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Challenging Welfare Mythmaking: Caps, (mis)classification and concealment of larger families' labour in austerity Britain

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ABSTRACT

The alleged 'welfare dependence' of larger families has long been used as a symbolic anchoring point in seeking to legitimise British welfare reform. This article focuses on the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit, setting out how defences of both reforms framed impacted claimants as 'workless', 'welfare-dependent' and requiring welfare constraint and restriction to 'activate' them. Larger families are particularly sensitive to social security policy changes due to their higher needs and yet their everyday experiences are rarely heard. This article is a corrective to this, drawing on qualitative longitudinal research with families affected by both policies. We document how larger families are both routinely engaged in the labour market and doing extensive social reproductive labour. A dominant policy framing of 'worklessness' collides with the everyday realities of larger families. We argue that a re-imagined welfare state can and should recognise and resource social reproductive labour and make that work possible.

KEYWORDS: Benefit Cap, larger families, social reproduction, Two-Child Limit, work

Introduction

Starting his tenure as Prime Minister, Keir Starmer promised to treat governance as 'service' and to begin a programme of national renewal (Starmer, 2024). During the election campaign, Labour repeatedly refused to commit to abolishing the Two-Child Limit, a policy that restricts means-tested social security support to the first two children in a household and that now impacts one in nine children (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024). Once elected, Labour sought to contain growing pressure around this policy, launching a Child Poverty Taskforce, which will report in Spring 2025. The refusal of Labour to commit to abolishing the policy was recorded as Starmer's second most popular policy decision of his first 100 days in office (Difford, 2024).

In the UK, child poverty is rising again after a period of steady decline from the late 1990s to the early 2010s (Stewart et al., 2021), with a record 4.3 million children in poverty in 2022/23 (Brown, 2024). Children in larger families have long been over-represented in these child poverty rates, and indeed changes to child poverty rates (both increases and decreases) are experienced *almost entirely* by larger families, due to their greater underlying household needs

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and the more complex constraints they face in securing employment which fits with their caring responsibilities (Stewart et al., 2021). In 2022/23, 46% of all children in larger families were in poverty. We define 'larger families' as those with three or more children as this is the point at which the two-child limit hits.

Abolishing the Two-Child Limit should be an easy decision for a Labour government committed to national renewal, and their failure to act perhaps speak as much to concerns about appearing 'soft' on 'welfare' as it does to their stated 'fiscal constraints'. Larger families have long circulated in the imaginations of policymakers with multiple, sometimes colliding, ideas in play about how social security support should correspond with family size, and how far policy can and should encourage particular reproductive decisions (Patrick & Andersen, 2023). One position is that social welfare systems should directly respond to the increase in household needs precipitated by the birth of each additional child, with social security payments rising as these needs also rise (Rathbone, 1924). A counter position argues that providing social security support on a per-child basis risks incentivising particular 'lifestyles', characterised by reckless procreation, abdication of personal responsibility and welfare dependency (Osborne, 2015).

In Britain, the dominant policy frame about larger families has been increasingly charged with this second orientation, crystallised in the rollout of the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit. The Benefit Cap, announced by the Coalition Government (2010-2015) in 2010 and implemented in 2013, limits the total amount of social security benefits that can be paid to a working-age 'workless' household. The aims of the Benefit Cap were initially presented as three-pronged; first, 'increasing incentives to work' by capping the financial support for out-of-work households; second, 'introducing greater fairness' between those receiving out-of-work benefits and those in employment; and third, 'making financial savings' in the 'welfare system' (Department for Work and Pensions [DWP], 2014). In 2015 the incoming, majority Conservative Government used their Summer Budget to declare that the UK's welfare spending remained unsustainable, announcing a series of further reforms, which included a reduction in the Benefit Cap and the roll out of the Two-Child Limit from April 2017. This limit was presented as a mechanism to 'ensure fairness' and encourage 'responsible' choices around reproduction; in other words, to discourage procreation among claimants of social security (Osborne, 2015; Rileysmith, 2015). Both the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit have been widely

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criticised since their introduction, with a growing evidence base documenting how they operate to *produce* poverty and fail in their stated aims (Patrick et al, 2023).

Under Osborne and The Conservatives tenure, social security has been routinely rebranded as ‘welfare’ (Walker, 1999) as part of a wider project to residualise state social security support; and to denigrate the support itself, and the lives of those who receive it. We prefer ‘social security’, although we also refer to ‘welfare’ in this article to describe the dominant narratives that circulate in this domain.

This article documents the collision between the dominant welfare myths that underpin these policies and the everyday realities for larger families impacted by them; a foregrounding we consider to be the crucial first step in challenging and ultimately reversing these policies. We argue that the (mis)classification of larger families as ‘workless’ and ‘welfare dependent’ conceals the many forms of activity they are participating in. We seek to challenge the current definition of ‘work’ as participation in the paid labour market and call for a broader conceptualisation which encompasses social reproductive labour; and for a reimagined welfare state that recognises, resources and celebrates this labour.

