



# **Why we won't turn the tide on child poverty with employment alone**

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## Foreword

Child poverty in the UK is high and rising, at huge cost both to individual lives and to society. Without action, the number of children living in poverty could rise from 4.5 to 4.7 million by the end of this parliament. Against this context, the UK Government have promised to be 'laser focused' on the issue, and are developing a Child Poverty Strategy, due to be published towards the end of this year.

Nearly all would agree that we need policy action to drive child poverty rates down, but there are some erroneous assumptions about the steps necessary to get us there. These assumptions could get in the way of delivering a successful child poverty strategy. Specifically, there is a widely-held view that increasing parental employment is the best (perhaps even the only) way to deliver reductions in child poverty.

The mantra that 'work is the best route out of poverty' resonates with many people, both because it appeals to commonsense ideas, and because it chimes with wider normative viewpoints around individual responsibility, hard work, and individualistic drivers of poverty. But it is a misleading claim, and not only because of the prevalence of in-work poverty. In this briefing, we share new analysis of past policy successes in reducing child poverty, alongside modelling of the future impact of any employment changes on poverty rates. These tell the same consistent story: changes in parental employment, whilst important, will never deliver change to child poverty rates on the scale we need to see. We can only get significant and lasting reductions in child poverty by investing in our social security system. There really is no other way.

Why is this the case? First, wages do not adjust for household size. Many working parents will need some financial support to help with extra costs while there are dependent children at home. Social security is an effective mechanism for responding to these increased needs. Cuts to social security support for children over the last decade have contributed to rises in in-work poverty - making it harder for families to escape poverty through work.

Second, parental employment has already increased substantially over the last two decades, and this means that room for further growth is quite small. The vast majority of parents who are not working, or who work a small number of hours, face real and substantial employment barriers, including very young or disabled children, health difficulties, distance from job opportunities and the interaction between these factors. While effective tailored employment support can help some parents overcome these barriers, it often comes at high per-person cost, and at best will still only reach a minority. There will always be many parents for whom paid

work, or increasing hours, is not a realistic option, at least not right now. The financial situation of those families is a core determinant of the overall child poverty rate.

To be clear, there are many excellent reasons government should help parents to balance paid work and care responsibilities. Well-designed support in this area could foster greater gender equality, increase productivity, generate higher tax revenues, and lower social security spending. But this on its own would not amount to an effective child poverty strategy. The centrepiece of an effective child poverty strategy must be adequate investment in financial support for families with children through the social security system.

## Introduction

"I don't want to feel guilty for doing a job I think I'm suited to, that is a job society needs, but at the same time pays so poorly I cannot afford to provide like others do for their kids."

*Herbie, April 2025 (Changing Realities research project)*

There is widespread recognition that child poverty scars those it affects and is detrimental to society at large, preventing children from living happy and fulfilled lives and restricting their life chances. This year, the UK Government will set out their ten-year strategy for tackling child poverty, the first strategy in many years. Much has been written about the contents of this strategy and its likely focus. In this briefing, we examine the potential contribution of employment to a successful strategy. More precisely, based on our own research and that of others, we set out the limitations to the role employment can play, challenging a widely-held assumption that increasing the rate and intensity of parental employment offers the most effective lever for action.

Above, Herbie, a parent living in poverty and working in childcare, sets out her own experiences of living on not enough. The persistence of in-work poverty is one reason that changes to employment is not the route to sustained, effective action on child poverty. But it tells only part of the story. We set out below why centring action on child poverty on increasing parental employment is misguided and will not work. We look both at lessons from the past, and predictions for the future, to show how changes to employment levels cannot do the heavy lifting needed to support the millions of children whose lives are currently harmed by poverty. And we set out the alternative approach needed, one that recognises the value of investing in social security as a force for good in supporting families to meet some of the additional needs that come with children.

## **Increasing parental employment is not as easy as it sounds - and it is expensive**

Parental employment rates have increased substantially over the last 25 years: more parents are in work, and more parents are working longer hours. Resolution Foundation [analysis](#) shows that 70% percent of families in poverty now have at least one adult in paid work, up from 49% at the turn of the century. Lone parent employment rose from 52% to 66% from the mid-2000s. More coupled households now also have two-earners - 77% of coupled mothers now work, up from 69% in the mid-2000s - and there has been an increase in the share of both lone and coupled mothers working full-time.

