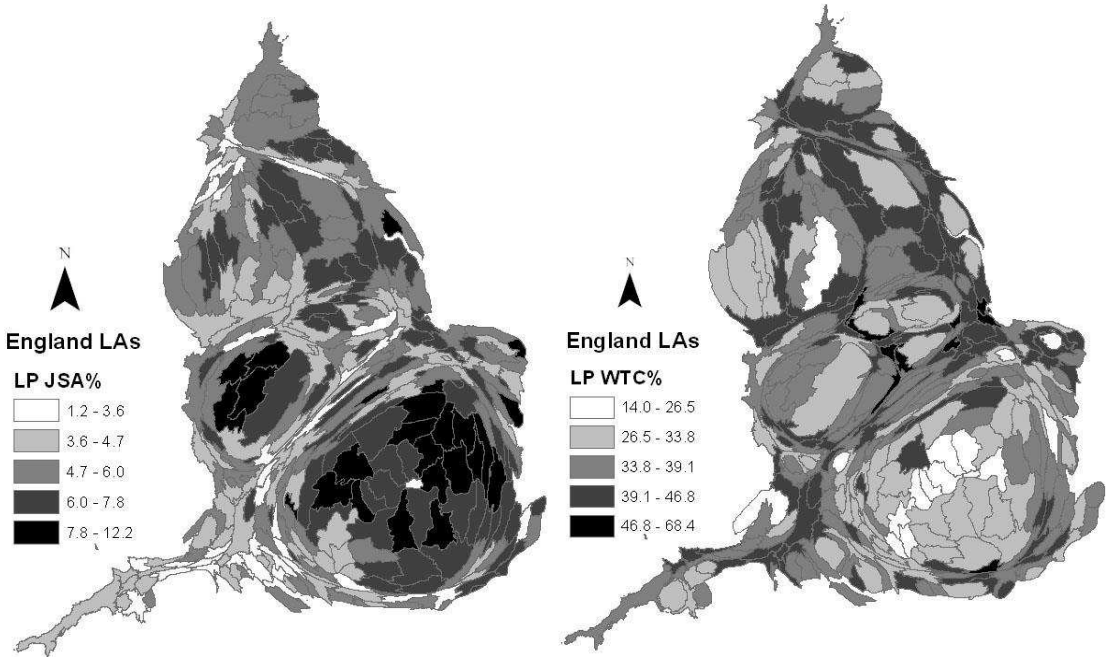


Figure 2 moves the focus down to local authority level but rather than showing maps according to standard geographical boundaries it uses cartograms as the basis for their shape so as to give a sense of the volumes underpinning these local authority rates. The left cartogram focuses on levels of lone parent JSA and the size of each local authority reflects the share of England's total lone parent JSA caseload within that local authority. Local authorities are shaded according to their lone parent JSA rates ranging from around 1 per cent up to a high of 12 per cent. This combination highlights that the West Midlands, London and to a lesser extent much of the north are areas with

relatively high lone parent JSA caseloads and rates. The right cartogram focuses on lone parent WTC rates. The shape of the cartogram is based on the lone parent population and is shaded according to the local authority's lone parent WTC rate, ranging from 14 per cent to a high of around 70 per cent. The eye is immediately drawn to the West Midlands and London with relatively high rates of JSA as well as relatively low rates of WTC.

Fig 2: Cartograms of lone parent JSA rates (left) and lone parent WTC rates (right), 2011 (JSA cartogram based on lone parent JSA counts; WTC cartogram based on lone parent population)