Classification and concealment

The design, rollout and continued defence of the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit deliberately taps into wider ‘welfare’ myths that cast claimants as irresponsible and unrestrained and describe the welfare state as (potentially) encouraging such ‘lifestyles’. The language of ‘caps’ and ‘limits’ activates moral debates around excess, profligacy and recklessness and casts welfare reform as setting tough, necessary conditions on the principle of entitlement. But benefit income caps and limits are not entirely new. The Wage Stop restricted social assistance to local wage levels between 1935 and 1975 (Grover, 2022) and a version of the Benefit Cap was designed by the Conservative Government in 1980, but ultimately abandoned because it would cause hardship among larger families, and thus could attract public disdain as an ‘anti-family’ policy (Grover, 2022). Three decades on, the Benefit Cap polled ‘off the charts’ (Chakelian, 2021) when introduced. This shift reflects the effective circulation of ‘anti-welfare commonsense’ (Jensen and Tyler, 2015) which saturates public debate with durable, resilient welfare myths, animated via historically specific figures; the scrounger, the ‘welfare’ queen, the benefits fiddler. These figures, mediated by popular culture and news media, incubate a deep moral

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disdain for the allegedly ‘undeserving poor’. They ferment negative public attitudes to the very principle of social security entitlement (Hills, 2017; Morrison, 2021; Wiggan, 2012).

Welfare mythmaking must undergo periodic ‘recurrent refurbishment’ (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 59). The revitalised concern around family size, refurbished with the ‘benefit brood’ figure from 2010, presented larger families as lazy, ‘workshy’, ‘gaming’ their reproductive choices and opting out of paid employment to maximise ‘welfare’ entitlements and enjoying an easy life claiming benefits which must be halted for their own good (Osborne, 2015). Reflecting on Family Caps, a United States version of the Benefit Cap which also draws on and activates unsubstantiated ‘welfare’ myths about ‘unfit mothers’ having ‘babies for cash’, Bouie (2014: n.p.) proposes that they ‘actualise prejudice into policy.’

Grover (2022: 3) describes the Benefit Cap as a ‘new approach to an old dilemma’ – querying how to provide unemployment support without eroding the wage incentive – but the key difference between 1980 and 2010 was that larger families were no longer considered to be a priority group for social security spending and the policy emphasis on addressing poverty has been replaced with a repeated emphasis on paid work as the ‘best route out of poverty’. Indeed, the Benefit Cap and the Two-Child Limit sit within a broader social security reform lens that prioritises paid employment as the only valuable activity for people to be engaged in, with ‘social security’ itself reconceptualised as part of the problem (Patrick et al, 2023). Both policies emerge from, and contribute to, moral discourses that seek to *classify* and *conceal* particular narratives around ‘work’ and ‘welfare’ – a narrowing of what counts as work, and a willingness to use welfare state apparatus to police, punish and ‘activate’ those considered to be operating outside of the bounds of recognisable and calculable work. This approach aligns with an indifference to hardships created by ‘incentive’ systems (including caps, restrictions and reductions) and an intensification and extension of social security conditionality (Wright, 2023). State-designed hardships are now considered part of the armoury in the battle against ‘social security dependence’ (Patrick et al, 2023). However, the actual operation of both policies reveals a more complex terrain around work and worklessness. For example, households may be subject to the Benefit Cap even if they are in work (but defined as working ‘insufficient hours’). Similarly, latest figures around the Two-Child Limit show that more than half of those affected currently have at least one household member in paid employment (DWP, 2024).

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The cultural and political condemnation of larger families that gathered pace during the austerity period aligns with a productivist definition of ‘work’ as ‘paid employment’. ‘Work’ is narrowly defined as that which creates surplus value under capitalist formations and can be exchanged for a wage. In this article, we are indebted to a long history of feminist scholars who have drawn attention to the inadequacy of this definition and have interrogated how capitalism operates through enclosure of women’s bodies, reproductive control and discipline, and the corporatisation, exploitation, and delegitimation of caring work both in and beyond the family (Farris and Marchetti, 2017; Federici, 2004). We draw on the concept of social reproduction to think more expansively about work in order to both acknowledge the many kinds of work that are being done within families (including larger families) and to reimagine the role of social security as a form of resourcing for social reproduction and caring infrastructures.

Feminist political economists have defined social reproduction as the mental, manual and emotional work necessary to maintain and reproduce life, comprising of the invisible labours of intimacy, emotional support, love and nourishment, the more tacit and affective dimensions of household work, and the literal reproduction of the next generation of workers (Gotby, 2023; Hester, 2018; Laslett and Brenner, 1989). Social reproduction is work that is typically unwaged and powerfully gendered (Elson, 2017), ‘hidden’ when completed within individual households or, when outsourced to state services or community organisations, done in sectors dominated by women workers who are devalued, undermined and underpaid (see Care Collective, 2020; Coffey, 2020; Fraser, 2014).