The government aims to build further on these figures, with an ambitious goal of [80%](#) employment across the working-age population. If achieved, this would make the UK one of the best-performing labour markets in the OECD. However, the successes in raising parental employment rates to date mean there are no easy wins in this area and further progress will be considerably more challenging. The vast [majority](#) (some 90%) of families living in poverty with no paid worker face at least one significant barrier to work. Half of these families have a child under five, nearly a third have three or more children, half have an adult with a disability or long-standing limiting health condition and nearly three in ten have a child with a disability. Many families face more than one of these barriers at once.

In a major recent [research study](#), we spoke to parents affected by the two-child limit and benefit cap. Many were already in work; those who were not set out the multiple, overlapping barriers to employment they experienced as well as - in some cases - a preference for prioritising the work of parenting when their children were very young. We walked alongside these families across four rounds of interviews and two years, and saw firsthand how circumstances prevented transitions into employment.

For example, Suzie has five children and was affected by both the two-child limit and the benefit cap after her husband died by suicide. She described how her solo childcare responsibilities and fragile mental health made securing employment impossible at the current time:

“It’s the childcare, it’s like obviously all the school runs, and then it’s like nursery as well, cos she only goes mornings as well ... Obviously my depression doesn’t help me, because some days I can be OK and some days I can just like I just don’t want to talk to anybody.”

*Suzie, July 2021 (Benefit Changes and Larger Families research project)*

Laura, a single mother of three, became affected by the two-child limit when she left her job because of a serious health condition. When we first met her, her youngest child was also being assessed for multiple health conditions. She told us:

"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, you know, 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... So I'd love to [go] back to work... I can't... [know] . . . what his needs are gonna be as he gets older, but right now he's, he needs full-time care."

*Laura, July 2021 (Benefit Changes and Larger Families research project)*

Because of these barriers, increasing the number of parents in work is not straightforward, and the costs of employment support for each extra job are estimated to be very high. According to [figures](#) from the Office for Budget Responsibility, four employment support programmes under the last government were projected to cost a total of £580 million per year over five years (£460 million net of expected welfare savings), and to increase employment by 40,000 over that time. Based on these numbers, it would cost £3.6 billion per year (£2.9 billion per year net) to move 200,000 parents into work over the four years remaining in this parliament – and several times that to approach the 80% target, which would require around 600,000 parents to enter work along with some 1.5 million others. In fact these projected costs are likely to be significant underestimates, both because they include the cost of individually tailored employment support but not the cost of childcare, and because costs are likely to increase as programmes try to reach people increasingly far from the labour market.

This landscape is very different than the scenario Labour faced last time they were in government. In a context of a low lone parent employment rate (and a growing economy) the New Deal for Lone Parents was able to make a significant difference relatively easily by investing in and supporting parents who were ready to make the transition into employment.

## **Increasing parental employment does less to reduce poverty than you might think**

Even if we were to put all of this to one side, we need to avoid assuming that increases to parental employment will actually drive child poverty down.

The central issue here is that wages do not adjust to family size, which means that workers doing some of the essential jobs we need will not be able to support children on wages alone, even if they work full-time hours. We would like to see jobs in childcare, social care and other crucial sectors better valued and rewarded than they are today. But the scale of pay increases needed to ensure that no extra help is needed when a family has dependent children are simply not realistic. This is a fundamental reason why we need child benefits - to help with the temporary additional costs associated with children. Indeed, it is a key reason why child benefits were introduced in Britain in the 1940s (breaking new ground at the time) and why all countries with low child poverty rates today have them.

The fact that wages are not always sufficient to support a family helps explain why, while moving into employment or increasing working hours allows families to increase their income and reduce their poverty risk, it is not a guaranteed route out of poverty. Resolution Foundation [research](#) shows that poverty rates halved with job entry for those entering work in 2014-15 (35% to 18%). That means that half of those who moved into work remained in poverty. Our own ongoing work using the same longitudinal dataset but focusing on families with children finds very similar patterns but with two important additional details. First, it is harder for families with more children to escape poverty when an adult enters work. Averaging across all years back to 2011-12, among children in households where an adult moved from not working into employment, the poverty rate fell from 48% to 26%. But children in smaller families (1-2 children) saw a bigger drop (45% to 22%) than children in larger families (3+ children, 52% to 33%).

