

UNITED KINGDOM Country Summary

Introduction and Overview

Despite its early pioneering role as a welfare state, Britain is clearly a social policy laggard with regard to responses to the gender role and other family changes of the latter part of the 20th century. In its earlier move toward economic liberalism in the Thatcher era, and its stress on means-tested rather than universal benefits, it demonstrates its membership in what have been called the Anglo-American "family of nations" (Castles, 1993; Ringen, S., et al., 1997). Following the US. in recent years Britain moved to increase its labor flexibility, deregulate wages, contain social spending, increase privatization, and reduced its unemployment rate almost to the OECD average. The privacy of the family is a traditional and well-established core value in British culture. The assumption continues that government should keep its role limited with regard to families, intervening only in situations of crisis or dysfunction.

A report on family policy in Britain begins with the not uncommon statement that "Britain does not have and has never had, an explicitly formulated policy with regard to families and children. Over time, however, British governments have adopted a range of measures directly or indirectly targeted at families that have had a significant impact on their standard of living. Mothers and children constitute a major group of welfare beneficiaries" (HM-Treasury, 1999). Moreover, there has been no coherent or consistent policy regarding children or families with children; and children's needs have rarely been the predominant factor in decision-making. Many would insist, furthermore, that child policy in Britain has focused on poor children far more than it has on children in general, and on dependent, handicapped and troubled children even more than it has on poor children.

Britain's implicit family policy is largely an antipoverty policy, stressing social assistance and means-tested benefits as its primary strategy. Defining those in poverty as households with income less than half the national average after housing costs, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) says that Britain has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the western world (BBC Fact Sheet, 5/31/01). In the mid-1990s, Britain had the highest poverty rate among the European Union countries (Bradbury & Jantii, 1999). Its poverty rate among children was only exceeded by the U.S. and Russia; and it had the highest rate among those countries in which child poverty rates were higher than poverty rates among the elderly (Roberts, 1999).

Its goals have been extended in recent years, as family issues grew in political importance under the Labor government. Among the major concerns now are: income inequality which has emerged as the highest in Britain in the EU; the social exclusion of children and families; the prevention of juvenile delinquency and youth crime; the promotion of better parenting; and a relatively recent focus on encouraging work by lone mothers and in reducing the caseload of Britain's social assistance program ("Income Support").

The Labor Government has made the eradication of child poverty by 2019 (halving child poverty by 2010) one of its central objectives. It is focusing on reducing child poverty through support to low-income families, and an emphasis on work and work-related benefits. Current multidimensional strategies tackle child poverty through education, targeted interventions to

support families with young children, and by supporting innovation and good practices in the voluntary sector. Britain has begun to implement a series of policies that reform the tax and benefit system in its efforts to reduce child poverty and to increase employment by making work pay. The Government's strategy includes:

- Ensuring a decent family income, with work for those who can and extra support for those who cannot;
- Access to excellent public services - including a world class education system for all, ensuring that children from poor backgrounds have the skills and education they need to break the cycle of disadvantage;
- Targeted interventions such as the Sure Start Programme and Children's Fund, for those with additional needs and at key stages in life; and
- Harnessing the power and expertise of the voluntary and community sectors, providing support for innovation and good practice, and fostering a strategic partnership with these sectors to fight child poverty.

Reform efforts began in the late 1990s with increases to the universal Child Benefit since 1997 and the introduction of the Working Families' Tax Credit (WFTC). The WFTC targets the largest gains on families with children, and is similar to, but more generous than the U.S. Earned Income Tax Credit. Following this, the Children's Tax Credit was enacted in 2001 which targets lower and middle income families and more than doubles married couple tax allowances. The next step in the reform is the introduction in 2003 of an integrated child credit, which would bring together the different strands of support for children in the universal Child Benefit, Working Families' Tax Credit, Income Support/Jobseeker's Allowance and the Children's Tax Credit, to create a seamless system of financial support for children. At the same time, The Government plans to introduce an employment tax credit that complements the new child credit. The employment tax credit would be payable through the wage packet, and potentially would be available not only to families with children, as in the WFTC, but extended to groups without children as well.

According to the British national expert member of the European Observatory on Family Matters, Ceridwen Roberts, among the family policy issues causing most political or public concern now are:

- The high incidence of family and child poverty -- one in three children in Britain lives below the poverty line (below 50 percent of median income).
- Marriage and relationship stability: High levels of divorce are accompanied by a growing incidence of cohabitation and extra-marital childbearing.
- Balancing home and work life. Men in Britain work the largest hours in Europe.
- Teenage pregnancy -- the highest rate in Europe and not falling significantly. Most teenage mothers (85 percent) are unmarried and a very high proportion are financially dependent on the State" (Family Policy Studies Centre, 2000b).