Across social security regimes, a range of policies have endeavoured to compensate this social reproduction work to varying degrees, in the form of family allowances, child benefits and tax credits (Stewart et al, 2025). The post-war welfare apparatus, while problematically predicated on an insurance model that assumed a male breadwinner, offered some protection for women and children in the form of regular welfare payments. Underpinning this apparatus are distinctive and often contradictory ideas about work, family and the functions of social security. Eleanor Rathbone pointed to family diversity and proposed that a family allowance could operate as a kind of ‘endowment’ paid to mothers according to the cumulative costs of each of her children, and covering family material needs (Rathbone, 1924). Family allowances calculate social security entitlements on a per-child basis and acknowledge, without ever fully compensating, the crucial labour provided by those doing social reproduction work. Complexly,

these policies have perhaps played a role in undermining demands for a higher family wage, highlighting the role of the family in absorbing reductions in the price of labour, providing low-cost and flexible forms of feminised labour and ideologically relieving the state and capital from full responsibility for the costs of social reproduction (Himmelweit, 1995; Weeks, 2011).

In recent years there has been a divergence in how European countries resource reproductive labour costs within social security regimes, with some taking distinctly pro-natalist directions that encourage procreation by offering generous child allowances and benefits (see Stewart et al, 2025). These policies are themselves often underpinned by a form of state racism rooted in fear of declining birth rates among white populations (Togman, 2019). The recent policy direction in the UK (including but not limited to the introduction of the Two-Child Limit and Benefit Cap) has been to absolve the welfare state of its obligations to support and compensate those doing social reproduction, by reducing the overall level of social security support and by attaching new conditions and limits on what remains, in order to encourage entry into paid employment amongst groups now defined as ‘welfare dependent’. This anti-welfarist agenda has been described as a ‘hollowing-out’ of social security principles, seeking to ‘refamiliarise’ or reduce and delegitimise the welfare state (Brown, 2015). The prioritising of waged work, even low-paid, casual and precarious work, and the downgrading of social reproduction work as inactivity or ‘welfare dependency’ (Benton, 2018: 61) further contributes to popular moralities around work and welfare that McRobbie (2020: 2) has described as culminating in a discourse of ‘contraceptive employment’. The welfare state is thus reimagined, ‘shedding its role in supporting social reproduction’ (McRobbie, 2020: 78) and tasked with encouraging or coercing claimants ‘off’ social security and drafting them into paid employment, using policy mechanisms such as caps and limits, even where these escalate poverty rates and destitution. British welfare policy is an international outlier in terms of these recent anti-natalist welfare reforms. Stewart et al (2025) highlights how distinctive and internationally unique the British Two-Child Limit is when compared to its European counterparts.

Under this period of austerity, and the attendant social security state destruction of the past decade, the defunding and cutbacks (and in some cases, withdrawal and dismantling) of some forms of state social reproduction has led to an intensification of unpaid household labour by way of compensation, as demonstrated in the data we discuss. In larger families, the shortfall of social reproduction work will necessarily be larger. At the same time, there has been a de-

linking of ‘need’ and ‘entitlement’ via policies like the Benefit Cap and the Two-Child Limit, with the very principle of ‘entitlement’ being problematised by ‘welfare’ mythmaking that posits it to be a cause of ‘welfare dependency’. We propose that social reproduction as a concept helps us understand both these shifting allocations of responsibility for supporting and resourcing family life, and the role of the state in promoting productive and reproductive activities, as well as helping us ‘see’ the social and class relations at play in terms of who can choose to prioritise parenting and caring work at key points in the life cycle. Drawing on the foundations of social reproduction debates, and on critical work scholars (Fleming, 2015; Hester and Srnicek, 2023; Peck, 2010; Weeks, 2011), we seek to broaden and reimagine the definition of ‘work’, to discuss the extensive accomplishment of social reproduction in larger families, and in doing so to contribute to resisting and overturning the problematic narratives around ‘work’ that are at the centre of the welfare reform project. By adopting these critical feminist perspectives on work and social reproduction, we highlight how extensively the dominant moral discourses around ‘welfare’ operate to *classify* and *conceal* reproductive labour in larger families.

While the spectre of the larger family has been central to the orchestration of these policy, public and media debates about ‘welfare’, the everyday experiences of larger families are seldom heard. Our very deliberate adoption of a social reproduction lens in this article represents our intervention into anti-welfare commonsense. By prioritising the voices of larger families, we seek to challenge dominant ideas of inactivity, passivity and dependency. We take a critical feminist perspective to unravel and puncture welfare myths around ‘work’ and ‘welfare’ that underpinned the introduction, and now shore up the continuation of both the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit.