Recent research highlights sharp regional differences in lone parent employment (Gingerbread 2009) and Figure 2 similarly highlights systematic spatial variation in lone parent (un)employment. Such variation raises questions over whether behavioural drivers can be key to these outcomes given that one would not expect systematic spatial variation in the distribution of differently motivated or oriented lone parents at these scales. This is not necessarily to say that behavioural and attitudinal factors have no role but that they do not seem a large part of the explanation. One possible counter is the argument that local neighbourhood context does have relevance to lone parents' constructions of 'good motherhood' and, as a consequence, their orientations towards paid work (Duncan and Edwards 1999). Such differences, however, relate to the very local level and given that variation *within* such larger geographies greatly outweighs variation *between* such geographies variability in *local* norms is highly unlikely to explain the systematic spatial patterns outlined above between these larger scales. To test this issue further, however, weighted analyses of the lone parent responses within the first wave of the Understanding Society survey were conducted across four attitudinal proxies: regularly helping children with their homework, considering A-Level education important for their children, wanting a job, and ever having had paid work. Virtually no statistically significant regional differences were found over any of the variables.

By way of contextualising the cartograms, Table 2 presents average values of a range of relevant factors for England and for each separate region. London, the North West and the South East together account for just under half of England's lone parents and make a sensible focus as well as an interesting set of comparisons. London shows by far the lowest lone parent WTC rate of any region (29.1 per cent), with the North West and South East both around 36 per cent. Whilst only

simple averages these data offer initial support to the notion that structural factors are of relevance. Of these three regions London shows the lowest rates of part time job vacancies, the highest weekly childcare costs and the highest levels of population turnover. London also shows – though only marginally – the highest rates of overall unemployment and the lowest proportion of lone parents with older children.

Table 2: Average values across key variables for England and each region, 2011

	Eng	NE	NW	YH	EM	WM	EE	Lon	SE	SW
LP WTC % 2011	36.5	36.2	36.8	39.0	40.9	38.1	35.9	29.1	35.9	37.3
Change LP WTC % 07-11	4.6	3.2	3.4	4.3	5.0	3.6	5.0	7.3	4.14	4.9
LP JSA % 2011	5.4	6.2	4.7	5.7	5.0	5.6	5.9	7.9	4.9	4.1
LP population (%)	100	5.9	16.1	10.5	8.2	10.7	9.2	17.6	13.1	8.7
PT median inc (£)	157	143	151	147	150	164.4	153	168	162.1	159.6
PT vacancies %	7.0	4.3	7.4	7.0	6.1	7.0	7.2	3.17	7.7	10.1
Job density	77.5	68.2	75.3	77.0	73.2	76.5	76.2	82.2	81.1	80.6
Pop turnover	170	161	156	163	161	154	167	202	177	180
% Aged 16-24	18.5	20.4	19.5	19.8	18.6	18.4	17.8	17.8	18.0	18.5
Overall JSA %	3.2	5.3	3.8	3.9	3.1	3.7	2.9	3.8	2.4	2.4
Childcare cost (£ week)	97.4	91.1	80.2	91.2	93.0	97.0	91.5	124.0	109.0	89.3
% LPs AYC 12+	33.7	36.1	34.3	34.8	34.7	33.6	35.1	32.4	33.0	31.6
Number LAs	324	12	39	21	40	30	47	32	67	36

To test the independent relevance of these factors Table 3 shows the results of two multivariate multilevel regression models of local authority level lone parent JSA rates and lone parent WTC rates respectively.

For the JSA model (Model 1) the year dummy policy proxies in Table 3 suggest only a marginal effect on lone parent JSA rates in the initial post-policy years followed by a two percentage point increase in 2010 and a four percentage point increase in 2011 compared to the 2007 base year, other things equal. Of the remaining explanatory variables most are either statistically or substantively insignificant. Two notable additional findings are evident however: other things equal, a one percentage point increase in the overall JSA rate is associated on average with a 0.58 percentage point increase in the lone parent JSA rate – presumably the result of generally inadequate demand for labour – whilst a £10 per week increase in childcare costs is on average associated with a 0.12 percentage point increase in lone parent JSA rates.