Social benefits spent on family and children in 1998 were slightly higher than the EU average, 8.6 percent compared to 8.3 percent.

Government Agencies

According to a recent report by the British member of the European Family Observatory, the government has confronted the problem of policy fragmentation across multiple agencies by establishing a Ministerial Group on the Family in 1998, chaired at a senior level by the Home Secretary, on which ministers from all relevant Departments sit (OECD, 2002). This is an effort at addressing family policy issues holistically. This Committee has led to the publication of the first ever consultation document on family policy, "Supporting Families", published in November 1998 and stimulating extensive public interest. The document contains a record of the government's main initiatives for families since taking office and identifies areas for further work.

The relevant ministries now are: the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education and Employment, the Department for Education and Skills, and the Department of Inland Revenue.

On June 8, 2001 a new Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was formed through the merger of the former Department of Social Security (DSS) with the employment side of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). (The Education side was transferred to the new Department for Education and Skills (DfES)). The new DWP is responsible for employment, equality, benefits, pensions, and child support. The new DWP's priorities are to link employment services and Income Support benefits (social assistance) and to support equality and social inclusion for all.

Responsibility for Child Benefit (child allowances) (CB) has been transferred to the Department of Inland Revenue (Treasury/Tax)

Demographic and Other Social Trends

UK is among the large European countries, with a population of 59.8 million in 2000, slightly larger in size as France and Italy but smaller than Germany (Glennerster, 1997).

Britain is an aging society, with almost 16 percent of its population aged 65 and older while children under 15 account for 19 percent. The British family is following the same pattern as that of the other advanced industrialized countries: smaller families, fewer marriages, more divorces, more cohabitation, declining birthrates, more out-of-wedlock births, later age at first birth, and more working mothers. The British fertility rate in 2000 was 1.6. Marriage and childbearing are increasingly separate with the illegitimacy rate increasing dramatically from 12 percent in 1980 to about 33 percent in 1996 and close to 40 percent by the end of the century. An article in the New York Times (1/15/01) reported that 51.2 percent of all new births were to unwed mothers. Two-thirds of all extra-marital births are to women under 25 years of age. However, both parents register most of these births. Very young children are increasingly likely to be living with cohabiting rather than legally married parents. Although Britain's teen non-marital birth rate is much lower than that of the U.S., it is the highest in the EU, by far. Lone parents constitute almost 20 percent of all families with children. Never-married mothers are the largest and most rapidly growing group constituting 42 percent of all lone mothers in 1997. Ethnic and racial

minorities, although still a relatively small proportion of the population, are becoming more significant. In 1997, 67 percent of married mothers were in the labor force but 60 percent of these worked part time (Kamerman, 1998). Labor force participation of lone mothers is significantly lower, at 41 percent. In 1999, the employment rate of women with a child under age 5 was 53 percent while the rate for mothers with older children was over 70 percent.

The British government's strategy towards single parents is to halve the rate of conceptions among the under 18 year olds by 2010 and to reduce the risk of long term social exclusion by getting more teen parents into education, training, and employment (European Observatory, 2003; MISSOC, 2002).

Social Protection

The full flowering of the British welfare state was left for World War II and the development of the Beveridge Plan. The Plan proposed an integrated, contributory, flat-rate and universal social insurance system covering old age, retirement, disability, unemployment, sickness, and family allowances in addition to a national health service and full employment policies. Although the full proposal was never implemented, a significant part was. It shaped the British welfare state from that time on and left its mark on present British social policy.

Britain spends about 26 percent of GDP on social protection (1998), almost equal to the EU 15 average (26.6 percent). Of this, 8.6 percent was spent on family benefits, slightly above the EU average (8.3 percent). Britain spent about 2.4 percent of GDP on its family benefits and services that same year (Bertelsmann Foundation). Britain has by far the highest rate of social assistance use among the European 15. A minimum wage (a new policy for Britain) is set at a level similar to the US minimum. Of all British social policies, family (child) benefits have varied the most in British income transfer policies. The value of child benefits has never been as high as when they were first established. The economic situation of children deteriorated especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Family benefits never had the financial, popular, political support given pensions or the National Health Service. Only in the Blair administration has there been a significant effort at announcing a child policy agenda, and even then there has been concern about the declining support for lone mothers.