Methods: Walking alongside families affected by the Two-Child Limit and the Benefit Cap

This article disseminates original data from a major research programme, the Benefit Changes and Larger Families study, which employed qualitative and quasi-experimental quantitative methods to explore and understand how larger families have been affected by the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit. The research team (of which Jensen was not part) conducted longitudinal research with 44 primary caregivers of larger families directly affected by one or both of these policies. The team deployed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that the sample included both male and female primary carers, was ethnically diverse, and incorporated a variety of family

sizes and structures. All interviewees lived in either Yorkshire or London (see table below for sample breakdown by key characteristics). This research sought to recognise and explore the uneven impacts of these policies both geographically and according to the intersecting characteristics of gender, ethnicity and relationship status. Analysis of the Two-Child Limit has demonstrated how it disproportionately affects minoritised populations (see Bi, 2024), and research shows the regional disparities in the reach of both policies (Nutt, 2023). Our sample was predominantly (but not exclusively) mothers; with both fathers and mothers articulating a common feeling of desperation about the struggle to ‘get by’.

[Insert Table One]

Repeat interviews (four waves over a two-year period) enabled the research team to ‘walk alongside’ families affected by the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit, generating a dynamic picture of everyday lives against a fast-changing context (see Patrick et al, 2023). Due to the timing of this article, we draw here on the first two waves of interviews, conducted in 2021 (Wave One) and Spring-Summer 2022 (Wave Two). Interviews explored participants’ experiences of the social security system; their relationship with paid employment; their household size and its needs; and their reliance on other forms of support from both public services and charities. The second wave of interviews also looked at parental mental health. This is the first longitudinal study to provide a comprehensive exploration of how larger families have been impacted by the Two-Child Limit and the Benefit Cap, making a detailed analysis of its evidence base especially valuable.

Data generated was analysed using NVivo software, drawing on an abductive research strategy. For this article, we immersed ourselves in the research data, before exploring the data pertaining to ‘work’ (here widely conceptualised) in detail. This data was analysed cross-sectionally and longitudinally, moving between and across descriptive and more explanatory accounts. This analytical process is messy and iterative, especially given the volume of data generated in qualitative longitudinal research. In the following, we share key anonymised findings, with participants using pseudonyms of their own choosing. These findings demonstrate the richness and thickness of description (Geertz, 1973) that can be produced by qualitative research, which in this case leads to a finely grained understanding of how everyday lives have

been affected over time. First, we explore the extent to which those in larger families are (mis)classified as workless, before detailing the reproductive labour being undertaken in these families.

(Mis)Classifying larger families as ‘workless’

This recent period of welfare reform is built upon the *classificatory* pillars of ‘benefit claimants’ and ‘taxpayers’, a powerful symbolic binary deployed to artificially, but effectively, cleave the British populace into two groups. These classificatory productions, while false (most taxpayers claim at least one benefit and most claimants pay taxes in some form, see Hills, 2017), have been crucial in orchestrating public support for welfare reform as both urgent and necessary.

Government ministers interpolate the ‘hardworking taxpayer’ when setting out their vision and seek voter approval by raising the spectre of an allegedly ‘workless’ population that have opted out of the labour market entirely (see, for example, Duncan-Smith, 2013; Sunak, 2024). The production of classificatory animosity between ‘taxpayer’ and ‘claimant’, central to the coordination of the public debate about ‘welfare’, was swiftly redirected to ideas about family size in 2015, when George Osborne announced the Two-Child Limit. Deploying this classificatory politics, Osborne argued:

It's important to support families, but it's also important to be fair to the many *working families* who don't see their budgets rise by anything like that when they have more children. (George Osborne, 2015, emphasis added)

Clashing with this popular depiction, many of the parents in this study were in paid employment, had recent experiences of paid employment, or were strongly oriented to paid work but experiencing other obstacles such as childcare availability and affordability. Asma described how she and her husband juggled paid work and childcare:

I do work part-time, so, for three days, so my husband will look after my youngest one while I'm at work during the day, and then I look after her in the evenings and when I'm back home. (affected by Two-Child Limit [2CL])

Zauna described her experiences of managing agency work alongside her parenting work:

... it make[s] it easier [financially] maybe when I get ... the agency work ... The problem is that you don't get it like full [time] ... maybe you get two days, three days, the rest you are at home. (affected by Benefit Cap [BC])

Policy narratives that generate static categories of 'workers' and 'non-workers' ignore the regularity with which people move between these categories, driven by ill-health and disability, the age of their children, and structural events that precipitate labour market change (notably in this research, the Covid-19 pandemic). Those in poverty also face a heightened risk of churning between 'low-pay' employment and 'no-pay' (see Shildrick et al., 2012).