Second, it has got significantly harder across the last decade for both larger families and lone parent families to escape poverty through employment. In the most recent years, where an adult in a family with three or more children has moved from no work to full-time work, it has led to poverty exit in two-in-five cases (43%). This compares to two-thirds of cases (66%) a decade earlier. Among lone parents, 56% escaped poverty by entering full-time work in the most recent data, compared to 76% a decade before. Our statistics are consistent with government numbers that show an astonishing [41%](#) of children in families with one full-time earner and one parent at home lived below the poverty

line in 2023/24, as did [one-in-five](#) children living with a lone parent working full-time.

It is important to note that minimum wages have seen significant recent [rises](#), approaching the highest rates in the OECD. This might have been expected to reduce in-work poverty, given that nearly [half](#) of families in in-work poverty contain a low wage worker. But the point that wages do not take account of household needs is crucial: many families will need additional support from the state when they have dependent children, even with wages significantly above minimum wage. The trends we identify in the difficulty of escaping poverty through work reflect cuts to state benefits for low-earners with children, which have made it harder to reach the poverty line, even as minimum wages have risen.

The reality of in-work poverty is powerfully illustrated in diary entries from parents taking part in the [Changing Realities](#) research project, like Izzy:

“... There are many who, like us, are on in-work benefits simply because our keyworker job roles don't pay enough to cover the bills and we have a child with learning needs... The threshold now for Free School Meals is so low (around 8k household income)... Please explain to me what family could (or should) live on that?”

*Izzy, April 2024 (Changing Realities research project)*

When people get support to progress in work by moving onto a higher salary or working longer hours this can have an impact on household earnings, but the impact of these efforts are typically quite [small](#). Further, this support can inadvertently create additional pressures for parents already working multiple jobs, as Pammy's situation illustrates:

“I worry that I will have another MH [mental health] breakdown with the number of hours I am currently working just to pay my bills and mortgage. I have asked to increase my hours on my second job but worry that with not having any rest time the impact this will have long term. The stress of debt or not paying my bills is greater so I accept the one of over-working. Additional stress is always a factor with MH not just money but money can be a major factor as if you can't eat properly or keep warm, it affects everything.”

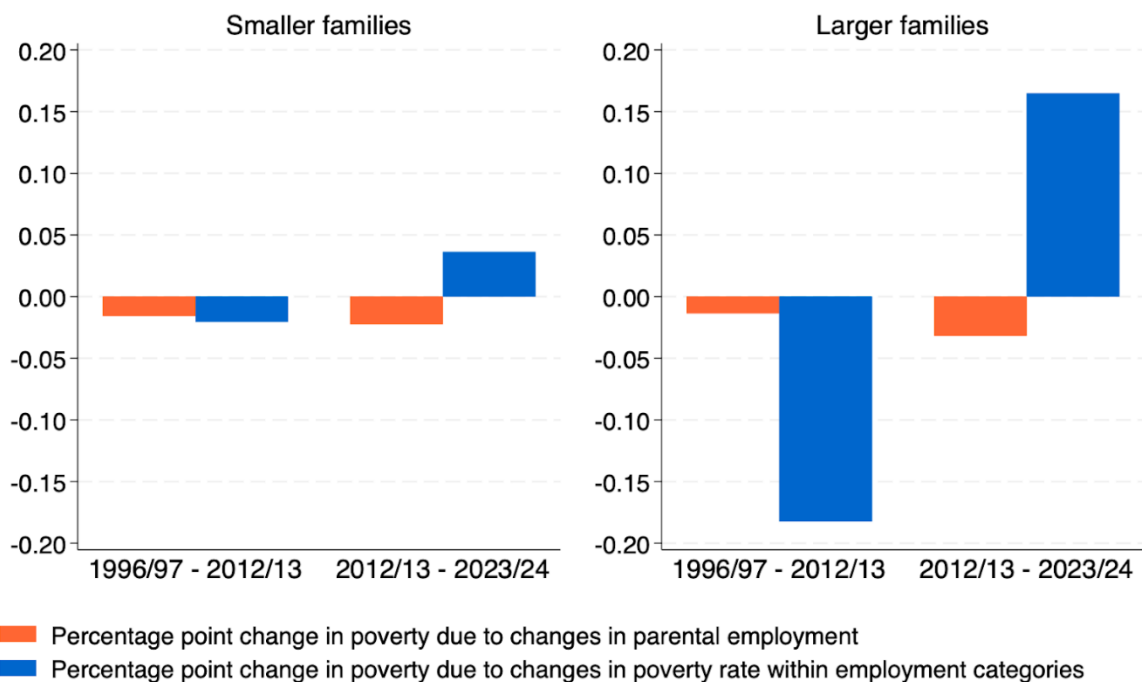
*Pammy, April 2025 (Changing Realities research project)*

So, while movement into work or increases in hours will help some individual families escape poverty, it is often not enough. Further, the evidence tells us that it is likely to make a small impact on child poverty rates in society overall. We go on to discuss this now.

