

Agenda-setting and issue definition in the lone-parent family policy area: the roles of political actors in setting and shaping the media agenda in Great Britain in 1993

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ABSTRACT

Lone-parent families were in the news in 1993 as never before. The Child Support Agency, and the question of lone-parent families' entitlement to state support were the feature of many news reports. This study examines this media coverage and, using concepts from agenda-setting and issue definition literature, examines the roles that political actors have played in the construction of these media reports. A content analysis of a complete sample of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* comprises the primary analytical method, with a policy process framework organising the analysis. It has been found that government ministers played the greatest part in setting the media agendas for these and other issues. It seems that other actors can be successful in shaping coverage, however, if they make use of certain tactics, particularly if they provide 'ready-packaged' stories to journalists that combine a human interest element (involving 'real' people) with a political slant. By mobilising on a mass level absent fathers were able to provide such stories and were thus able to take control of press coverage of the Child Support Agency. The lone parents' groups Gingerbread and the National Council for One Parent Families, on the other hand, found mobilisation and particularisation more difficult due to the social and economic situation of their client group - nine out of ten lone parents are women, and around eight out of ten claim income support benefits - and for this reason were less successful in shaping either coverage of the Child Support Agency, or of lone-parent families and their right to state support.

1

INTRODUCTION

In 1974, Britain saw the publication of the first major research work on the phenomenon of lone-parent families: *The Report of the Committee on One-Parent Families* (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a and b). The problems of bringing up children alone had been recognised by government, and lone-parent families were seen, for the first time, as a distinct population group for whom 'special' public policy should be made. The proposals put forward in the Report received a moderate amount of governmental consideration and media attention in the months following its publication, but their specificities seemed soon to be forgotten. Of more lasting importance, however, was the recognition that lone-parent families were different from two-parent families, and distinct policy needed to be made for them.

In the late 1980s, lone-parent families again came to the forefront of governmental concerns. The number of such families was growing at a rapid rate, adding to the already soaring welfare budget. Reports were commissioned by some government departments, and the situation of lone-parent families had a place on the policy agenda once again.

Their public profile then soared in the latter half of 1993, as the media took up several lone-parent family related issues with gusto. By the end of 1993 it was probable that much of Britain's population had some sort of an opinion on the lone mother and her children generally, and on the Child Support Agency, such was the prominence given to both of these subjects during this year.

This is a study of both agenda-setting and issue definition in the lone-parent family policy area. The focus is on the roles that various interested political actors have played in these processes, with the media agenda in Great Britain during 1993 studied in detail to elucidate these roles. Although the pages that follow contain a historical review of policy in this area, and media agendas are examined from 1974, much of the study centres on 1993 - the year in which lone-parent family issues were high on both policy and media agendas.

Before summarising the structure and content of the chapters that follow, the main organising framework utilised in this study will be briefly set-out.

1.1. THE POLICY PROCESS APPROACH

To talk of agenda-setting and issue definition is to conceive of a policy *process*. These concepts have underlying them the view that an issue has a life, consisting of several stages. Such an approach can be traced back to Lerner and Lasswell (1951) although Easton (1965) was seminal in providing an intellectual framework for understanding the policy process in its entirety (Sabatier, 1991, p. 144). Models setting out specific stages in an issue's life can be traced back to Gunn (1966), but no particular origin can be cited as most attempts to depict the policy process have included at least some of these stages (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984, p. 24). Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 4), in one of the more sophisticated versions, list the stages as follows:

"(1) Deciding to decide (issue search or agenda-setting)

(2) Deciding how to decide (or issue filtration)

(3) Issue definition

(4) Forecasting

(5) Setting objectives and priorities

- (6) Options analysis
- (7) Policy implementation, monitoring, and control
- (8) Evaluation and review
- (9) Policy maintenance, succession, or termination"

These stages should not, however, be seen as clearly separate and consecutive stages occurring in the life-cycle of each and every issue. Rather, they should be seen as comprising an ideal type organising framework.

This approach has been criticised for its atheorism (Burch and Wood, 1983) but is nevertheless a useful descriptive device in which to organise studies of substantive issues. Proponents do not claim that it has explanatory powers in examining *why* issues get on agendas, or *how* they do so, for example. It contains no mechanisms for explaining *how* issues move from stage to stage in their life cycle. These limitations should not, however, detract from its utility as a framework in which to posit studies of particular issues which may attempt to explain such questions by using a variety of other methods.

Certainly this approach is useful in its emphasis on political activity taking place within a 'system', rather than simply in terms of government activity occurring in a vacuum, separated from the social and economic environment and untouched by other political actors. It stresses the dynamic nature of politics and, importantly, it allows a mechanism for studying what government, or other actors, do *not* do (see Hogwood, 1987, p.8).

In short, the policy process approach is a useful organising framework for a study such as this which aims to take several issues and examine the roles that political organisations have played in promoting these issues. Its utility lies foremostly in the scope for focus on issues and on organisations which it facilitates.

1.2. STRUCTURE

The structure of this study reflects this dual approach. Its main body comprises four sets of paired chapters which provide i) background on lone-parent families and policy for this group; ii) a focus on the organisations involved in the lone-parent family policy area; iii) a focus on agenda-setting processes in the lone-parent family policy area; and iv) a focus on issue definition processes in this area.

Chapters 2 and 3, then, provide the background to the study. Chapter 2 looks at terminology, characteristics and trends relating to lone-parent families in Britain and in other countries. This includes a detailing of the recent increase in the number of lone-parent families, and the increase in the proportion of such families headed by never-married mothers, as well as looking at the relative poverty and benefit dependency of such families. It was these facts that led to the government becoming concerned about this family type - the prime factor in the spurring of media coverage.

Chapter 3 also sets the scene and provides a base for analysis of later chapters in its look at the development of policy for lone-parent families in Britain over several policy areas, from past to present. Such an examination clarifies the government's views about lone-parent families, and elucidates the context in which political actors have formulated views about lone-parent families, and around which 'their' issues have been constructed. As such, both background chapters provide a factual context in which the roles of actors and the processes of agenda-setting and issue definition can be seen, so although they stand apart from the main thesis, they are important to the thrust of this thesis which is taken up from Chapter 4 onwards.

Chapter 4 reviews pressure group literature providing a theoretical context for the empirical work presented in Chapter 5. This chapter looks at the history, organisational structure, membership, strategies and tactics used, and the status of,

three organisations active in the lone-parent family policy area, as well as providing background information on other interested groups. In both chapters, a particular focus will be on the relationship between the media and pressure groups in terms of how these organisations attempt to 'use' the media in order to get their point of view across to the public and to policy-makers.

Chapter 6 returns to theoretical literature, reviewing the agenda-setting literature with a particular focus on the literature concerning the relationship between policy and media agendas. Much of this literature has looked at how media agendas influence policy agendas, either directly or via 'the public'. The concern of this study is rather with how media agendas have been influenced by governmental and other elite agendas - that is, the focus is on the media as a *dependent* variable.

Certainly within the policy process literature, such an approach is unusual. The widely recognised importance of contemporary media as a bridge between the 'political world' and 'the public' provides the context in which such an examination should be seen as important to our understanding of policy-making processes. That members of 'the public' are influenced in some way by the news they see, hear or read is undisputed. It is therefore important to examine which political actors have the power to influence this media agenda, and to examine the nature of such influence, particularly in terms of whether the same actors systematically influence media agendas, or whether the nature of agenda-setting processes takes a different form.

Chapter 7 presents the results of such an examination of the media agenda, operationalised as a systematic examination of the content of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* from 1974 to 1993. Detailed discussion centres on the two 'big issues' featuring on these and other media agendas during 1993. How these two issues made the news will be discussed, with precipitating events, types of articles, those cited or

quoted, and articles' themes all quantified in order to elucidate the processes of media agenda-setting, particularly in terms of the role other elite agendas have played in the construction of the media agenda.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the issue definition stage of the policy process. Chapter 8 reviews the issue definition literature, with Chapter 9 making use of the insights gained from this literature in order to analyse the policy frames and resulting definitions of several of the interested actors in the lone-parent family policy area for the two issues discussed in Chapter 7. A focus of the analysis is on how various definitions propounded by interested actors interact to form media definitions of issues. In order to do this, pressure group literature, government speeches and publications, and Parliamentary speeches and written answers published in *Hansard* have all been examined to provide information on the frames of interested actors.

These two sets of processual chapters should be looked upon to complement each other in the understanding of the inextricably linked agenda-setting and issue definition stages through which an issue passes.

This study has benefited greatly from advances in computer technology. Methods used in data collection will be discussed in more detail in section 7.1.1., but here it should be pointed out that large scale and systematic content analysis of newspaper articles was made possible by the use of on and off-line databases. These allowed relevant articles to be tracked and printed on inputting a search strategy (reproduced in Appendix 1). It is doubtful that such a comprehensive set of articles appearing on lone-parent family related issues could have been gathered in the time available had a manual search been undertaken.

Systematic coverage of lone-parent families related issues in the Houses of Parliament was also made possible using an on-line database (the search strategy used is reproduced in Appendix 2) which both saved time and avoided some of the exigencies of using an indexing system prepared by someone else in order to track relevant articles. Most databases allow searches on specified words and phrases so that one can be confident that one's own area of interest has not been overlooked, as may occur when relying on the indexing of a third party. The increasingly widespread use of such technology by researchers should augment the data collected, and increase its quality in terms of relevance and comprehensiveness.

Finally, Chapter 10 will present conclusions reached in this study of agenda-setting and issue definition in the lone-parent family policy area. Overall comments will be made on the roles of political actors in setting and shaping the media agenda. What the study has contributed to the bodies of literature reviewed in terms of methodology adopted, methods used, and results found is discussed.

2

LONE-PARENT FAMILIES: TERMINOLOGY, CHARACTERISTICS AND TRENDS

In this, the first of two background chapters, the scene is set for the more analytical chapters that follow. Why the term 'lone-parent family' has been used in this thesis in preference to other terms is explained, and characteristics of lone-parent families, both on an individual level and as an aggregate group, are discussed. Numbers and trends in lone parenthood are then described, both here in Great Britain¹ and, more briefly, in other countries.

2.1. TERMINOLOGY

The term predominantly used throughout this thesis to describe families headed by one parent, rather than two, is 'lone-parent family'. This term is itself worthy of comment. Prior to the publication of the *Report of the Committee on One-Parent Families* (Department of Social Security, 1974a and b) (see 3.1. for a discussion of this Report) such families were usually referred to as 'broken families', 'unmarried mothers', or 'fatherless families'. This publication was, however, influential in establishing the term 'one-parent family'. Deven (1987, pp. 16-18) suggests that this renaming was not simply a result of the need to find a term for what was a growing family type, but that it also reflected a change in attitude towards such families.

Whereas the term 'broken family' was premised upon the assumption of a 'complete' (and, inferentially, superior) two-parent family, the term 'one-parent' family was seen

by those concerned with their situation as being more neutral and less judgemental (Millar, 1989, pp. 3-4).

The term 'one-parent family' is still in common usage, but 'lone-parent family' seems to have become the preferred term in academic literature and in official statistical publications. One of the most prolific academic writers on lone parenthood, Jane Millar, says that she prefers this latter term because she believes it to be less singular than the former, so being less dismissive of the 'absent parent' (Millar, 1989, p. 4). It is also pointed out in another of her publications that 'lone-parent family' has the advantage of being smoother - one can say 'the lone parent' whereas 'the one parent' does not make sense (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991, p. 1). The term 'single-parent family' or 'single parent' is also in common usage as a generic term, particularly in the media. This can be confusing, however, as the term can also be used to describe marital status, with 'single' parent referring to the unmarried parent to differentiate from the 'divorced' or 'separated' parent.