For the WTC model (Model 2) all but one of the predictors are statistically significant. In terms of the year dummy policy proxies, lone parent WTC rates are estimated to be a little over 4 percentage points higher in each year 2009-2011 compared to 2007 after controlling for other factors. It is interesting that these estimates seem to have flattened out at this level, perhaps because employment outcomes become harder to achieve once those lone parents with fewest barriers to work have moved into employment. There also seems to be some positive change in 2008 before the first wave of lone parents were transferred to JSA, perhaps as a result of anticipatory movements into work (Griggs and Evans 2010). In contrast, unemployment may be considered an intermediary – though not necessarily temporary – step between economic inactivity and employment which the reforms are also generating: other things equal a one percentage point increase in lone parent JSA rates in the local authority is associated on average with a 0.4 percentage point increase in lone parent WTC rates.

The overall JSA rate in the local authority is significant and negative and its effect is relatively large: for every percentage point increase in the local authority's JSA rate the lone parent WTC rate is on average expected to fall by around half a percentage point, other things equal. This seems most likely to be the result of a more general lack of demand for labour in the area: for lone parents to move into work the policy assumption of local job availability must be a reality.

Of the other factors, both childcare costs and the availability of part time jobs are significantly associated with local authority lone parent WTC rates and in the expected direction. The effect size for part time job availability is positive although small, perhaps a consequence in part of the variable capturing only those vacancies notified to Jobcentre Plus offices. The effect of childcare costs is relatively large however with a £10 per week reduction in childcare costs associated on average with a half percentage point increase in lone parent WTC rates, other things equal. Moreover, this is in a context where many lone parents will be receiving childcare subsidies within WTC and not therefore facing those full market costs. Both indicators of labour market competition – population turnover and youth population – are statistically significant and negative, as expected, although their effects are relatively small.

Table 3: Coefficients from multilevel model of factors affecting rates of lone parent WTC across English local authorities, 2007-2011

	Model 1: LP JSA %		Model 2: LP WTC %	
	Coef	p	Coef	p
% LP 12+	0.01	0.00	-0.01	0.17
Median Income (£10)	0.04	0.00	-0.15	0.00
PT vacancy rate	-0.00	0.41	0.05	0.02
Job density	-0.00	0.95	-0.05	0.00
Turnover rate	0.00	0.00	-0.03	0.00
% 16-24	-0.04	0.00	-0.20	0.02
LA JSA%	0.51	0.00	-0.46	0.02
Childcare costs (£10)	0.12	0.00	-0.47	0.00
2008	-0.04	0.42	1.47	0.00
2009	0.28	0.00	4.43	0.00
2010	2.27	0.00	4.12	0.00
2011	4.43	0.00	4.45	0.00
LP LA JSA%			0.37	0.00
Constant	-2.60	0.00	50.19	0.00
rho		0.21	0.82	
Overall R2		0.89	0.30	

Discussion

The gradual deepening and thickening of WTW conditionality in the UK since the late 1990s has marked a radical shift in the construction of lone parent citizenship and a pronounced change in the work expectations placed upon the group. The shifting justifications underpinning these

conditionality reforms say something about the way in which different administrations have perceived the appropriate function and nature of WTW policies, as well as the perceived political viability of radical reforms at different points in time. Since the late 1990s these justifications have evolved from a focus on paternalism in the early New Labour period to a more mixed argument incorporating both contractual and paternalistic perspectives, although both accounts have faced consistent critical attention. More recently, under the Coalition government changes in emphasis can be detected which suggest less of a concern for wellbeing gains from WTW, a stronger behavioural discourse and less of a focus on the government's role in ensuring that enabling policy supports are in place alongside conditionality. Taken together these changes would be of concern for those concerned with WTW outcomes (whether employment, income or wellbeing outcomes) and moral concerns around notions of equity and 'fair reciprocity'.

The paper's empirical findings suggest that the transfer of lone parents to the JSA regime since 2008 has increased lone parents' economic activity, with estimates that lone parent WTC rates are up by around 4 percentage points between 2007 and 2011 as a result of the JSA transfers. This is somewhat unsurprising given that the reforms mandate lone parents to become 'active' in historic numbers. Whilst supporting lone parents wishing to work back into employment is of course to be welcomed there remain three key areas of concern following from these analyses.