## What difference does employment make to overall child poverty rates?

We present two types of evidence on the impact employment growth is likely to make to poverty rates, one backward-looking and one forward-looking. First, we look back at the last 25 years - a time of rising parental employment and significant changes in child poverty - to understand how these changes relate to each other. How far can we attribute changes in child poverty in this period to changes in parental employment? We have conducted a type of analysis called a decomposition to answer this question. The results are shown in Figure 1. We separate the period from the late 1990s to 2012/13 from the period since then - because child poverty was broadly falling until 2012/13 and has been broadly rising since. We also distinguish by family size, as changes in poverty, both the fall and the rise, have been heavily concentrated through these years in families with three or more children.

**Figure 1: How much of the impact on child poverty has been driven by changes in parents' employment status?**



Source: Authors' analysis using the Family Resources Survey. Updated from [Stewart, Reeves and Patrick \(2025\)](#) 'A time of need,' *Journal of Social Policy*. Note: Smaller families have 1-2 children; larger families have 3+.

The orange bars in the figure show the contribution to the child poverty rate made by changes in employment rates. We know that an increasing share of families were working throughout the 25 years shown here, and

an increasing share were working longer hours (e.g. full-time rather than part-time). We would expect these employment increases to put downward pressure on child poverty: other things equal, more parents working should mean fewer children in poverty. The orange bars confirm this (they all fall below the zero line, in negative territory) - but the impact is small. Employment changes reduced poverty by around 1-3 percentage points. That is, if this had been the only change, we would have seen child poverty fall by around 1-3 percentage points in both periods for both family types.

At the same time, however, there have been substantial changes in the rates of poverty *within* employment categories - i.e. changes in the poverty rate for children who have full-time working parents, part-time working parents or parents who are not working. These changes within categories are shown by the blue bars - and turn out to dominate the figure. For larger families, we see a very big reduction in poverty rates within employment categories in the first period. These changes reduced poverty by some 17 percentage points. In the more recent period, since 2012/13, while increases in employment continued to put downward pressure on poverty (shown in orange) - they were far outweighed by the increased rates of poverty within employment categories (blue).

For smaller families, there has been much less change overall. Nevertheless, the direction of change is the same: so in recent years we see downward pressure on poverty through increases in employment (orange) outweighed by upward pressure within categories (blue).

What is behind these blue bars? As we discuss below, they reflect changes in family benefits: first, increases in the value of children's benefits through the tax credit system under the last Labour Government, and then cuts as part of austerity measures since 2012/13. It is changes in social security benefits that have been the dominant driver of child poverty trends. Increases in parental employment, though sizeable in themselves, have been a very modest part of the story.

What can we expect if we look forward rather than back? Is the story likely to be different? Microsimulation modelling is a technique that lets us project forward, making assumptions about possible increases in employment and calculating the impact on poverty. A number of organisations have made recent projections using this approach. These projections vary in their assumptions (e.g. about who will move into work, and into what kind of jobs). However, in all cases the predicted impacts on poverty are small. On top of this, these small effects are often predicated on assumptions that might be considered very optimistic. Further the costs of achieving employment increases are likely to be high and this is often overlooked.

For example, Resolution Foundation's [Turning the Tide](#) report argues that an 'optimistic but still plausible scenario' could see a reduction of 100,000 children in poverty by 2029-30 as a result of increasing numbers of parents in work. (Note that this and other numbers cited here are reductions in poverty *compared to default projections*; they are not enough to ensure reductions in poverty compared to levels today, because of other drivers pushing poverty upwards, like the two-child limit.) This scenario envisages very substantial increases in employment across the decade from 2024-24: a rise of 5 percentage points (pp) for lone parents (90,000 workers) and 2pp for coupled parents (235,000 workers), with half assumed to take up part-time and half full-time work, and no increases for other family types. In reality, even accepting the plausibility of these increases, which would mean employment rising at three times the rate of Resolution's baseline scenario, it seems inconceivable that parents alone will benefit from employment gains over the decade. If instead an employment rise included other groups too, the impact on child poverty would be smaller or could even disappear, because of the consequences for median income and the relative poverty line.