In short, as LSE economist and social policy scholar Howard Glennerster (1997) writes, "Distinctively less generous than the Scandinavian or continental European countries, the UK system of welfare is much more dependent on the market and income tested benefits but keeps its highly developed national minimum safety net and national responsibilities for health and education. It may be called "a hard core welfare state" (Barnes, et al., 2000).

Child, Youth and Family Policies

Maternity, Paternity, Parental, and Family Leaves

All pregnant employees are entitled to 18 weeks (up to 11 weeks can be taken before birth) of job-protected, unpaid maternity leave, regardless of the length of employment. Employees who have worked continuously for at least one year, are entitled to an additional period of maternity

leave that lasts until 29 weeks after the birth of the child. During the initial 18 weeks of maternity leave, women receive 90 percent of earnings for the first six weeks, and then at a low flat rate for the remaining 12 weeks that is financed by payroll taxes. For those who do not qualify because they left their jobs or are self-employed, a parallel benefit, the Maternity Allowance is available at the lower benefit level. These benefits are all tax-exempt.

Parental leaves were established December 15, 1999, as a result of an EU directive and supplement the maternity leave policy. Either parent having or adopting a baby and having at least one year's qualifying service with their employer, is entitled to an unpaid, job-protected leave which can last up to 13 weeks. The leave can be taken at any time within the first five years of the child's life.

Family Leave: In addition and at the same time, a new right to "Time Off for Dependents" was introduced, to permit workers to take time off for family emergencies (e.g. an ill child or spouse).

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

In Britain (like the U.S.), infant schools stressing education, were established in the early 19th century, expanded rapidly, and then largely disappeared to be replaced later by part-day kindergartens. They provided an "inferior" form of care and education to the children of poor working women and covered 20 percent of three-year-olds and 40 percent of 4 year olds in 1851 and 43 percent of 2-5 year olds by 1901. They constituted a voluntary but free educational service for all young children from the age of 2 or 3, if parents chose to avail themselves of it (Family Policy Studies Centre, 2000a).

In contrast, middle and upper class children were cared for at-home by "nannies" or their equivalent, supplemented increasingly, beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century, by kindergartens organized on the model of the German, Friederich Froebel (as occurred in the Nordic countries, the U.S., Canada, and several other European countries). The failure to improve the quality of infant schools for children of the working class, or to integrate these programs with the new educational philosophy of the kindergarten, and the inclusion of 5 year olds in primary schools, contributed to the decline in the popularity of nursery education in 20th century England. One other result was the continuity of a pattern of fragmentation between early education as an enrichment program and day care as a "protective" service. It took almost another century for there to be significant increase in coverage and a renewed effort at integrating the two parallel streams.

At present, the British ECEC system is fragmented as to auspice and program, diversified regarding philosophy, curriculum, and program focus, very inadequate as to supply and of mixed quality at best. Recently, there has been an administrative shift in auspice in some locations from social welfare to education and funding cuts by the central government to the local authorities. ECEC is divided between education and social welfare with preschool programs under the Department of Education and Local Education Authorities and day care centers or nurseries and child minders under the Department of Health and the Local Authority Social Services Departments. Preschool is still viewed as a program of enrichment, preparing middle class children for school from the age of 2½ or 3 while day care programs serve children in need: poor, deprived, immigrant, neglected, abused and disabled children. Compulsory school begins

at age 5 and most four-year-olds are already in school. The Blair administration has announced a goal of full coverage of four-year olds and a doubling by 2002 of places for the 3s, but there is little discussion regarding the expansion of programs for younger children. There has been some development of a compensatory and integrated early childhood program ("Sure Start") that some compare with the U.S. Headstart—or Early Headstart—program. Although a significant proportion of the 3-year-olds are in preschool programs, most are part-day and part-week programs. A small group of children who are "at risk" or have problems of various sorts are in social welfare day care. Only a small proportion of the under 3s are in out-of-home care and they are largely in playgroups or cared for by child minders (family day care providers).

There is also interest in raising math and English achievement levels for 7 year olds.

The Labor Government has also established a new child care tax credit which is described below as part of the Working Family Tax Credit.

Family and Child Allowances

Child Benefit (CB) is a universal (non-income-tested), tax-free cash benefit provided for each child in a family, including the first. The benefit is available until a child is age 16 (or 19 if at school) and for up to 4 months for the 16/17 year old youth who have left school and are looking for a job or training program. The benefit is financed out of general revenue, and, since 1992, has been indexed to wages. However, its value, as a percentage of social benefits or average wages has not been maintained since first established at the end of World War II. Since 1991 CB has been paid at a higher rate for the first child, and at the same flat rate for all others. The CB package in the early 1990s, provided to a single mother with two children, was worth about 8 percent of average male wages and 13.4 percent of average female wages. CB for a two-child, two-parent family was worth about 6.5 percent of average male earnings in 1992. It compares well with the other European countries with regard to small families (those with one or two children) but poorly with regard to larger families. In two-parent families, the benefit is paid to the mother, thus becoming (at least in the UK discussion) a kind of "mothers wage."