Bradshaw and Millar (1991, p. 1) do, however, point to the emotiveness of the term 'lone parent' which suggests loneliness and being alone. Neither does it adequately include the non-custodial parent (usually the father) who may not be living in the household but who may be involved in the child's upbringing. Pressure groups such as Families Need Fathers (FNF) have pointed out that it is important to remember the existence of this parent who is often referred to, FNF say inaccurately, as 'the absent parent' (whether absent from his, or her, child's life or not).²

The term 'lone-parent family' will be used here following Millar (1989), but the points made above are acknowledged.

2.2. CHARACTERISTICS

The term 'lone-parent families' also implies homogeneity and, indeed, comparing lone-parent families *as a group* with two-parent families on a range of characteristics throws-up many group differences. *Within* group examinations of lone-parent families, however, show that this is a diverse grouping. The definition of a lone-parent family used for official purposes by the Department of Social Security today is the one first proposed in the *Report of the Committee on One-Parent Families* (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a and b):

"a mother or father living without a spouse (and not cohabiting) with his or her never-married dependent child or children aged either under 16 or from 16 to (under) 19 and undertaking full-time education" (Haskey, 1993, p. 26).

Aside from this commonality, though, lone-parent families may have little in common.

The most common way of sub-dividing lone-parent families is through *route* to lone parenthood, with this categorisation often used in government publications and rhetoric. Thus, unmarried (never-married) mothers are categorised separately from divorced and separated mothers, and widows are another separate category. As approximately nine out of ten lone parents are female, lone fathers are seen as another 'type' which is not generally sub-divided further by route to lone parenthood. Figure 2.1. gives such a breakdown of the lone parent population.

Official figures are also published based upon the age composition of lone-parent families as a group (see figure 2.2. below), ethnic origin (see figure 2.3. below), housing type (see figure 2.4. below), numbers of dependent children (see figure 2.5. below), and employment status (see figure 2.6. below). All of these charts illustrate the heterogeneous nature of the lone-parent family grouping, although it is apparent that most lone parents are female (90.5 per cent), white (91 per cent), live in public rented accommodation (57 per cent), have only one dependent child (55 per cent),

and are not in paid employment (59 per cent). The most evenly distributed data is found in figure 2.2., illustrating that lone parents are found in fairly similar proportions in all five age groupings from 20 through 44 years, although in both lower and higher child-bearing age groupings, the proportions fall.

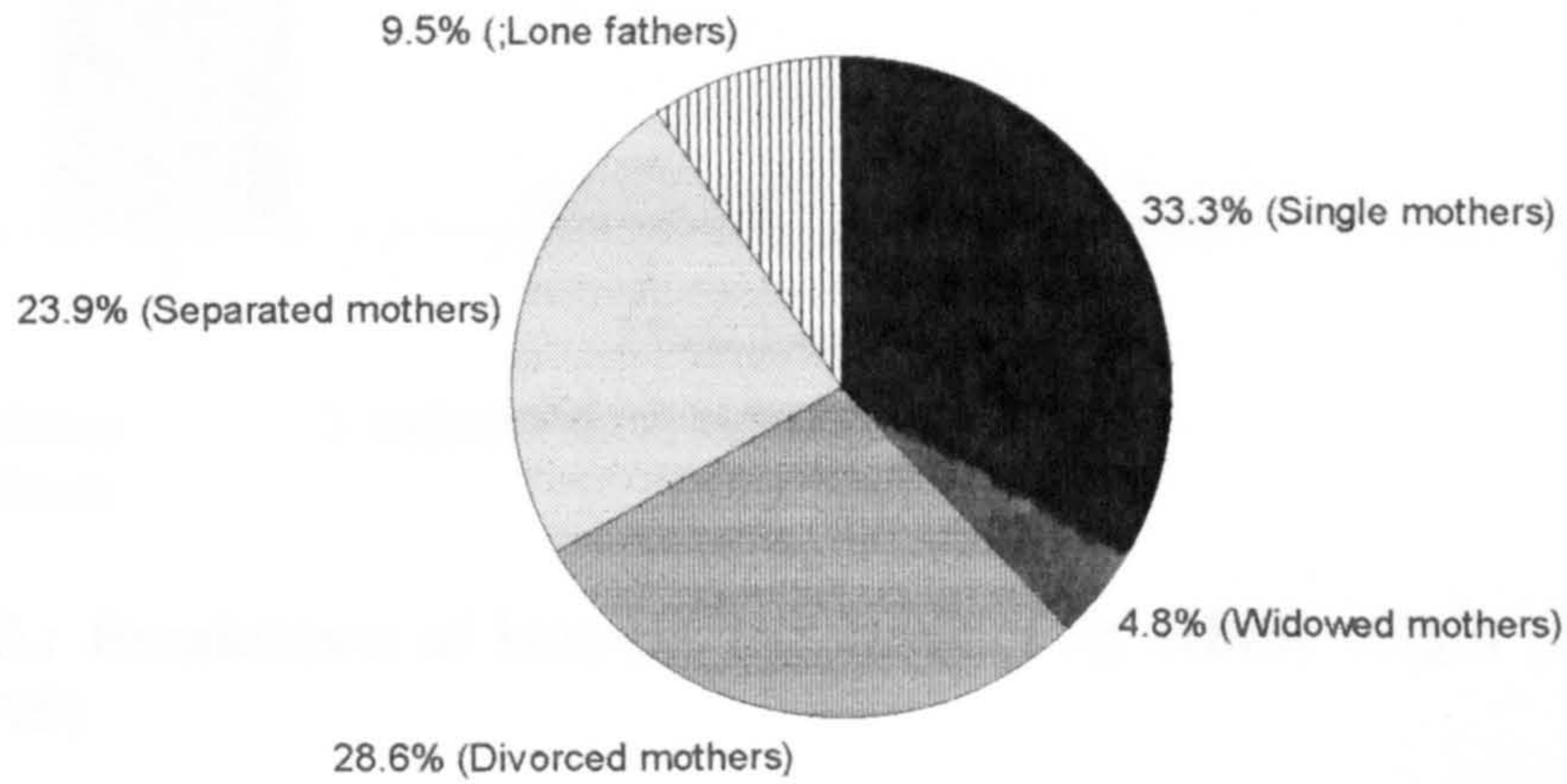


Figure 2.1.: Breakdown of lone parents by marital status and/or sex (OPCS, 1994a, p. 17)

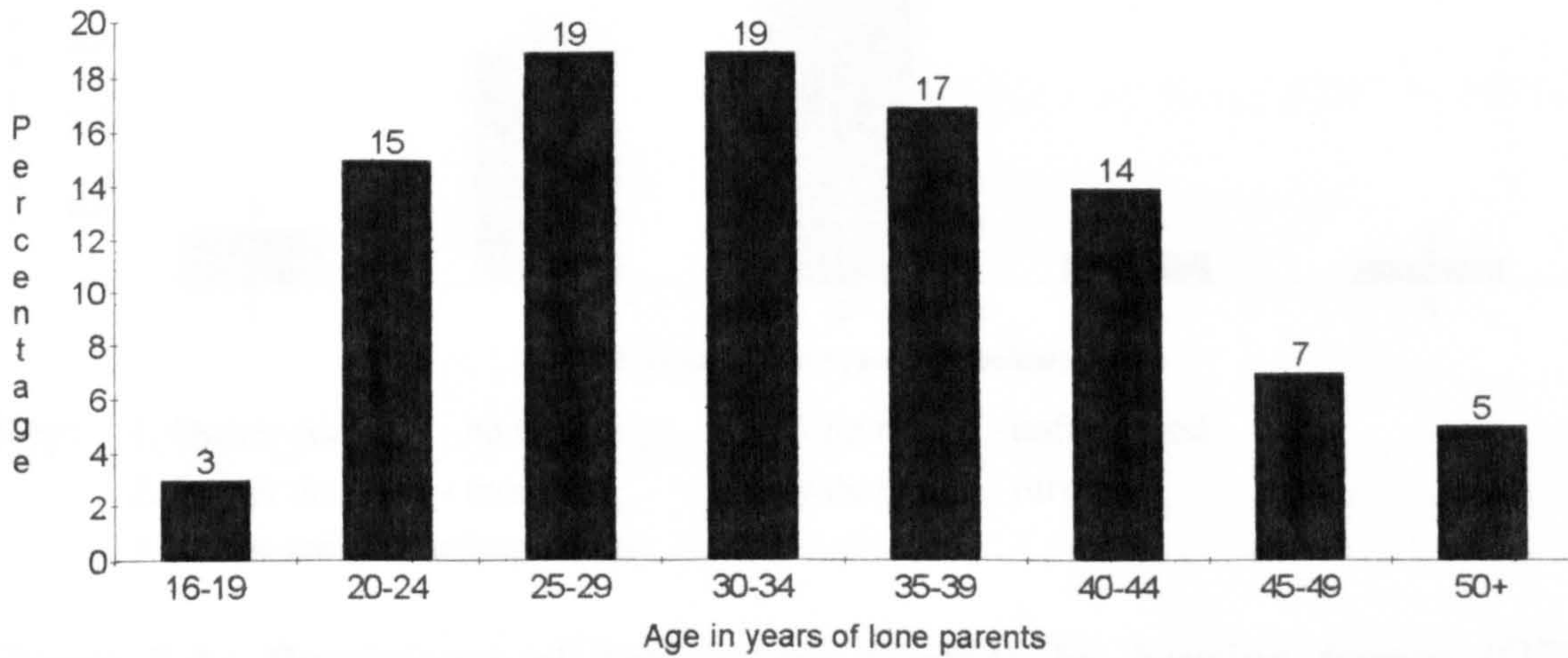
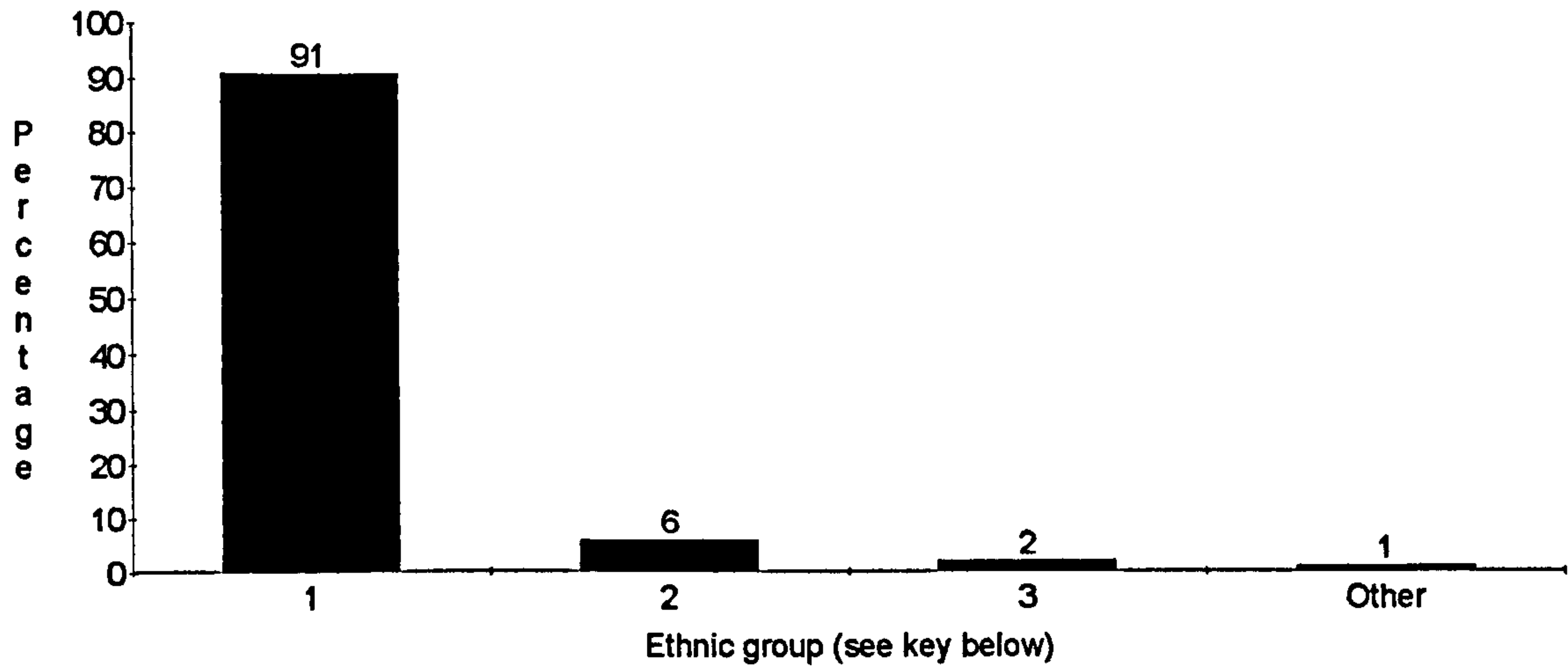
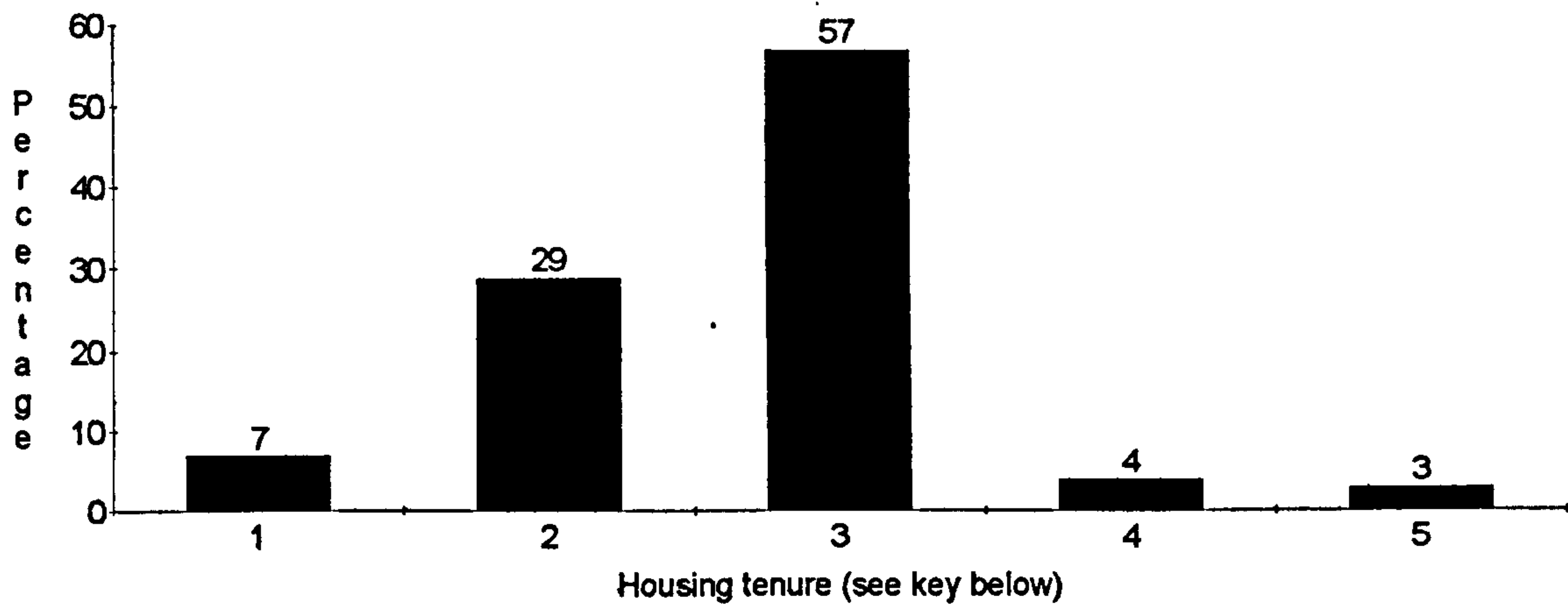