Further, it is crucial to underline that employment rises do not come for free from a taxpayer perspective, as discussed above. The costs of achieving such an increase are not calculated in the report, but the number of parents projected to move into work is 50% higher than the 200,000 we roughly cost at £3.6 billion/year.

Action for Children's [Paying the Price](#) report is perhaps less sanguine about the prospects for using employment alone to reduce child poverty. Their analysis reaches a figure of a possible 150,000 children lifted out of poverty by 2029/30, but through a combination of personalised employment programmes and changes to social security to boost financial returns to work. They simulate the effects of 125,000 people (parents, carers and disabled people) moving into work, alongside a reduction in the UC taper rate (from 55% to 50%) and the introduction of a second earner's work allowance in UC. Together this package is anticipated to cost £4.4 billion per year by 2030, and to reduce child poverty by 150,000. Action for Children points out that this combination of measures would support other economic priorities beyond simply delivering a significant reduction in child poverty. But they also strongly underline both the costs and the uncertainty around the estimates of employment changes, especially given many of the target group face high labour market barriers, as discussed earlier.

The [IFS](#) model the government's 80% target, which they note is very ambitious - a rise roughly equal to the difference between the low-point

of the Great Recession and the pre-pandemic employment peak. On their projection, it would mean an additional 2.2 million people moving in work (including many non-parents) - ten times the 200,000 we costed at an annual £3.6 billion. They model increases in employment that are randomly distributed across the population (excluding lone parents or second earners in households with a baby under one). Their conclusion is a small but uncertain drop in child poverty - and they note that the impact could in principle even be poverty-increasing, because the resultant rise in median income would push some families below the line even as others rose above it. The report is more confident in projecting between 230,000-340,000 children lifted out of absolute poverty, with the range depending on how employment gains are split between parents and non-parents.

Finally, we have conducted our own calculations together with IPPR. This analysis also projects the impact of achieving the government's employment target of 80% by 2029/30, with a 3.7 percentage point increase in employment within couples (with and without children) and a 7.4 percentage point increase for single people and lone parents; 2.1 million people in all. Like the IFS analysis, this is a far more ambitious projection than Resolution Foundation's 'optimistic but plausible' scenario, implying larger employment changes, achieved over half the time period. On the other hand, as with the IFS, the fact that employment gains are not assumed to be entirely concentrated among parents reduces the child-poverty-reducing impact. Under the IPPR scenario we project a reduction of children in poverty of 100,000 by 2029/30, compared to default projections with no policy change. Once again it is important to emphasise just how ambitious these employment changes are, and that to get even close to them would likely cost many billions in investment.

We summarise these modelling simulations in the table below. What this table shows is that even the very most optimistic scenario predicts only a reduction in child poverty of 100,000 by the end of this decade, or 150,000 if there are also reforms to Universal Credit as suggested by Action for Children. Without other policy changes, child poverty would still rise across this parliament under all these projections, with the employment effect only partially offsetting the 200,000 increase caused by keeping other policy levers as they are. This would leave us with 4.6 million children still in poverty, compared to 4.5 million today.

In other words, even the very most ambitious action on employment – well beyond what many consider feasible – would leave Labour at the end of their first term with child poverty higher than when they entered office, thereby failing a key test that Prime Minister Keir Starmer set for his government.