Some participants described circumstances that made paid employment difficult, or impossible (see Reeves et al, 2024 & Stewart et al, forthcoming). Laura could not enter work due to the combination of her own ill health and that of her youngest child:

I mean I don't see it [entering work], I mean there's two things; one is ... am I gonna be healthy enough to work, and also ... things are so uncertain for my youngest at the moment ... they're testing him for multiple conditions and I just don't know if I'm ever gonna be able to not be caring for him full-time. (2CL)

It was common for participants to recount extensive previous working experiences and strong orientations towards re-entering paid employment in the future, when circumstances allowed. Vicky had been in paid employment but was made redundant in 2018 and described how hard it was to find paid employment that could be combined with reproductive labour:

From a money point of view ... I would love to be in paid work, but my kids are my priority ... There was a job she [daughter] sent to me yesterday and it ... was part-time work so I thought well that'll be good ... but then I looked at it and I thought I couldn't do it because it was either a ... seven till two [shift], or two till eleven, and I'm like, I can't, how can I do that ... people want flexibility from you, employers want flexibility, which I can't offer... (BC)

Parents also described how their efforts to secure paid employment were sometimes directly hampered by the very policies that were supposed to be ‘activating’ them. For example, Amanda wanted to become self-employed, selling knitted products or doing graphic design, but her aspirations were constantly undermined by the hardship caused by the Benefit Cap:

... when I did have no Benefit Cap my plan was trying getting myself out of benefits so I started buying more knitting stuff, I’d buy, started buying knitting machines, which I had to sell to basically feed the kids. So I went opposite. So I started buying equipment to make with the graphic studio in the house and then when I started getting broke I sold back my Apple Mac. So all the things I tried to make myself financially secure with had to go. (BC)

Our empirical evidence demonstrates that the assumptions of the Two-Child Limit and Benefit Cap (that claimants need the ‘push’ of conditionality to ‘activate’ them into employment) are based on a false representation of the everyday lives for larger families directly affected (see also Reeves et al, 2024; Patrick et al, 2023). First, our data demonstrates many instances of paid employment that so many affected families are *already* undertaking, within the constraints of their individual circumstances. The policy apparatus presumes claimants are ‘inactive’ and does not account for the intensive reproductive labour that larger families are juggling, often alongside paid employment. Parents who were not currently engaged in any paid employment articulated a strong desire to (re)enter paid work when future circumstances allowed, and were often taking practical steps towards this aspiration, undermining the central tenets of this classificatory rhetoric around worklessness.

Second, this policy apparatus also obscures and even ignores structural barriers to employment, which include, but are not limited to, unaffordable and inaccessible childcare, the dominance of precarious, poorly paid employment, and the difficulty of securing part-time work that fits alongside caring responsibilities (see Patrick et al, 2023; Wiggan, 2024). Insecurity in the paid labour market has risen rapidly in recent years, with women and ethnic minorities at heightened risk from being in insecure work; groups that are both disproportionately affected by the Two-Child Limit and Benefit Cap (see Florrison, 2022).

These policies cannot be separated from a wider labour market context of wage stagnation and a pervasive context of precarity (Resolution Foundation, 2023), felt especially by those at the bottom end of the labour market. Since 2007, real wages have flatlined in the UK, costing the average worker £10,700 per year in lost wage growth (Resolution Foundation, 2023). Around 10% of the workforce are in precarious employment, with this disproportionately affecting young, female and working-class employees (Department for Business and Trade, 2024). As prominent social policy scholars have argued (see Fletcher, 2019; Grover, 2019; Redman and Fletcher, 2021; Wiggan, 2024), an intensive activation approach, inadequate social security provision, and punitive sanctions and conditionality coalesce to reinforce the ‘less eligibility’ principle at a time of pervasive in-work poverty and systemic problems with the UK’s labour market. This approach to social security sustains a ‘reserve army of labour’ which is further embedded by privileging paid work as the marker of the dutiful citizen, and popularly articulated in political pledges to support to ‘hardworking families’, always implicitly defined as those in paid employment.

Our findings contribute to a wider evidence base on the work orientations and experiences among those (mis)classified as ‘workless’ (Garthwaite, 2015; Shildrick et al 2012; Patrick et al, 2023), zoning in on the collision between the ‘welfare’ mythologies that circulate around larger families and their everyday realities and aspirations. Far from demonstrating an unwillingness to work, those heading larger families in poverty routinely want to (re)enter paid employment or are already working, but sometimes at a level classified ‘insufficient’, where they are hit by the benefit cap). Many of those not currently in employment face profound structural barriers to entering or increasing their hours. In some cases, parents make a deliberate choice to prioritise reproductive labour while their children are young. In this way, larger families are like any other families in poverty – they are often working, routinely juggling paid employment with reproductive labour, and busy with the work of trying to ‘get by’. What is distinctive about larger families in poverty is the extent to which they are subject to intensive scrutiny and censure as the centrepiece of a damaging anti-welfare imaginary. It is to an exploration of the reproductive and associated labour being undertaken by larger families that this article now turns.

Concealing the everyday work of larger families in financial hardship

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The policy framing that (mis)classifies larger families as ‘workless’ and ‘welfare dependent’ also operates to celebrate the sanctity and legitimacy of *paid* employment as the only viable and valuable kind of work. This framing *conceals* and obfuscates the many kinds of social reproduction work that take place in larger families on low incomes. Parents in larger families *are* routinely working incredibly hard, even when not currently in paid employment, and making a real and significant contribution, be it through their social reproductive labour as carers, parents and/or through informal support provided to wider networks of family, friends and neighbours.