Figure 2.2.: Breakdown of lone parents by age (OPCS, 1994b, p. 192)



Key: 1. White 3. Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi
 2. Black

Figure 2.3.: Breakdown of lone-parent families by ethnic origin (OPCS, 1994b, pp. 214-215)



Key: 1. Owner occupier - no mortgage 4. Private rented - unfurnished
 2. Owner occupier - mortgage 5. Private rented - furnished
 3. Public rented accommodation

Figure 2.4.: Breakdown of lone-parent families by housing tenure (OPCS, 1994a, p. 18)



Figure 2.5.: Breakdown of lone mothers by number of dependent children (OPCS, 1992, p. 43)

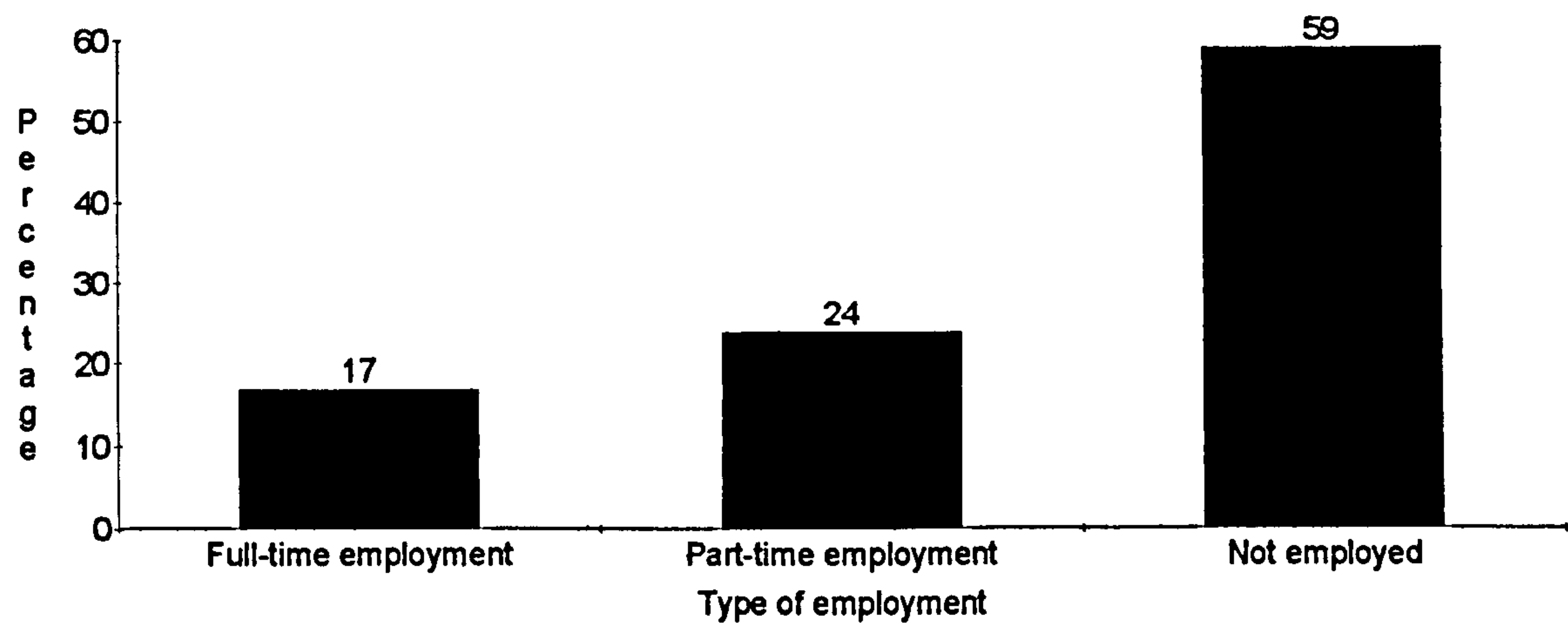


Figure 2.6.: Breakdown of lone mothers by employment status (OPCS, 1994a, p. 19)

In summary, an examination of the above charts shows that lone-parent families exhibit a variety of characteristics. The lifestyle of a fifty year old widow, for example, living in her own home with one child and a full-time job, is likely to be very different from a nineteen-year-old unmarried and unemployed mother claiming Income Support and living in accommodation rented from the local authority. Yet both are referred to as lone-parent families. The widow's lifestyle may, though, in this hypothetical

example, bear a closer resemblance to her married, home-owning, employed and middle-aged neighbour's than to this unmarried teenage mother. Referring to families based upon the number of adults or parents living in that family may tell one little about the family's lifestyle. Two-parent and one-parent families should not be seen as opposing family types, each with their own characteristics. The sole factor that unites each group is the number of resident parents.

It is also important to note that lone parenthood is often a transitional period. One may not be *either* a lone *or* a partnered parent throughout her or his child-rearing years, one may be both. Thus, although there are over one and a half million lone parents in Great Britain now (Central Statistical Office, 1995, p. 31), there are many more who have been lone parents in the past and there will be many more who are presently parenting with a live-in partner who will be lone parents in the future if past trends continue. As a result, many children are being brought up both in a lone-parent and two-parent household during their childhood years.

Clarke (1989, p. 31) suggests that as many as a third of all children born in the early 1980s will pass through periods in lone-parent families, and Millar (1989, pp. 11-12, p. 20), using General Household Survey data, suggests that almost a fifth of children aged under 18 had spent some part of their childhood in a lone-parent family. She estimates that, in the near future, about a quarter of all British children will spend at least some time living with one parent before they reach the age of 16. Using National Child Development Study³ data, she suggests that about 31 per cent of children spend at least four to five years in a lone-parent family. The most up-to-date estimation, however, can be found in the most recent edition of *Social Trends* (Central Statistical Office, 1995, p. 34). It is pointed out here that if 1988-89 divorce rates continue, 24 per cent of children will experience divorce in their family by the age of 16, and 13 per cent will become step children in a married or cohabiting couple family. This

estimation does not include children born to single mothers who, if included, further push-up the estimated figure.

Bradshaw and Millar's (1991, p. 7) study, the first major sample survey of lone-parent families in the UK, also points to the complexity and volatility of the processes of becoming a lone parent. In their sample of around 1,500, 14 per cent had been a lone parent more than once, with six of these lone parents (0.4 per cent) having been a lone parent four times. Millar (1989, pp. 12-13) estimates that the median duration of lone parenthood is in the region of three to five years - considerably less than the number of years a child is dependent on his/her parents. Similar results were found in an analysis of the Department of Employment Women and Employment Survey data (Ermisch, Jenkins and Wright, 1990).

These points serve to demonstrate that lone-parent families should *not* be seen as a homogenous and distinct family type, standing apart from their two-parent counterparts. The lone/two parent dichotomy should be recognised as a simplification, hiding a variety of complex processes and situations. Rather than exhibiting wide-ranging within-group similarities, it must be remembered that lone-parent families come in a variety of forms, just as do two-parent families, and that the two family forms are not mutually exclusive over time. As an *aggregate group*, however, certain common characteristics can be attributed to the lone-parent family. These will now be examined.

2.2.1. Poverty

The characteristic most often associated with lone-parent families is poverty. Even going as far back as Rowntree's (1901) work in York at the turn of the century, it was apparent that lone-parent families, particularly those headed by lone mothers, were

numbered disproportionately amongst the poor. Other major poverty studies carried out since the 1950s have also found this to be the case (Abel-Smith and Townsend, 1965; Fiegehan, Lansley and Smith, 1977; Layard, Piachaud and Stewart, 1978; Townsend, 1979; Mack and Lansley, 1987). Family Expenditure Survey data produced by the government have, in addition, consistently shown lone-parent families, as a group, to be poorer than the two-parent family grouping, and Marsh and McKay's study of low income families carried out for the Department of Social Security stated that the one factor overriding all others in distinguishing low income from higher income families is lone parenthood (1993, p. 13).