**Table 1: Modelling simulations of child poverty effects of increases to parental employment**

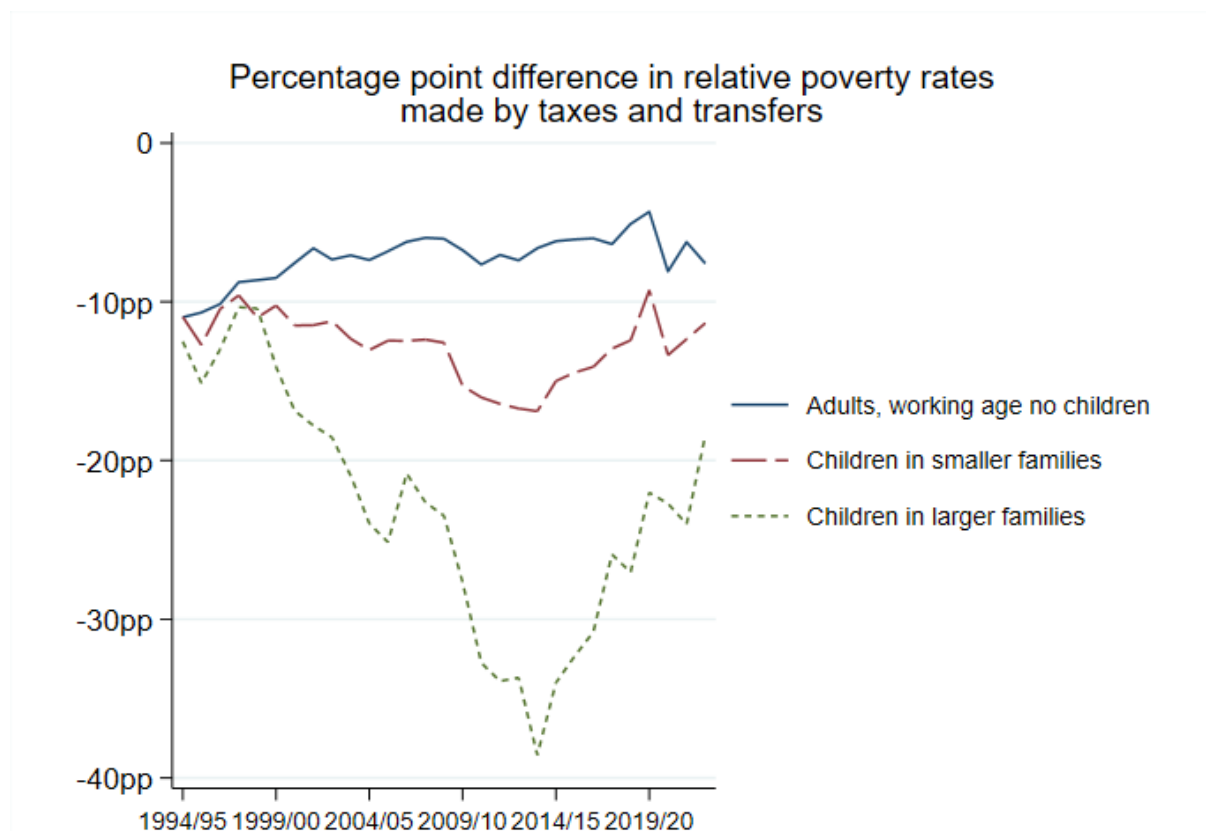
Modelling done by:	Underpinning assumptions	Projected impact on parental employment	Predicted impact on child poverty, compared to default projections
<a href="#">Resolution Foundation</a>	<p>Targeted action to improve childcare provision (including for school-age children), boosting parents' skills, and/or supporting parents with health conditions into work.</p> <p>These actions are not costed but are likely to be expensive.</p>	<p>Increase lone parent employment by 5pp (90,000 workers); increase couple employment by 2pp (235,000 workers), both by 2034-35. Only parents projected to see employment rises.</p>	<p>100,000 fewer by 2029-30</p>
<a href="#">Action for Children</a>	<p>Targeted employment support programmes for single parents, carers and disabled people</p> <p>Package would also include reducing UC taper rate from 55% to 50% and introduction of a second earner work allowance.</p> <p>Estimated cost of reforms circa £4.4bn per annum by 2030.</p>	<p>125,000 parents, carers and disabled people move into work by 2030</p>	<p>150,000 fewer by 2030</p>
<a href="#">Institute for Fiscal Studies</a>	<p>Achievement of 80% employment target by 2030.</p> <p>Employment support to achieve this not costed but likely to be expensive (see next row).</p>	<p>2.2 million people move into work, randomly distributed across the population.</p> <p>Greater impact for children if only those without long-standing health conditions assumed to enter work</p>	<p>'Small' reduction; much smaller than the projected 240,000 - 340,000 out of absolute poverty. Suggest could in fact increase relative poverty</p>
IPPR (new analysis for this paper)	<p>Achievement of 80% employment target by 2030.</p> <p>Employment support to achieve this not costed - but our own estimates suggest that, even if achievable, it would require an investment of at least £9 billion/year net of welfare savings to move nearly 600,000 parents into work, and far more to move 2.1 million people.</p>	<p>2.1 million people move into work (28% of them parents): this is a 3.7pp increase for coupled households (with and without children) and 7.4pp increase for single people and lone parents.</p>	<p>100,000 fewer by 2029-30</p>

## So what does work?

If employment is not a reliable way to make a significant difference to child poverty, what is? Again, the answer both from looking at the past and projecting into the future is clear. Adequate investment in social security benefits, to protect families during times when they have less labour market income, and to help them with the extra costs of children even when they are earning, is the best (indeed the only) policy lever that can drive a long-term and sustainable reduction in child poverty.