Current reforms seek to unify child and family supports by building upon the universal Child Benefit and tying additional government benefits to parental employment.

Child and Family Tax Benefits

The filing unit for income taxes is the individual, with husbands and wives being taxed independently.

The Working Family Tax Credit, established in October, 1999 and replacing the earlier Family Credit for low-income working families, is a refundable tax credit for families in which at least one parent works at least 16 hours a week or more. It is designed to "make work pay" for families by providing a wage (or earnings) supplement and by reducing the poverty trap and the lack of affordable childcare. It is modeled after the US Earned Income Tax Credit. It guarantees working families a minimum income above and beyond the level of the minimum wage; and as a tax credit is expected to reduce the stigma associated with claiming welfare. It is paid to the main wage-earner and where men are in that position, they can choose to make their wives the payees. It is expected that about half of the beneficiaries will be women. It also includes a provision for a

new child care tax credit to provide help for working families with moderate incomes. This credit meets up to 70 percent of child care costs (in centers or family day care providers) up to a maximum of about \$160 for a family with one child and \$240 a week for those with two or more—far more generous than the U.S. Dependent Care Tax Credit. It is expected to benefit about 1.5 million working families with children, a very significant number, and will be administered by the tax department.

A new children's tax credit was introduced in April 2001. Directed at 4.5 million families with children, it will replace the married couples' and related allowances and be worth up to 416 £ (\$615) a year, coupled with child benefits. Families with one child could be receiving up to \$1,800 a year in benefits. The children's tax credit is phased out for higher-income families.

In April 2003, the Working Families' Tax Credit, Disabled Person's Tax Credit, Job-Seekers' Allowance, and Children's Tax Credit will be replaced by two new tax credits, and will be administered along with Child Benefit, through the Department of Inland Revenue. These new tax credits will be called Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit and will provide support to a wider range of people through a single framework. The Child Tax Credit is for families with at least one child. It is paid at a higher rate to families with at least one child under the age of one (known as the baby element); and to families whose child has a severe disability. The Working Tax Credit is for employed persons who are single; a married couple living together; or cohabitating. The level of the credit varies according to your household status, presence of children, number of hours worked, child care costs, and if either resident parent is disabled.

Child Support

Child support is the payment of financial support for a child by the non-custodial parent. Britain was late among the major industrialized countries in enacting policies designed to strengthen child support provisions. A recent report stresses the importance of child support and of the debates and proposed reform. . "The original motivation for reform in both the UK and the US came from the growing number of lone parents and their increasing reliance on welfare payments...In the UK, widespread discontent with the way in which earlier reforms in 1993 have worked has renewed pressure for further change" (Barnes et al., 2000). One of the main concerns was the low proportion of welfare recipients who were receiving child support (30 percent) and the low level of support paid by those who paid any.

The 1993 legislation established the Child Support Agency (CSA), required that those receiving welfare payments use the Agency for the collection of support, and permitted others to do so if they wished. The vast majority of the CSA caseload consists of those claiming benefits. Substantial amendments to the original legislation were introduced in 1995 and again in 2000, following "a huge public outcry about the effects of the Act, partly from lone parents and their organizations, but mainly from non-resident parents affected by the policy" (Family Studies Policy Center, 2000a). The basic structure for the government's reform scheme were established in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act of 2000. Under this Act, non-resident parents whose income is £200 per week or more, will be required to contribute: 15 percent of net income for one child; 20 percent of net income for two children; 25 percent of net income for three or more children. Those with income of less than £200 per week will pay reduced rates of maintenance. Non-resident parents with net income of £100 a week or less, and those on

specified benefits (including income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support) will pay a flat rate of £5 per week. The calculation will take account of all children in a non-resident parent's current family, including stepchildren. The net income used to calculate maintenance will be reduced by 15 percent for one child in the current family, 20 percent for two children and 25 percent for three or more children.

Other Child Conditioned Income Transfers

Children are entitled to receive certain standard income transfers, including: dependents' benefits for the children of old age pensioners; dependent's benefits for the children of a disabled worker; special benefits for a disabled child; Survivor's benefits for the guardian of a minor child.