In 1993, the average gross weekly income of lone-parent families with one child was 34 per cent that of two-parent families with one child (Central Statistical Office, 1994, p. 87). Figure 2.7. (below) shows that in 1992 over 40 per cent of lone mothers had an income of less than £100 a week compared with only four per cent of married couples, with the proportion of lone parents in receipt of over £350 being 11 per cent, compared with 59 per cent of married couples (OPCS, 1994a, p. 19).

This relative poverty is largely a result of widespread dependence on Income Support as the main source of income. In May 1993 there were 1,048,000 lone parents claiming Income Support (Department of Social Security, 1994, p. 24) with a further 228,000 lone parents claiming Family Credit (January 1994 figures) (Department of Social Security, 1994, p. 11). Indeed, according to the 1993 Family Expenditure Survey (Central Statistical Office, 1994, p. 87), the average gross weekly income of lone-parent households with one child was made-up 44 per cent from earnings, 37 per cent from benefits, and 19 per cent from other sources; with the average gross weekly incomes of couples with one child made-up 80 per cent from earnings, 6 per cent from benefits, and 14 per cent from other sources. Lone-parent family households are,

proportionately, much more likely to have to rely on benefits than are two-parent households.

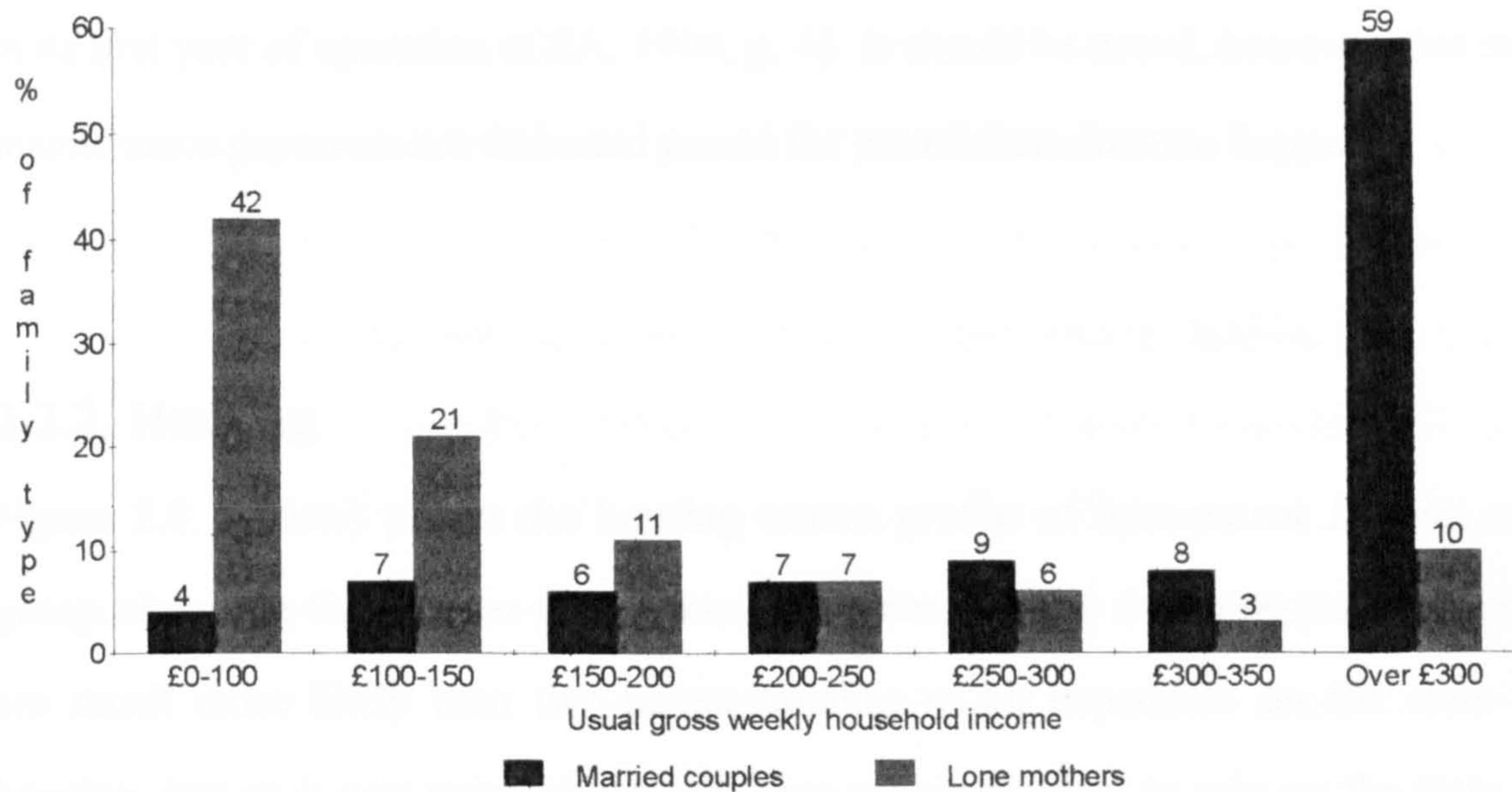


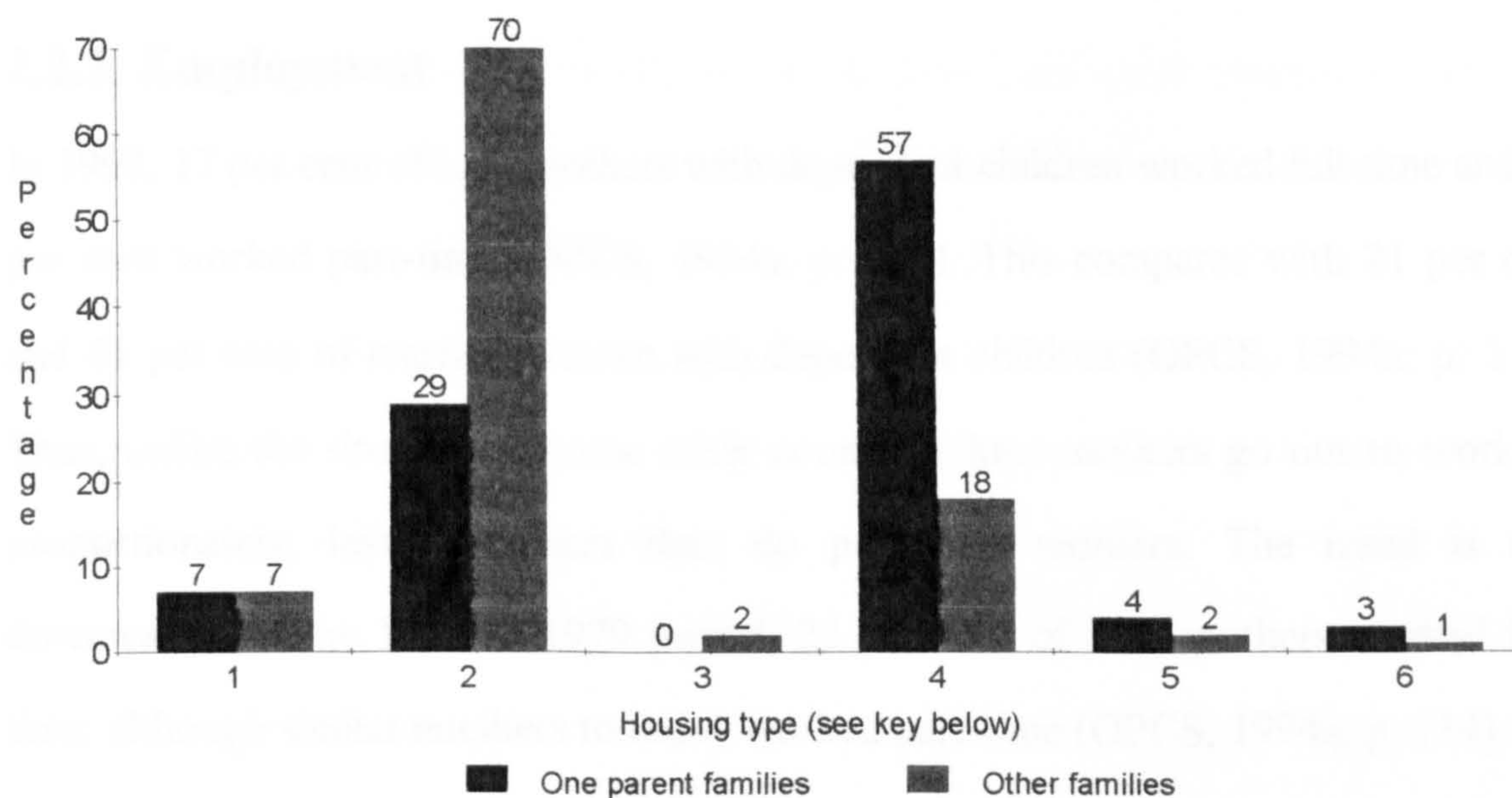
Figure 2.7.: Gross weekly income of lone mothers and of married couples (OPCS, 1994a, p. 19)

This situation has, in many cases, been compounded by the refusal or inability of many (usually) fathers to pay regular maintenance for their children. Data on this have been sparse, but in a speech made early in 1990 the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said that nearly four out of five lone mothers claiming Income Support received no maintenance from their ex-partners (text of National Children's Homes' George Thomas Society Lecture, 17 January 1990, cited in Bradshaw and Millar, 1991, p. 77). The results of Bradshaw and Millar's (1991, pp. 77-87) survey backed this-up. They found that 29 per cent of their sample received regular maintenance payments, but only 13 per cent of those on Income Support were in receipt of such maintenance payments. Similarly, McKay and Marsh (1994, p. 52) found that 30 per cent of their survey sample were in receipt of maintenance.

The Child Support Agency, which came on-stream in 1993, will, perhaps, change this situation. As yet, however, such data are not available, although it is known that the Agency converted 31.5 per cent of maintenance applications into arranged payments in its first year of operation (CSA, 1994, p. 6). It should be noted, however, that such maintenance payments are deducted pound for pound from Income Support.

2.2.2. Housing

Figure 2.8. (below) places the housing tenure profile of lone-parent families as a group alongside that of two-parent families. It can be seen that lone-parent families are much more likely than two-parent families to be dependent on the state for housing, just as it was noted above that they are more likely to rely on the state for income in benefits than are two-parent families.



Key: 1. Owner occupier - no mortgage 4. Public rented accommodation
 2. Owner occupier - mortgage 5. Private rented - furnished
 3. Rented with job 6. Private rented - unfurnished

Figure 2.8.: Housing tenure by family type (OPCS, 1994a, p. 18)

Furthermore, some studies have shown that the quality of housing tends to be worse for lone-parent families than for two-parent families (see Crow and Hardey, 1991 for a review of such studies). Harrison (1983, p. 225), for example, found that lone mothers tended to be allocated older council stock, and often flats on higher floors. More recently, a survey by the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland in conjunction with One Plus (1993) found that disproportionately more lone-parent families lived in flats and maisonettes than did two-parent families. It did find, however, that there was little difference in the type of accommodation *offered* to these different family types. 1991 Census results certainly show that the greatest concentration of lone-parent households are to be found in the metropolitan areas of Greater London, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Tyne and Wear where hard-to-let council accommodation is found (Bailey, 1993, p. 14).

2.2.3. Employment

In 1992, 17 per cent of lone mothers with dependent children worked full-time and 24 per cent worked part-time (OPCS, 1994a, p. 114). This compares with 21 per cent and 41 per cent of married women with dependent children (OPCS, 1994a, p. 114). Thus, unlike the situation in some other countries, lone mothers go out to work in, proportionately, lesser numbers than do partnered mothers. The trend is also downwards. In the 1977 to 1979 period, 22 per cent of lone mothers worked full-time, although similar numbers to today worked part-time (OPCS, 1994a, p. 114).