A key reason family benefits were introduced as part of the post-war welfare state was in recognition of the increased needs that come with children. Many working parents will need some financial support to help with extra costs while there are dependent children at home. Effective welfare states help working families to smooth income across the life-course by contributing to these temporary costs. Social security is an effective mechanism for responding to increased needs that come with children.

**Figure 2: Changes in the effectiveness of the tax-transfer system for different family types**



Source: Authors' analysis using the Family Resources Survey. Updated from [Stewart, Reeves and Patrick \(2025\)](#) 'A time of need,' *Journal of Social Policy*.

Looking again at the history of the last 25 years, Figure 2 shows sharp changes in the effectiveness of taxes and transfers over this period. Now we see clearly the explanation for the size of the blue bars in Figure 1. While the last Labour Government invested in multiple policies to support parental employment, it was changes in redistributive policies via the child tax credit system that enabled them to bring child poverty down. Conversely, it has been the erosion of the adequacy of family benefits - through the two-child limit and benefit cap, alongside other changes including below-inflation benefit uprating - that has allowed child poverty to rise in recent years, even while parental employment has also been rising. This is a critical point to underline, and it is one that is not being sufficiently heard in current debates.

Similarly, looking forward, microsimulations underline that by far the most cost-effective way to achieve child poverty reductions is to scrap the two policies that prevent adequate support from reaching families at time of need: the two-child limit and the benefit cap. For example, the Resolution Foundation estimates that this would lift 500,000 children out of poverty by 2029/30 at a cost of £4.5 billion/year, while Action for Children project a reduction of 600,000 children at a cost of £3.9 billion/year.

Of course to make a real impact on child poverty requires much more than just scrapping these two poverty-producing policies: it means investing more widely in adequate family benefits, including restoring the value that has been eroded over the last 15 years and embedding an effective system of uprating going forward, for example learning from the pensioner 'triple lock' to ensure that benefits keep up systematically with prices and wages. This in turn requires an understanding of the two key points that we started with: that wages do not adjust to family size, so some families will always need extra support at this stage in the life course, even when they are working; and that there will always be families for whom full-time work, or even any work, is not possible at the present time. Whether we ensure that children in these families have what they need to thrive and fulfil their potential is central to determining the rate of child poverty, and the kind of society we are.

## Conclusion

Child poverty rates have been going in the wrong direction for many years now, leading to millions growing up without the resources they need. The imminent publication of the UK Government's child poverty strategy creates a critical opportunity to make the changes needed to turn the tide and start to move in a different direction. But for this to happen we need a clear understanding of what will and won't make a real and sustainable difference. We have observed a tendency to treat employment as the primary solution. Our own analysis and that of others, cited here, shows that this is the wrong place to look for policy levers that will really move the dial on child poverty: increases to employment are simply not able to do the heavy lifting required. To be clear, we are not arguing that action to improve opportunities to enter and progress in work is not important. They are - not least because, while they carry significant upfront costs, they will create more fiscal space in the longer-run to invest in both social security and public services. But employment is not the silver bullet that it is so often presented to be.

The only effective response to the challenge of child poverty, one that can make a difference quickly but is also fundamental to lasting change, is investment in adequate social security for families with children. There is near-universal consensus about the immediate actions required: the removal of the two-child limit and the benefit cap. But these are only first steps. To ensure a society free of child poverty means ensuring the adequacy of social security support for all families. This in turn means recognising the core reasons that families with children, both in and out of work, need this additional support. We encourage the UK Government to be bolder and braver both in making the case and in finding the resources to make the investment. Because it *is* an investment - in the future of the nation's children, and therefore in the future of us all.

The child poverty strategy is a once-in-this-parliament opportunity for the UK Government to make a real difference and ensure that its legacy is one where child poverty falls decisively. We hope that this analysis can support this effort.

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## **Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion**

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