First, the impacts appear as large for lone parent *un*employment as for lone parent employment and given the current economic context it must be feared that a substantial part of this lone parent unemployment may not be short-term. Of course, this 'unemployment' is in a sense technical in that it is caused by an official redefinition of most lone parents' status from 'inactive' to 'active' (whether employed or unemployed) rather than by any real change of activity necessarily. Nevertheless, the process of being labelled as unemployed and being pressured to move into paid work in the current economic and policy context may result in frustrated periods of longer-term unemployment and act to harm confidence and motivation. The New Deal employment programmes under New Labour were created in part to respond to exactly these concerns around hysteresis and scarring effects from long-term unemployment it would be ironic if the lone parent obligations acted to generate precisely these problems for the group.

Second, the analyses highlight that structural factors are of continuing importance to lone parent (un)employment outcomes – in particular job availability and childcare costs – and that behavioural and attitudinal issues are at most a negligible part of the story. Nevertheless, Coalition policies continue to talk in terms of aspatial behavioural drivers and to downplay such structural issues, despite a raft of evidence to the contrary. WTW which genuinely helps lone parents to tackle barriers to work and to fulfil employment ambitions are to be welcomed. Where policy problems are misdiagnosed around behavioural drivers, however, and conditionality created as a policy solution in response, this acts to distract attention and resources away from tackling the real causal factors and does little to genuinely help lone parents.

Finally, whilst one would hope that lone parents are supported by WTW programmes to realize beneficial transitions to employment there is reason to fear that the reforms may harm rather than help lone parent wellbeing. As discussed earlier, it is widely known that paid work often does not equate to significant gains for lone parents and their families in terms of wellbeing, income levels or security and stability (Millar and Ridge 2009). Indeed, this is intuitively apparent: if one is willing to accept that lone parents are rational then it follows logically that if work was not previously chosen voluntarily then conditionality-driven employment transitions would perhaps be expected to risk negative impacts on wellbeing.

Very few WTW evaluations focus on the longer-term wellbeing impacts of conditionality in addition to shorter-term employment and income effects. Two studies are of particular relevance however. First, in a synthesis of the impact of sanctions Griggs and Evans (2010) summarize that whilst conditionality does reduce welfare caseloads in the short term the limited evidence that is available (which comes from the Swiss context) suggests that conditionality-driven employment transitions are associated with longer-term *dis*benefits in terms of reduced employment quality, weaker employment stability and lower earnings levels than would otherwise be the case. Second, Gregg et al (2009) provide a rare multivariate analysis of the impact of UK lone parent activation policies on wellbeing outcomes in the early 2000s. Their findings are mixed but generally suggestive of modest wellbeing gains. These analyses are however based on early 2000s data and so relate to the much lighter conditionality regime of that era, as outlined in Table 1. Given that one would expect greater wellbeing gains from work where it is chosen voluntarily – as Waddell and Burton (2006: 1) emphasize, but which Freud (2007) omits to mention – then one would expect any such wellbeing effects from conditionality-driven work transitions to be smaller and, as with the Swiss evidence cited above, quite possibly negative. Given the serious concerns therefore around the veracity of the paternalistic arguments for enhanced WTW conditionality further research into the wellbeing effects of the conditionality-driven employment transitions for lone parents (and their children) is pressing.

Notes

1. The author is grateful to Deborah Pritchard at the DWP for providing these data.
2. The author is grateful to Adrian Tuff at HMRC for providing these data.
3. 324 of England 326 local authorities are analysed: complete data for two local authorities – Isles of Scilly and City of London – could not be sourced and these are excluded from the analyses. These local authorities are unusual in a range of ways (most notably their very small populations) and are often excluded from local authority level analyses.
4. Interviews for Wave 1 of the survey took place between 2009 and 2011.
5. Defined as aged 16 plus.
6. Author's own weighted calculations.
7. The author is grateful to Jill Rutter at the Daycare Trust for providing these data.
8. Where working age is defined as 18-59 for females and 18-64 for males.
9. Defined as between 16-24 years.
10. December counts used for 2008-2010; July is the most recent data available for 2011.

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