This has been explained in terms of various barriers to work that lone parents face (see McLaughlin et al, 1989; Marsh and McKay, 1993) such as lack of affordable childcare, and pound for pound loss of benefit on earnings of more than £15 a week. Lone parents may, therefore, be discouraged from the traditional route taken nowadays by mothers returning to work. They are less likely to ease themselves into

work part-time and gradually increase their hours as their youngest child passes first into nursery school, then into primary school, then secondary school (Marsh and McKay, 1993, p. 15).

One must, then, recognise that lone-parent families are not homogenous, but at the same time, as a group they are distinct from two-parent families in the above ways. In sum, as a group lone-parent families are more dependent upon the state for income and shelter, and as a result such families tend to be poorer.

2.3. NUMBER OF LONE-PARENT FAMILIES: TRENDS ACROSS TIME AND ACROSS COUNTRIES

When looking at lone-parent family numbers and trends, it makes sense to distinguish between long-term trends (ie. trends across centuries) and more medium-term trends (ie. trends across the last few decades). Whereas there has been an increase in lone-parent families in the post-war period, when one goes further back this trend is not so evident. Below, trends are discussed in a historical context before going on to look at the soaring number of lone-parent families over the last few decades in Britain.

Taking a comparative perspective and looking at recent trends in other countries also helps to place the situation in Britain today in context. In 2.3.3. trends in other industrialised countries will be briefly discussed in order to provide an overview of the ways in which Britain is similar to and different from other western nations.

2.3.1. The Historical Context

Although accurate figures are not available, it is thought that high rates of mortality resulted in a large number of families headed by widowers and widows in the nineteenth century. Illegitimacy rates did not start falling until the mid-nineteenth century, and although divorce was not readily available marital breakdown did, nevertheless, occur. Millar (1989, p. 13) suggests that the easier availability of divorce in the twentieth century may simply have made marital breakdown more visible, not more likely. She says that historical studies find that lone parenthood was at least as common in the nineteenth century as it is today, and was perhaps more common (see also Anderson, 1983, p. 4). Snell and Millar (1987) analyse parish records to make estimates of the number of lone-parent headed households as a proportion of all households containing dependent children between 1551 and 1851, before census data was available. They find that the overall proportion for all the parishes analysed over this three hundred year period was 19 per cent, just under today's figure of 21 per cent (Central Statistical Office, 1995, p. 34). Further, Laslett (1980, pp. 54-55) notes that as many as 60 per cent of women bearing their first child between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century may have conceived that child out of wedlock. As Snell and Millar (1987, p. 392) put it:

"It is clear that we can safely discard any notion that the two-parent family has been a fixed norm in the past".

Looking at the incidence of lone parenthood today and comparing it with thirty years ago, as it often done, is to compare today with a period when lone parenthood rates were temporarily lower (see 2.3.2 below). Going back over one hundred years ago, however, we see that today's rates of lone parenthood are not new, although routes into lone parenthood have changed, primarily due to improved mortality rates but also as a result of more easily available divorce.

2.3.2. Modern Day Trends

Many commentators, however, compare the number of lone parents today with the number thirty or so years ago (before the advent of the so-called permissive era discussed in 3.1.). Using this baseline, the proportion of lone-parent families in Great Britain in the 1990s is, indeed, high. The Government's Back to Basics campaign, for example, which became linked with the increasingly common phenomenon of lone parenthood, was perceived to be harking back to a Golden Age of this time when families were 'proper families'. Indeed, it is certainly true that thirty years ago the vast majority of children were brought up in two-parent families (although it should not be forgotten that this is still the most common family type). Figure 2.9. (below) shows the percentage of lone-parent families in Great Britain as a proportion of all households since 1961. It can be seen that the proportion of households in Britain headed by a lone parent has more than trebled since 1961, from two per cent of all households, to seven per cent of all households today. Figure 2.10. (below) charts the number of lone-parent families in Britain during this period to elucidate a similar but more dramatic increase over time. A steady increase can be seen, with almost five times as many lone-parent families in Britain today (1.6 million) than in 1961.

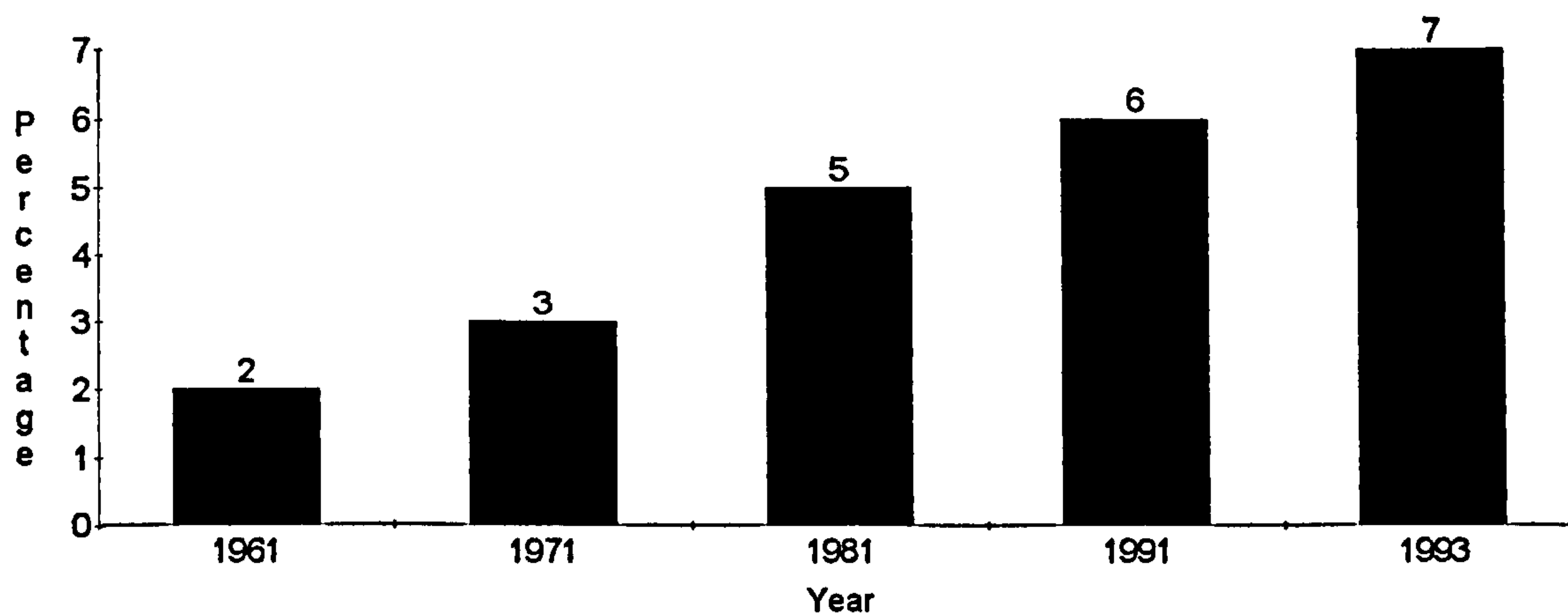


Figure 2.9.: Lone-parent family households as a proportion of all households in Great Britain 1961-1993 (Central Statistical Office, 1995, p. 31)

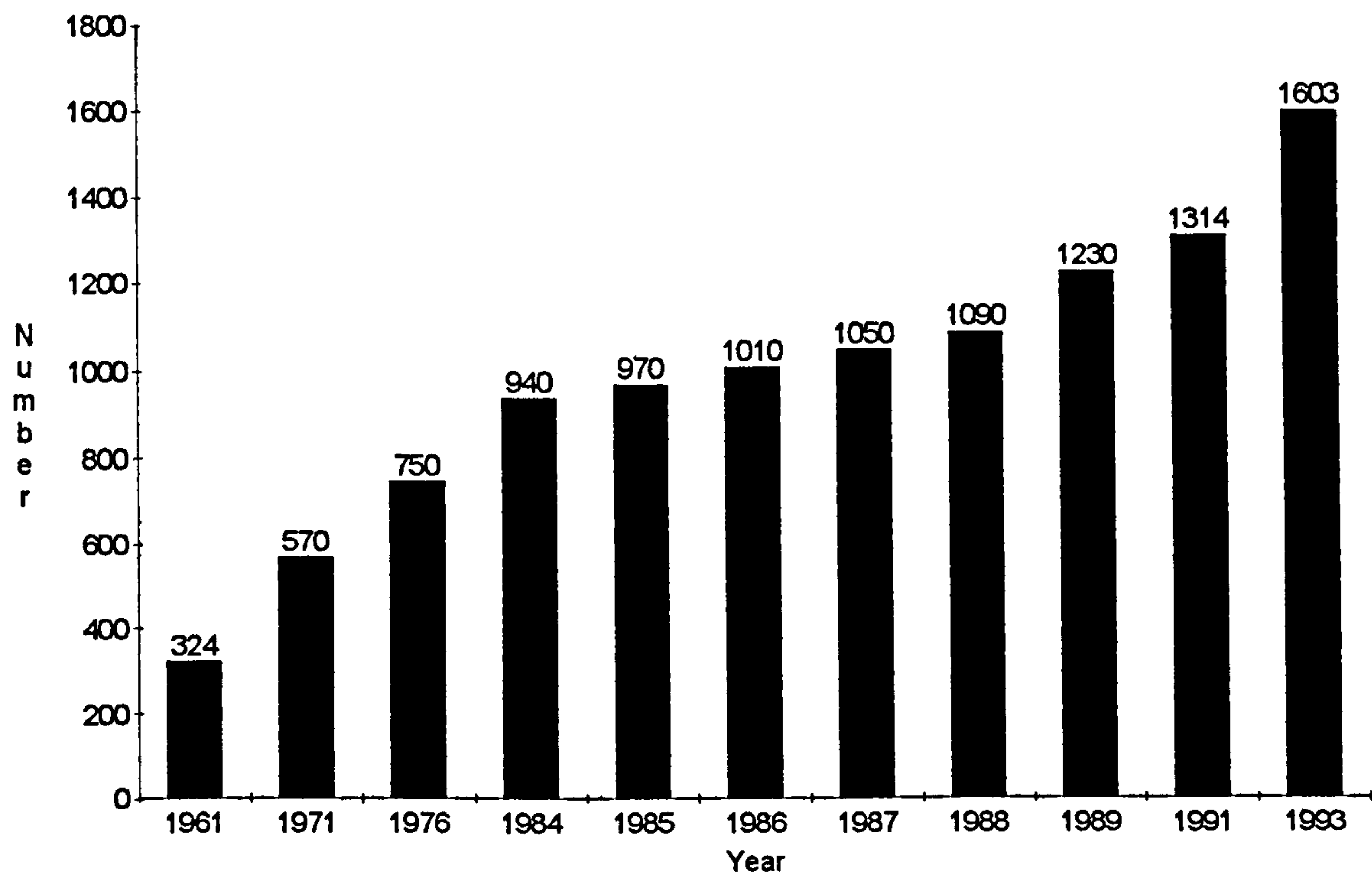


Figure 2.10.: Numbers of lone-parent families in Great Britain 1961-1993 (in thousands) (Haskey, 1993, p. 27; Central Statistical Office, 1995, p. 31)

In order to better understand and explain this increase in both the numbers and proportion of lone-parent families, one should look at how routes to lone parenthood have changed over the years. Figure 2.10. (above) gives an up-to-date breakdown of lone-parent families by marital status. It shows that one third of lone-parent families are headed by never-married mothers, with over one half headed by divorced or separated mothers. Much smaller proportions are headed by lone fathers (9.5 per cent) and widowed mothers (4.8 per cent). Figure 2.11. (below) compares this breakdown to equivalent breakdowns over time. Seeing this chart in conjunction with figure 2.10. (above) one can see that this growth was initially fuelled by the increase in the numbers of divorced mothers, who headed 22 per cent of lone-parent families in 1971 growing to 40 per cent in 1986. More recently, however, it has been the growth in the number of unmarried mothers which has been notable - 23 per cent in 1986,

growing to 33 per cent in 1992, from a figure of 14 per cent in 1971. The proportion of lone fathers has remained fairly steady throughout, at around 10 per cent. The other interesting trend regards the proportion of lone-parent families headed by widows, down from 22 per cent in 1971 to only 5 per cent in 1992 (indeed, this category is the only category where numbers of such families have fallen).