The evidence from this research reinforced the extent to which the work of parenting and caring for children (especially young children) is time intensive and demanding, often leaving parents with little time for other activity. Anthony explains:

... at the moment my daughter, she’s at playschool but she’s only in playschool for three hours a day; I, I do, I do sixteen hours a week for her. So, do you know what I mean, to do anything, by the time I drop her off and get, you’ve got no time left really. (Anthony, BC)

Anthony’s description of feeling time-pressed is likely to be common to many families – but we find it significant that the policy framing around the Benefit Cap (which his household is subject to) routinely and deliberately conceals both the engagement in paid work and the parenting work of parents like Anthony. The Benefit Cap has been constantly framed and defended as a mechanism to ‘activate’ people into work. There is an important issue here around choice; specifically how far policy supports households to make their *own* choices about balancing paid work and reproductive labour, or makes choices *for* them, classifying them as ‘workless’ and/or requiring them to secure additional employment under threat of financial penalty.

Rachel described the intensive reproductive labour she does, as both a parent and a carer for her disabled husband, who is no longer able to sustain paid employment;

[Husband] and I both used to work; [Husband] was a long-distance lorry driver so would go to work Monday morning and we wouldn’t see him until Saturday afternoon, and I was a teaching assistant at a primary school. [Husband] then injured his back so he had to stop working; I carried on working until it became impractical. So there are days where

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[Husband] is in a wheelchair and so he needs help with day-to-day stuff, there are other days when he can't get out of bed. And we also have two autistic children who need a lot of looking after; so I had to give up my job to become [a] carer; and that's sort of where we are. (Rachel, 2CL)

Alongside the devalued work of social reproduction, participants often described additional *new* forms of work, generated directly by the hardship created by the Two-Child Limit and/or the Benefit Cap. Both policies sever the link between need and entitlement within social security provision (Patrick et al, 2023), and in doing so, reduce household income and thus routinely generate *more* time-intensive work; managing incredibly tight budgets, visiting multiple supermarkets to secure the best deals, modifying food shopping, researching prices, collecting vouchers and supplementing supermarket shops with food bank and food larder provision (Patrick et al, 2023). Melissa explained how she was shopping almost daily for food to try and reduce food waste, and keep to her tight budget:

I don't do weekly shops now, I, because I find that a lot of food goes to waste if I do that. I just, what I do is, when I go to school, when I'm coming home, because I go past, I, my school's next to Lidl, which is quite cheap for some stuff, and then I go past ASDA every day [...] So I'll call in there and get a few bits and then bring 'em home and I just do that every couple of days because I find if I do a big shop it just goes to waste. So I might like to do meal plans and just go in and get the meal for that day and the next day, if you know what I mean? (BC and 2CL)

The work of feeding families on diminishing incomes extended beyond general 'shopping around' to more intensive budgeting work: ruthless advance meal planning, shopping daily for reduced items, making constant calculations around cost and quantity:

I'll get food shopping this week for teatime, right, for seven days we're gonna have this, this and that, but try and sort of cut back on things that, we think right, we'll just budgeting really, you know, like rather than making something that would cost you more money. Say, for example, I was making shepherd's pie for tea; your mince costs money,

then you've got, then you've got all your little ingredients, well rather than that you could have beans on toast, and that's cheap, that kind of thing. We sort of shuffled about a bit with; we, we did eat, it's just knowing what kinda food and how much it will cost, you know, for a family tea. You know how some people add up at home and think right, tonight's tea will cost us that much between seven people or something. So it was just budgeting. (Asma, 2CL)

The parents in this study demonstrated their entrepreneurial practices and their 'thriftiness', finding this constant budgeting, planning, adjusting, and recalculating time-intensive and stressful:

... so now, I mean I wasn't a big fan of spreadsheets (laughs) but that's me best friend now, I think (laughs) is doing a spreadsheet just (Q laughs) to, to work things out because I don't have that worry of, worried about food and stuff, but now I do have that kind of bit of stress like, you know, and to do the food shop and where I can shop [...] So yeah, it's difficult. I mean we're, we're doing fine [...] as a mum you just, just always want the best for 'em don't you? (Jyoti, BC)

Participants regularly went to great lengths to *avoid* spending money. Amanda explained how she had started using second-hand cloth nappies, reusable sanitary towels, and home-sewn hair scrunchies:

I've learnt to do everything to be more self-sufficient; like I'll make my own pitta bread, I'll make my own bread, we bake our own birthday cakes, we do everything to not spend money. (BC and 2CL)

The work generated by increased hardship is physical, emotional, and almost inevitably corrosive to mental health. It regularly necessitated seeking out additional help from charities, and from families and friends, which Jessica described as 'exhausting':

I'm constantly trying to chase up, you know, constantly ringing my worker for a food bank and (laughs) sorry, yeah, constantly trying to get bills down and, and looking for bargains online and (laughs) it's just, it's, it's quite exhausting, actually. (Jessica, BC and 2CL)

There is a sense of intensity and relentlessness across the longitudinal data in these efforts to stretch inadequate budgets and to survive; this work often felt futile, especially given the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis and rapidly escalating prices. Rachel described her constant efforts to manage financially, alongside her sense that there was simply nothing more to do, no further coping strategies to try:

I already shop at ALDIs and Lidl and that so I can't really go much (laughs) cheaper really. I've got an approved food app on my phone, which is a website that does cheaper food...So literally I, I can't do anything else, so yeah, we're sort of stuck (laughs).