Of particular importance, however, is the Income Support benefit, a cash, means-tested benefit designed to support low-income individuals (both elderly and young) and families when earnings are absent or social insurance benefits are low. Its roots are in British Poor Law and it was first established as a national public assistance scheme in 1948. It is available regardless of marital or family status to low-income individuals aged 18 or older (or 16 if pregnant or if they have a child). It offers a national, uniform minimum income worth almost half an average female wage, which makes it especially important for lone-mother families. The Blair administration is currently attempting to encourage poor lone mothers with children aged 5 and older to take jobs rather than claim welfare, but it is not requiring they do this.

Child and Adolescent Health

Britain emphasizes child health policies in the context of its overall National Health Services and provides an exemplary home health visiting service that is targeted on young children and their families (along with the elderly and the handicapped). Child Health services in England and Wales are delivered largely through the National Health Service (NHS), which has responsibility for general practitioners, community health, and hospital services -- and the DWP where income transfers for children and their families play a critical role in supporting child health. NHS services are universal, available to the whole population regardless of income, and delivered for the most part to all children below the age of 16 (or 19 if in full time school). Since its inception, the NHS has improved the quantity and quality of child health services significantly. Child health care has remained divided between community care and hospital care, and between prevention and treatment.

Children gain access to the health care system when they are born, through automatic notification of their birth to the local health visitor (HV) who is responsible for the geographic area where the family lives. HVs are registered nurses with additional public health training and are the key individuals in health care for very young children, providing health education and preventive care, visiting new mothers and babies at home usually within 10 days of the birth, and then at frequent intervals during their early years. It has recently begun to target its longer term services on higher risk family situations. In addition, responding to cultural diversity is becoming more important as well as working with ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse families with very young children.

Health visiting has been and continues to be at the heart of the British child health service.

School-Aged Children: Policies and Programs

Despite the emphasis on mother's employment, after-school child care in Britain remains a fragmented and under-developed program. The government made major strides in recent years - the number of out-of-school clubs increased to 4,900 in 2001, an 11 percent increase from 2000 alone. This increase reflects the government's pledge in 2000 to create an additional 600,000 childcare places as part of a campaign to encourage more lone parents back to work. The extra places are due to come on stream by 2004 and are supported with increased funding for out-of-school clubs and child minders.

There has also been a similar increase in the number holiday schemes for children. In 2001 there were 12,900 holiday programs, a 10 percent increase from the previous year. Holiday schemes provide care for school-aged children during school holidays.

Housing

Housing benefit is a means-tested, non-taxable benefit (both income and asset-tested), which provides help with paying the rent for private or public housing for people with low incomes. A Council Tax Benefit is a means-tested benefit which provides help towards the tax raised by local government. For those receiving social assistance (Income Support, or welfare) housing benefit is the full amount of the rent and council Tax Benefit is the full amount of the tax. For those not receiving assistance, the housing benefit is a portion of the rent linked to the individual's income.

Youth

Young people under age 25 or a young lone parent aged less than 18 may qualify for certain benefits more easily than a couple. They receive a priority for housing benefits, are entitled to free health care, and can qualify for welfare payments from the age of 18, or 16 if pregnant or if they have a child; these policies are viewed by some as creating a work disincentive and an incentive to teens to get pregnant.

Child Benefit is available for up to 4 months for 16 -17 year old youth who have left school and are looking for a job or training program.

There is strong interest in reducing teen pregnancy and the government has announced a goal of halving the rate by 2010.

There is interest in reducing school exclusion and drop-out rates among 16-18 year olds from low-income families, who are not in education, employment, or training, and improving participation and achievement in learning. Two new initiatives (ConneXions and Educational Maintenance Allowances) have been established to achieve this by providing financial assistance and other services to these youths.

The United Kingdom was one of the fourteen countries participating in the OECD thematic review, From Initial Education to Working Life - Making Transitions Work. For more detail on the transition to working life in the U.K., see OECD's background report on the United Kingdom. Links to both reports are available from the Clearinghouse website.

Click here to view in PDF format a table on the ages at which children and youth are legally entitled to carry out a series of acts in EU countries.

Reconciliation of Work and Family Life

One major part of the British Employment Relations Act, implemented in October 1999, is a policy package designed to encourage family-friendly employment policies. This package includes regulations designed to eliminate discrimination against part-time employees, make part-time workers eligible for a pro-rated portion of all social, non-wage benefits, and to encourage flexible working time arrangements. There is also an effort to expand eligibility for maternity and parental leaves and to establish a right of employees to reasonable time off for family emergencies.

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