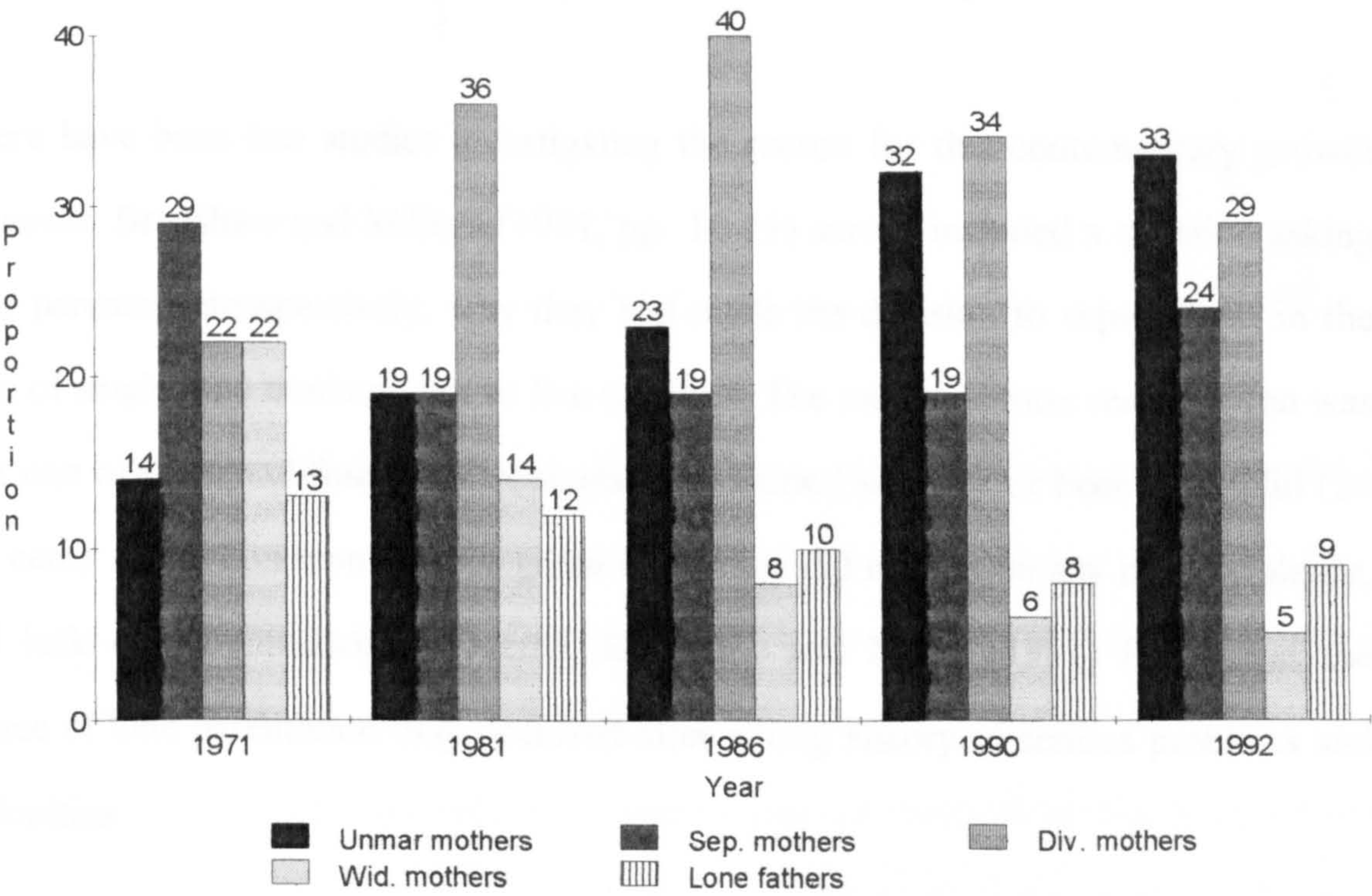


Figure 2.11.: Breakdown of lone-parent families by marital status and/or sex 1971-1992 (Haskey, 1993, p. 30; OPCS, 1994a, p. 17)

It is this former trend - the growth in the number and proportion of families headed by never-married mothers - that has been highlighted by demographers (see Cooper, 1991; Haskey, 1993; McKay and Marsh, 1994, p. 1) and that has worried the British government (see Chapter 9). This increase has become tied-in in much discourse with the increasing number of extra-marital births. Government ministers have used the statistic that over 30 per cent all births have recently been to unmarried mothers (see *Population Trends*, 1993, p. 50 for this statistic) to argue that nearly a third of all

babies are born into a lone-parent family. Equating births outside marriage with lone parenthood is, however, misleading. An analysis of the most recent figures shows that of the 215,225 births outside marriage, 163,753 (76 per cent) were registered by two parents, with 55 per cent registered by both parents living at the same address (*Population Trends* 73, 1993, p. 50). Figure 2.11. shows, though, that there has been an increase in the proportion of lone-parent families headed by lone mothers.

There have been few studies investigating the reason for this contemporary growth however. Bradshaw and Millar's (1991, pp. 10-11) survey included a question asking lone parents, retrospectively, why they had made the decision to separate or, in the case of single lone mothers, not to live together. The most common reason given was that one of them had found someone else, committed adultery or been unfaithful (24 per cent). Other common reasons given were: they did not get on any more, violence, and lack of communication. Overall, Bradshaw and Millar (1991) found that the choice of lone parenthood only occurred after a long history of serious problems and difficulties.

Over the longer term, it may well be that factors such as easier divorce, the reduction of the stigma of lone parenthood, and the existence of a benefit system for lone parents, make lone parenthood an 'easier' option nowadays. No empirical evidence exists to support these oft-made claims, however, though the pattern of increase in numbers and types of lone-parent families since 1971 (see figures 2.10.) lends support to the hypothesis that easier divorce is responsible for at least some of the increase in numbers (the 1969 Divorce Reform Act came into operation in 1971 and made divorce easier - see 3.3. for a more detailed discussion).

In summary, there has been a sharp increase in the number of lone-parent families in Great Britain over the last thirty or so years. If one takes a longer perspective,

however, today's level of lone parenthood is not at an altogether unprecedented high. It is the route into lone parenthood that has changed over the years, with the proportion headed by widows dramatically decreasing (due to improved mortality) and the proportion headed by divorced or separated women increasing (due to a comprehensive divorce law). Over the last few years, though, the increase in the proportion of lone-parent families headed by never-married women has been notable.

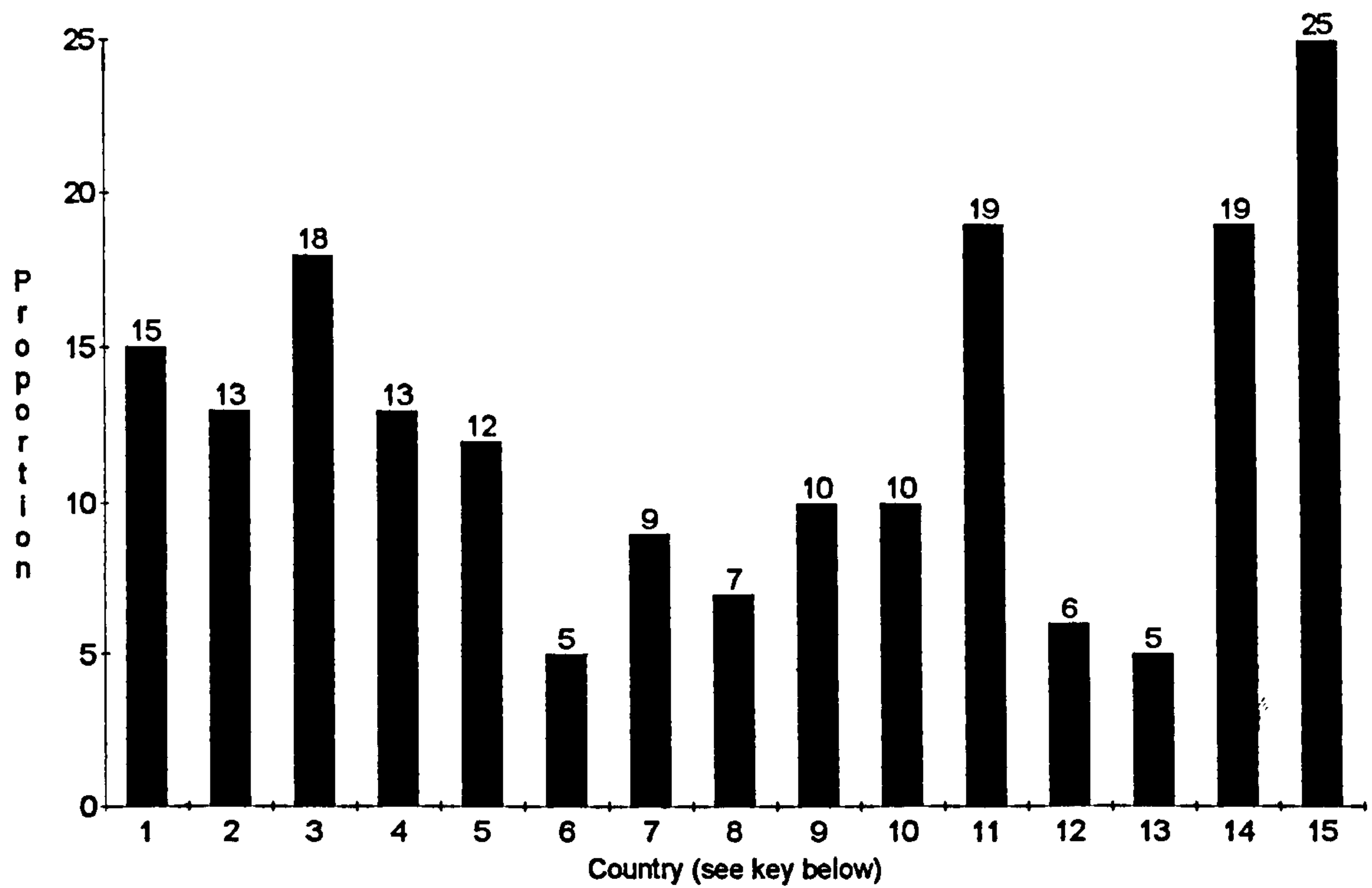
2.3.3. Trends Across Countries

Lone parenthood is not, then, new. Neither is it unique to Britain. Roll (1989, p. 2) has observed:

"it is striking the extent to which all countries [of the European Community] have experienced the same trends".

Indeed, throughout the industrialised world, lone-parent families have formed a substantial and growing proportion of all families over the second half of this century (Millar, 1989, p. 1). Like with like comparisons are rarely available, largely because different countries use different official definitions of lone-parent families (see Ermisch, 1991, pp. 24-25; Roll, 1992, pp. 7-10), but it appears that the western industrialised countries have followed similar trends to Britain in the post-war period.

Bradshaw et al's (1993, p. 75-77) study of support for children in fifteen western industrialised countries shows that the U.S.A. has the greatest proportion of lone-parent families as a proportion of all families with dependent children, at 25 per cent. Greece and Spain have the lowest proportion with only five per cent. Figure 2.12. (below) shows that the U.K. has a relatively high proportion of lone-parent families, but is by no means unusual.