I mean the kids were laughing at me on Monday cos I was actually hanging the washing out in the rain, cos I was like "Well I need it out of the way (laughs) you know, it's just got to go." So yeah, not putting the dryer on, not putting the oven on, we're not, you know, anything that's being cooked is being cooked pretty much on the hob and, yeah, just not going out. (2CL)

These efforts to 'make ends meet' are absent in policy narratives about welfare reform, that sometimes suggest hardship is surmountable through better financial planning. Parents in this study were already forensically planning every penny of their budget. Living in hardship was another kind of 'work'; repetitive, endless, emotionally taxing, unproductive, and frequently described as impossible and futile. This manifested in efforts to ration things like energy usage, regularly 'going without' and prioritising children, as discussed by Ashley:

I don't know how to explain it ... everything you watch. I'm constantly turning the lights off ... If they put the electric heater on I'm like five minutes and that's it, turn it off. Like I'm actually going mad when they leave when I see a light left on cos it's like the

electric's gonna go off ... And we have sat there, the electric's gone off, and ... we've all got our phones out with our lights on so we can see (laughs). (Ashley, BC)

Unsurprisingly, the work and everyday realities of getting by on insufficient income, and constantly trying to protect their children from the impacts of this hardship, took a real toll on parents' mental health, creating a constant backdrop of anxiety, worry and uncertainty. This came through repeatedly in interviews:

... as it stands at the moment I think I've got a shortfall of about four hundred pounds every month; the only way I'm making ends meet is because I am quite good financially. Basically kids' presents, birthdays, clothes, things that they need, I am putting on catalogues and I am then paying the catalogues off with credit cards and then putting balance transfers onto other credit cards to avoid the interest. So I am quite money savvy so I'm doing everything I can but it is a constant moving the goalpost, it's exhausting. (Melissa, BC and 2CL)

Melissa's account, like all the parents interviewed for this study, was saturated in descriptions of the damage caused by poverty which is designed into this policymaking apparatus. What this evidence shows is that policies nominally designed to incentivise work and/or control fertility – and disproportionately targeted at larger families – were, in practice, generating elevated and constant hardship, requiring more time-intensive and emotionally taxing budgetary work that for many respondents felt ultimately futile. We see it as no accident that this decade of welfare reform has been characterised by both an obsession with 'making work pay' - pushing people into evermore precarious and exploitative kinds of waged work - and an accompanying, steady dismantling of the very public services that once supported family life ('making families do more unpaid work'). These shifts around paid work and unpaid work are intimately connected, part of an anti-welfarist ideological terrain that treats families as potential labour units to be propelled towards employment and as privatised machines for social reproduction; ideally requiring little, if any, collective input or resourcing from social security systems.

Conclusion: Hardworking families and welfare solidarity

In 2012, Clarke and Newman (2012) set out the ‘alchemy of austerity’, a ‘magical thinking’ that presented austerity and the decimation of social security provision as economically necessary and with scope to *benefit* those affected. More than a decade on, this ‘alchemy’ remains potent. The Two-Child Limit and Benefit Cap are defended via fantastical representations of individual lives (Patrick et al, 2023). The enduring power of this alchemy can be seen in the persistent refusal of the Labour government to commit to abolishing these poverty-producing policies.

The most comprehensive independent evaluation of both the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit found that neither policy was succeeding in their stated objectives; whether ‘incentivising work’ or leading to increased employment for affected individuals, or significant reductions in fertility (Patrick et al, 2023). Rather, the primary impacts of both policies have been simply to push families further into poverty, forcing parents to make almost impossible decisions about how to ‘get by’ with ever more thinly stretched budgets, in ways that are harmful to them and their children (2023).

In this article, we have added to this evidence base by documenting how the Two-Child Limit and the Benefit Cap are underpinned by, enact and deepen simplistic and problematic understandings of ‘work’ and seek to ‘activate’ and incentivise them. We have problematised the stigmatising mythology about larger families. The accounts that emerged out of this research reveal that, far from being ‘workless’, financially incompetent or irresponsible, parents raising larger families are inventive, resourceful and industrious. The anti-welfare political narrative of the preceding decade continually pivots around a celebration of ‘hardworking families’, narrowly conceived as those in the paid labour market, who are ideally earning enough to not require any additional support from the state through the social security system. But as this rich dataset demonstrates, larger families *are* working incredibly hard. They are doing the significant work of parenting multiple children, as well as the significant additional work generated by the hardships of an insufficient income. While this reproductive labour is rendered invisible, is undervalued, and may even be derided as a strategy to evade ‘proper work’, it is crucial work; world-building, and future-realising.

