

CRSP CONFERENCE

FEEDBACK FROM SESSION ON PEOPLE OF WORKING AGE – OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS (GROUP 2)

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Three papers were presented at this group: one on in-work benefit calculation and work outcomes among lone parents, one on combining work and care and carers' decision making in the context of competing policy pressures, and one on maternal employment and child-care choice in Britain.

In terms of feed-back from the group, we decided to concentrate on issues arising from the three presentations that would have a direct relevance for policy implementation or policy development.

The first paper, by Dr Diana Kasparova at the Policy Studies Institute, was a study of in-work benefit calculation and work outcomes among lone parents. The study was based on data from the Department of Work and Pensions and on administrative data, and looked at differences and similarities between new or repeat claimants on the one hand, and long-term claimants on the other. Dr Kasparova found that there seems to be an association between in-work benefit calculation and work outcomes, but only for new or repeat claimants, and not for repeat claimants. For policy makers it would thus be important to take a closer look at the different barriers to work faced by these two groups. The financial initiatives to working are apparently not enough to overcome the barriers that lone parents are facing. Furthermore, it would be relevant for policy development to make improvements in the delivery process of the in-work benefit calculation programme by making it more consistent across clients, jobs and various Job Centre Plus.

The second paper, by Dr Hilary Arksey at the Social Policy Research Unit in York, was a study of carers who combine work and care, and their decision making in the context of competing policy pressures. The study was based on interviews with 80 working age carers in England. Dr Arksey found that the current benefit system does not facilitate carers' participation in the workplace. The eligibility criteria for Carers' Allowance are very strict, and the value of the Allowance is very low. For policy makers it would thus be important to make the benefit system both more flexible and more generous in order to encourage increased work participation by carers. Other areas where policy should be developed further are in relation to carers who decide to return to the workplace when their caring situation changes, and in breaking down barriers to carers' engagement with social services. Many carers struggle on their own without making use of social services.

The third paper, by Yekaterina Chzhen at CRSP, was a study of maternal employment and child-care choice in Britain. It provided an analysis of evidence from the Families and Children Study 2004-2005. Chzhen's paper confirms previous research which has found that women with younger

children are less likely to be in work than women with older children. The number of children in a family is the most important factor affecting employment and child-care decisions of women with children. Working lone mothers find particular challenges in relation to child-care choice, and are more likely to opt for expensive, formal care options. Overall, working mothers tend to juggle a variety of formal and informal care options, which may indicate that formal options alone are either inadequate, unaffordable or inaccessible. It would thus be important for policy-makers to provide more help with child-care in order to facilitate female employment both as a route out of poverty for children and for strengthening women's position. Government tends perhaps to focus mostly on formal care, but policy makers should also assess the importance of informal care, and look further into how women and their families make decisions about child-care.