Key: 1. Australia 9. Luxemburg
 2. Belgium 10. Netherlands
 3. Denmark 11. Norway
 4. France 12. Portugal
 5. Germany 13. Spain
 6. Greece 14. U.K.
 7. Ireland 15. U.S.A.
 8. Italy

Figure 2.12.: Lone-parent families as a proportion of all families, in fifteen countries (Bradshaw et al, 1993, p. 76)

The surge in the growth of lone-parent families began in the 1960s in the U.S.A, and slightly later in other countries. Duskin (1990, p. 9) points out that since the early 1970s numbers have increased relatively moderately in some countries (for example, in France), but have soared in other countries, including Britain, Australia and the United States. For most countries, she calculates, the increase in numbers has been between 30 and 50 per cent (Duskin, 1990, p. 9).

Several cross-national commonalities can be identified regarding lone-parent family trends, numbers and characteristics, in developed countries. Firstly, the large majority of lone parents in most countries are women (Millar, 1994, p. 69). Secondly, lone-parent families generally have a greater risk of poverty than do two-parent families (see Zill and Rogers, 1988 for the U.S.A; Roll, 1992 for the E.C. countries). In most countries this family type is dependent on public support in large numbers as in Britain (Department of Social Security, 1990b, p. 85). Also as in Britain, maintenance is not commonly a major income source for lone parents (see Roll, 1992, p. 17). Thirdly, in many countries, particularly richer countries, there is now a smaller proportion of lone-parent families headed by widows than there was in previous decades, and a greater proportion of lone-parent families headed by never-married mothers, although marital breakdown is still the most common route into lone parenthood (Roll, 1992).

Where Great Britain is unusual is in the employment patterns of lone-parent families. Great Britain is one of the few countries where lone mothers are less likely to be employed than partnered mothers (Millar, 1992, p. 33). Millar (1992, p. 33) points out that while the labour force participation rate of all mothers in Britain is amongst the highest in the E.C., the labour force participation of lone mothers is amongst the lowest. In France, for example, 85 per cent of lone mothers are economically active, compared to 67 per cent of mothers in general (Lefaucher, 1992, p. 27), and in Italy 60 per cent of lone mothers are economically active compared to 40 per cent of mothers in general (Palomba, 1992, pp. 29-30). As was discussed above (see section 2.2.3.), in Britain 41 per cent of lone mothers are in employment compared to 62 per cent of partnered mothers (OPCS, 1994a, p. 114).

In most respects, however, the characteristics, numbers and trends in lone-parent families in Britain are similar to those in other developed countries. As in Britain, in many countries there have been distinct policy measures formulated for this

population group⁴ and, as in Britain, in many countries lone-parent families have been on the political agenda during the 1980s and/or 1990s. In the following chapter, policy for lone-parent families in Britain will be focused on. It is worth pointing out here that similar debates have taken place in many other countries, even if the same policy measures have not always resulted⁵.

2.4. SUMMARY

The terminology used to refer to families with only one resident parent has varied over time. In common with much recent academic literature, the term 'lone-parent family' is preferred here.

Individually, the types of families headed by lone parents are diverse. As an aggregate group, however, certain common characteristics can be identified, not least the relative poverty of families headed by one parent.

Lone parenthood is not new. Current levels are possibly very similar to those of one hundred years ago. Nowadays, however, only five per cent of lone parents are widows, whereas death of a spouse was the main route into lone parenthood around one hundred years ago. Presently, the majority of lone parents are divorced or separated, though the number of never-married mothers is on the increase. Unlike in the past, lone parenthood is now primarily a female phenomenon.

Britain is experiencing similar trends to other western industrialised nations. Governments have tended to treat the post-war rise in numbers of lone parents as a problem, although governmental responses have varied across countries.

In Chapter 3 the development of policy for lone parents in Britain is summarised. Recent legislation and policy proposals and rhetoric are focused on, but trends in policy over the last one hundred years are also discussed.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Most data available relate to Great Britain rather than the United Kingdom. Where United Kingdom data are available, however, they will be used.

² Indeed, in the U.S.A. lone-parent families headed by women are referred to not numerically but as 'female-headed households' (David, 1983, p. 206). This term is seen by FNF as more accurately describing a situation where the child has regular contact with both parents, while living largely with the mother.

³ The National Child Development Study is a birth cohort study following, amongst other cohorts, the progress of all 17,000 babies born in one week in 1958.

⁴ These include the lone-parent family allowance in Denmark (Fridberg, 1992, p. 23); specific tax allowances in Greece (Papadimitriou, 1992, p. 26); the API means-tested benefit, and the ASF benefit for those families where the absent parent is paying no maintenance in France (Lefaucheur, 1992, pp. 27-28); the means tested Lone Parents' Allowance in Ireland (Richardson, 1992, pp. 28-29); favourable tax treatment for lone parents with a child under 12 in the Netherlands (Nell, 1992, pp. 30-31); and lone parents have priority in access to childcare facilities in Portugal (Botao, 1992, p. 32).

⁵ For example, in Australia the debate about child support (see Millar and Whiteford, 1993) has been very similar to that having taken place and currently taking place in this country (discussed in more detail in Chapters 7 and 9). In both the U.S.A and the Scandinavian countries too there has been governmental concern over the situation of lone-parent families (see Garfinkel and Wong, 1990; Askevold, 1990; Duskin, 1990).

3

TRENDS IN LONE-PARENT FAMILY POLICY

In this second of the 'setting of the scene' chapters, the development of policy for lone-parent families in Britain¹ is summarised. Important pieces of legislation and landmark reports are examined, and the general slant of policy over the years is discussed. Developments are looked at over several policy areas, each of which has special salience for lone-parent families: the income support area; the housing area; and, moving to family law, divorce policy; the private maintenance area; child custody; and, policy concerning what were referred to until recently in law as 'illegitimate' children. Developments in all of these policy areas have been well-documented elsewhere so the discussion for each is brief, with readers referred to other texts for more details.²

3.1. INCOME SUPPORT POLICY

As was touched upon in Chapter 2, lone mothers and their children have always relied disproportionately on state benefits, in one form or another, as their major source of income. Before the Welfare State was set-up in the 1940s, they relied largely on the Poor Law and Public Assistance Authorities for what was called relief. Since then, various social security benefits have been provided.

The Poor Law was the predecessor to the modern day social security system. Abolished in 1948, it was a last resort for the destitute - there to provide financial or institutional support for those who could not work and had no one else to turn to for

help. Moreover, the provision of financial support was often contingent on the behaviour of the potential recipient, particularly in the nineteenth century. The Poor Law Guardians had clear ideas of what constituted deserving behaviour. This was to shape the kind of support given to lone-parent families. The Guardians had a strong respect for marriage and its sanctity, with any woman seen to have flouted this treated harshly. Thus, widows were treated more favourably than separated and unmarried mothers, although, in the case of the former, if the separation was seen as the husband's fault, treatment was likely to be more generous. Lone fathers were expected to work to support their children, and usually did, though if this proved impossible the children may have been taken into the workhouse (see *Finer and McGregor, 1974b; Brown, 1987, pp. 15-18*).

There was, thus, a hierarchy apparent in provision for different types of lone parents. Widows received reasonably sympathetic treatment within the constraints of the Poor Law according to *Brown (1987, p. 17)*, although there were sometimes fears that too favourable treatment would discourage the husband and father from providing in advance for his wife and children. *Lewis and Piachaud (1987, pp. 35-36)* tell of how some workhouses routinely told the widow that her children would be taken into the workhouse. If she protested and said that she would manage to bring them up on her own, she would not be offered any financial relief. Otherwise, help would be given. In most cases, though, the long-term relief given was not sufficient for subsistence. It was expected that, after the initial period of mourning, widows should work to support their children, aided by this extra financial help from the authorities (*Finer and McGregor, 1974; Brown, 1987, p. 17*).

Deserted wives were usually denied financial help for a year to ensure that they were not colluding with their husbands to defraud the authorities, but after that period such help would usually be given. Unmarried mothers and wives who had not been

deserted, but who had themselves left their husbands, were given no financial relief as it was felt that any financial help would condone and encourage this immoral and feckless behaviour. Such women were invariably forced to enter the workhouse (see Finer and McGregor, 1974; Brown, 1987, p. 18; Lewis and Piachaud, 1987, pp. 35-36; Macaskill, 1993, p. 11).

The state was, in other words, very reluctant to take over what it saw as the role of a husband. All lone mothers were expected to work to support their children. The unsupported mother was a worker first and a mother second in the eyes of the authorities (see Brown, 1987, pp. 16-20; Lewis and Piachaud, 1987, p. 36).

This changed, somewhat, in the early part of the twentieth century. It was decided by those administering the Poor Law that the mother should not work if her children were likely to suffer from her absence. Finer and McGregor (1974, p. 126) and Brown (1987, p. 20) put this down to the greater public concern for children which, they say, can be dated to the Boer War at the turn of the century. It was realised then that children, boys in particular, must be brought up to be strong and healthy in order that they could fight for their country. The result was that more financial aid was given and, for unmarried mothers, special maternity homes were set-up, an alternative to the workhouse (Brown, 1987, pp. 20-21).

The situation improved further for widows in the inter-war years when, in 1925, pensions were granted to women whose husbands had died. The National Insurance Act of 1936 meant that lone mothers who had contributed to the scheme could claim benefits on the basis of their contributions. Many lone mothers, though, did not benefit under either Act, and it was not until the Welfare State was put in place after World War II that the institutionalisation of lone mothers truly became a thing of the past. Under the 1948 National Assistance Act, non-widowed lone mothers received a

safety net means tested benefit. Widows received a higher-level benefit, classed alongside the male unemployed as deserving of a non-means tested insurance-based benefit.

For the first time, unconditional state support for all types of lone mothers unable to support themselves was available. Lewis and Piachaud (1987, p. 37) describe this as a part of the move by the state to treat all women with dependent children as mothers first and foremost. No longer were women with children expected to work. Maternal bonding theory³ was influential, contributing to this move to regarding the mother's place as being in the home, looking after her children.

The next major watershed in the area of income support for lone-parent families was the setting-up of the Commission on One-Parent Families in 1969. The Commission's work and Report (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a and b) are largely of symbolic importance as there was little policy change of substance. Rather, it represented a new concern apparent in governmental circles about this population group.

It is always difficult to pin-down 'moods' of the time but it does seem to be generally agreed that the 1960s saw more liberal attitudes to sex outside marriage, to marriage itself, to the position of women, and to the duty of the state to help those most in need. As a result, lone-parent families began to be viewed more compassionately, with less of a stigma attached to their situation (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a; Macaskill, 1993). Put simply, whereas the 1950s had seen an emphasis on morality, and on the terrible, even evil, consequences of illegitimacy and sexual liaisons outside marriage, the 1960s seemed to herald in a more permissive era (see Department of Social Security, 1974a; Phillips, 1988; Weeks, 1989; Durham, 1991; Lewis, 1992; Macaskill, 1993 for discussion of the 1960's 'permissive society').

It was in this more liberal context, then, that the Labour government, in 1969, appointed a Royal Commission to look into the problems of lone-parent families. The *Report of the Committee on One-Parent Families* (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a and b) was published, five years later. This Report, often referred to as *The Finer Report* after its Chairman Sir Morris Finer, contained 230 recommendations not all to do with Income Support policy but also dealing with the administration of family law and maintenance provisions under family law. It was widely recognised as being a substantial social document (Macaskill, 1993, p. 35). The recommendations were, taken together and individually, aimed at raising the status of lone-parent families to that of two-parent families.

The key recommendation concerning income support policy was for the adoption of a 'guaranteed maintenance allowance'. All lone parents would be eligible for this allowance which would be non-contributory. The benefit would replace maintenance payments for divorced and separated lone mothers, with the state itself responsible for collecting maintenance payments from the absent father. The child component of the allowance would be non-means tested, and the adult component would be reduced for earnings, but with a taper (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a, pp. 289-314).