The extensive reproductive labour that larger families in poverty are undertaking does not in itself set them apart from other family types, but we argue that their intensive and important labour warrants emphasis, *precisely because* this family type is so routinely demonised as ‘inactive’, ‘passive’, and ‘profligate’ and as needing corrective state intervention to incentivise

and activate them. Anti-welfare commonsense around larger families pivots on an imagined ‘work inactivity’ (and imagined ‘reproductive hyperactivity’) that we want to unpick and challenge. The social reproduction critique that we have drawn in this article offers a valuable conceptual framework and vocabulary for rethinking and interrogating the narrow definitions of ‘work’ that have been prioritised throughout this period of welfare reform. We propose that this vocabulary also helps re-imagine social security as a dynamic system for resourcing and protecting people and families from hardship as they move in and out of periods of additional need and constraint. Larger families comprising of three or more children face higher needs, more complex employment constraints, and over a longer period than smaller families, and are thus more exposed to the harms caused by the dangerous and pervasive mythology and its accompanying policy enactment (see Stewart et al., 2021).

The wilful denial and evasion of the extensive work that larger families are doing has served as the underpinning rationale for arbitrarily severing the connection between their assessed needs and their social security entitlement. ‘Welfare’ here is mobilised as a tool, not to provide support or security, but as a rationing mechanism that can, if needed, effect punishment. This is a muscular state then, that is using its power to intentionally immiserate households. The roll-out, and sustaining, of these policies, without wider public challenge and outrage, speaks to and demonstrates the power and persuasion of anti-welfare commonsense. It marks the defeat, perhaps, of feminist movements that demanded reproductive labour be prioritised and valued, that demanded wages for housework, and that called for the affirmation of a diversity of household types (Fernandes et al, 2023; Schwartz, 2025).

We propose that the wider processes of (mis)classification and concealment around work and reproductive labour as discussed in this article effectively reinforce the ‘welfare’ mythmaking that inhibits the development of more positive, progressive and solidaristic approaches to social security, and in turn connect with the political reluctance to commit to a reversal of these policies. We close this article by calling for a much more ambitious reappraisal of social security in the name of national renewal, which reimagines it as a central mechanism through which essential social reproduction work might be supported and resourced through a principle of universal entitlement. There is a need to create spaces for people to make choices about how they balance engagement in the formal labour market and social reproductive labour; choices which can be made possible by a more expansive and generous welfare state.

Commented [RP9]: Added this re theoretically underpowered point - but think you can build on a bit more?

We are writing at a moment when more solidaristic understandings around work and social security may just be possible, precisely because of the extraordinary crises of the political present. While this article has focused on the experiences of larger families and policies that advance caps, limits and other deteriorations of welfare state obligations, it has clear, wider salience with social security policy as it pertains to all of us. People heading families, of all sizes, will recognise the futile work of enduring on evermore thinly stretched household budgets. All people engaged in reproductive labour, whether that is in households with one child or with ten children, will feel resonance with the voices of the participants in this research, who set out the incompatibility of this work with the demands of a precarious labour market. Our hope is that centring the everyday experiences of larger families demonstrates the urgent need for a new, radically different policy approach. We hope that it will help reanimate challenges around ‘welfare dependency’ made by feminist thinkers like Eleanor Rathbone a century ago, and by anti-work and post-work scholars and thinkers today (Gotby, 2023; Hester and Srnicek, 2023; Segal, 2023), who recognise that the language of ‘dependency’ is used to raise suspicion and distrust for periods of need that are a quite normal, temporary, feature of family life. These accounts can contribute to a pro-welfare counter-narrative and help incubate popular demand for decent, liveable social security. In this effort, there is great power and potential in doing more to promote the voices of those undertaking this labour, supporting their full inclusion in policymaking debates and processes (Patrick, 2020; Power & Patrick, 2025). We insist on a *celebration* of the very hard work undertaken by larger families – and by extension, all families – and on new kinds of social security imaginaries that recognise and legitimate reproductive labour and secure resourcing of families, of all sizes, according to their needs.

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Table One: Demographics of participants

Socio-demographic characteristics		No. people
Area	Bradford	20
	Leeds	1
	York	4
	Tower Hamlets	10
	Hackney	2
	Greenwich	8
Policy affected by	Two-child limit	21
	Benefit cap	12
	Both	12
Length of time affected by policy	Since March 2020	6
	Before March 2020	39
Gender	Female	39
	Male	6
Ethnicity	Black African	9
	Black Caribbean	1
	Pakistani	7
	Bangladeshi	7
	Arabic	1
	Black Caribbean and White	1
	White	19
Relationship status	Single	29
	Partnered	16
Number of children	3	20
	4	12
	5	8
	6	2
	7+	3
Ages of children	All below 12 years	21
	Some 12 years and above	24
Employment status	Employed/employed partner	13
	Unemployed	32