This was radical in several ways: all lone parents were to be treated alike; private maintenance was to become the state's responsibility; and the structure of the allowance, along with complimentary recommendations regarding employment and childcare issues, meant that, in effect, lone parents would be free to choose whether or not they wished to take paid employment. The allowance was never, however, adopted. In fact, by 1978 only 38 recommendations had been adopted, with a further 29 endorsed, and 115 rejected. The rest remained in limbo (Macaskill, 1993, p. 35).

Although this guaranteed maintenance allowance was not taken up, the government did, in 1976, extend Family Allowances to the first child in lone-parent families. The following year, when the Child Benefit scheme was introduced, lone-parent families were given an additional payment on top of the normal Child Benefit rate, later called One Parent Benefit. Millar (1994, p. 68) argues that *The Finer Report* was instrumental in the passage of these benefits. She says that this publication convinced policy-makers that lone-parent families had extra needs, and should be catered for by income support policy measures which recognised this.

Perhaps this period can be best summed-up by Finer's comment (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a, p. 7):

"The old tariff of blame which pitied widows but attached varying degrees of moral delinquency to divorced or separated women or to unmarried mothers is becoming irrelevant in the face of the imperative recognition that what chiefly matters in such situations is to assist and protect dependent children, all of whom ought to be treated alike irrespective of their mothers' circumstances."

No longer was the amount or type of state benefits available contingent on the marital status and behaviour of the lone mother (although more generous benefits were, and still are, available to widowed mothers reflecting the differing degrees of deservedness with which the state regards different types of lone mothers).

In 1979 the Conservative Party succeeded the Labour Party in governing the country. Although little lone-parent family policy was implemented during the Wilson/Callaghan years, lip service was paid to the importance of financial support for lone-parent families (see, for example, Hansard, 1975). Rhetoric under the Thatcher governments was, however, different.

Publicly ministerial talk was of Victorian values and traditional morality. Lone-parent families were rarely mentioned, perhaps because they were not seen as being a part of these. The two-parent family model was generally presented as the 'proper' family type (see Smart, 1987; Durham, 1991).

As in the Seventies, however, rhetoric and action did not always coincide. Lone-parent families were the target of several policy measures during this period. One Parent Benefit was established in 1980, and a government campaign was launched to publicise it (Macaskill, 1993, p. 45). This year also saw the extension of higher long-term supplementary benefit scale rates to lone parents after one year, rather than after two years, on benefit, and the introduction of the Tapered Earnings Disregard (see Weale et al, 1984). One of the major pieces of legislation of the Government's second term, the 1986 Social Security Act, also had implications for lone-parent families, both directly and indirectly. Under this Act, lone parents lost the right to have their child-care costs taken into account when working part-time and claiming benefit. The introduction of the Social Fund was also seen by lone-parent family pressure groups as impacting on lone parents, although this was not a measure aimed specifically at this group.

The third term of the Thatcher government saw lone-parent families, and more specifically, those dependent on income support benefits, becoming a major concern. Having reformed the social security system by enacting the Social Security Act of 1986, the government began to focus on lone-parent families (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991, p. 1). Social Security Minister John Moore made several speeches about lone parents during 1987 and 1988 which centred on the relationship between the benefits available and the behaviour of lone parents. Other ministers also made this the subject of their speeches during this period (see Bradshaw, 1989, p. 5, Macaskill, 1993, p. 44-45). In 1988 a Ministerial Review of policy for lone parents was announced, the

Social Security Advisory Committee undertook a research review, and major research studies on the dynamics of lone parenthood (this was to result in Bradshaw and Millar's 1991 publication), and on the housing consequences of relationship breakdown (resulting in Bull's 1991 publication) were commissioned (Bradshaw, 1989, p. 5). Lone-parent families were under the government spotlight again, with concern largely focussing on how much such families were costing the state in income support payments.

More recently, under their fourth term of government, Conservative ministers' concerns about lone-parent families have become very public (see Chapters 7 and 9 for detailed discussions of the amount and type of media coverage over this period, and of ministers' stated concerns). There have been no major changes in income support policy as yet, however, although developments in other areas are documented in the remainder of this chapter.

Overall there has been a trend towards policy objectives which encourage lone mothers to return to, or to stay in, paid employment (see Bradshaw, 1989). The Tapered Earnings Disregard introduced during the first term of the Thatcher government sought to encourage lone parents on benefit to work by allowing them to keep some of their benefit in addition to their wages (see Weale et al, 1984), as did the later £15 Earnings Disregard. More recently, the Department of Employment has introduced a variety of initiatives, many at a local level, with this aim in mind, and it is one of the new Child Support Agency's (less well-publicised) functions. Family Credit has become payable at 16 hours of work per week instead of 24 hours, and £15 of child maintenance is disregarded against Family Credit, (but not against Income Support so that those lone parents on Income Support continue to receive no financial gain from low levels of maintenance) (Millar, 1994, p. 71). The 'Under-5s Initiative', run by the Department of Health, has a lone parent category, with the aim being to

pump prime voluntary sector provision of affordable day-care for lone parents with pre-school children so that they are free to return to work or to education (see Edwards, 1993). Although not specifically directed towards lone-parent families the measure, introduced in October 1994 whereby families claiming benefits will have child-care costs of up to £40 a week offset against their earnings when their benefit entitlement is assessed, will have implications for many lone-parent families caught in the much documented 'poverty trap' (Campling, 1995, p. 96). This can be seen as replacing the child-care allowance abolished in the 1986 Social Security Act, a move which was deeply unpopular with lone parent pressure groups and with groups concerned with children.

Despite these moves, however, many commentators have argued that many lone parents who want to work are financially unable to do so because of the workings of the benefit system and the lack of services such as child-care provision, forced instead into long-term dependency on the benefits system (see Cohen, 1988; Bradshaw, 1989; Brown, 1989; Millar, 1989; Parker, 1989; Moss, 1991; Marsh and McKay, 1993). When Macaskill called her 1993 publication *From the Workhouse to the Workplace*, then, she summed-up over a century of policy for lone-parent families in one respect, but skirted over the ambiguity inherent in many policy measures which mean that many lone parents feel that they are, in fact, unable to enter the workplace (see Bradshaw and Millar, 1991, pp. 32-47).

Another important trend has been the move, over the duration of the twentieth century, towards regarding all non-widowed lone parents as equally deserving (or undeserving) of support. Rather than the state making judgements as to the level of support given based on the behaviour of the mother, all non-widowed lone parents are now regarded in the same way (although recent government rhetoric has suggested a

desire in some quarters to return to a hierarchy of benefits based on such behavioural judgments - see Chapter 9).

It seems to be the case, though, that the Ministerial Review of lone-parent family policy announced in the 1980s is still very much alive. It may be that, retrospectively, the mid-1990s will be seen as another watershed in the provision of income support for lone-parent families. What is certain at the time of writing is that there is a realisation at the governmental level that income support policy can no longer be seen in isolation. Policy-makers seem to have reached the conclusion that policy for lone-parent families must be about more than state benefits, it must be coherent across a range of policy areas. Some of these policy areas will now be discussed, with the most recent developments placed in this context.

3.2. HOUSING

During the nineteenth century and in the first part of the twentieth, many lone mothers (particularly unmarried ones) and their children could be found in workhouses as described above in 3.1.. Unmarried mothers were even, on occasion, removed to mental homes and incarcerated, sometimes for many years, because they had given birth out of wedlock (see Melville, 1991). Some hostels were available, providing 'non-judgemental' accommodation, but they were few in number (Macaskill, 1993, pp. 12-13).

By the onset of World War II, homes and hostels, funded by local authorities, were more common. The provision of such accommodation was, however, generally seen as a stop-gap for, usually, unmarried mothers. Apart from this, there were no 'special' housing measures aimed at lone parents (Macaskill, 1993, pp. 18-20).

Indeed, it was not until the 1960s that this situation changed. This decade saw voluntary housing associations forming bedsit and flatlet projects specifically for lone mothers, as hostels and homes went out of fashion. More importantly, in the late 1960s local authorities started to play a part, with some housing lone-parent families for the first time. This was discretionary however - there was no specific legislation giving lone-parent families the right to such housing. It was the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act that legislated that all but the 'intentionally homeless' must be housed by housing departments. Homeless families with children were given priority over families or individuals without children in the allocation of public housing (Macaskill, 1993, pp. 38-40).

Little has changed since then but, at the time of writing, change seems imminent. In January 1994 a consultative paper was issued on housing: *Access to Local Authority and Housing Association Tenancies* (Department of Environment, 1994). The document contained two sets of proposals: the first relating to the provision of accommodation in an emergency, and the second to the allocation of local authority and housing association tenancies.

In sum, the main elements of the proposals were:

- i) to confine the duty of local authorities to one of securing accommodation *for a limited period* for those in priority need, in an immediate crisis occurring through no fault of their own, and who have no alternative accommodation available;
- ii) to make waiting lists the *only* route by which people can be allocated permanent accommodation;
- iii) to encourage local housing authorities to help households by providing more user-friendly approaches. (Department of the Environment, 1994, p. 5.)

In July 1994 the results of the consultative process were made public. In accordance with the proposals, it was announced that homeless people are no longer to be given priority on council waiting lists, but that local authorities will have to provide emergency accommodation, for at least a year, to people, including lone parents, who come to them with no suitable alternative accommodation. In short, Sir George Young, Housing Minister, has proposed that *genuinely* homeless families should be provided with temporary housing and then take their turn in the housing queue for permanent homes. This is to replace the present law whereby homeless families (with children) have an automatic right to permanent council housing, whatever their circumstances.

These changes may have implications for the teenage mother living at home with her parents as eviction by family or friends will no longer lead to homeless status and automatic priority rehousing (she will no longer be classed as 'genuinely' homeless). Neither will lone parents and their children leaving the family home on separation from the other parent be liable for automatic priority rehousing into permanent accommodation, though it is expected that the discretion of local authorities will view each case 'on its merits'.

The proposals have been presented by the government as making the housing system 'fairer'. Although lone-parent families were not mentioned at all in the consultative document (Department of Environment, 1994), the public announcement (Young, 1993) of the results of the consultative process made it clear that it was, in large part, governmental concern about the cost of lone-parent families and about the widespread public perception that the housing system was awarding irresponsible behaviour by giving priority to lone-parent families in regard to housing, that motivated the proposed reforms. It is expected that the proposals will be enacted in Autumn 1995 (Campling, 1995, p. 101).

Housing is one of the areas of policy where the Scottish Office operates with considerable independence from Whitehall. In May 1994 the consultative paper *Tackling Homelessness* was published reflecting this independence in that several proposals suggest the *increasing* of the rights of homeless people, unlike the English proposals. The Scottish Office appears to share the concerns of the Department of Environment, however, in the area of 'queue jumping'. Those in priority need, including lone parents, may lose their right to permanent housing if these proposals are enacted.

If both the English and Scottish proposals are enacted, then, it seems that, legally, lone-parent families without their own home will find themselves in a similar position to their counterparts in the mid-1970s, before the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act and the equivalent Scottish legislation reached the statute books. Lone-parent families will no longer be able to 'queue jump'.

3.3. DIVORCE

There have been many statutes enacted by parliament relating to divorce procedures. It is not the role of this background chapter to detail them all (for such information see Lee, 1974; Stetson, 1982). Below landmark divorce legislation will be highlighted and briefly discussed.

Modern divorce law was established through the Divorce Reform and Matrimonial Causes Act 1857. It made divorce available to all, when previously it had only been available to the very rich. It was not until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923, however, that husbands and wives were put on an equal footing in respect of the grounds of divorce. Previously the husband's adultery had not been sufficient grounds

for a wife to divorce him, whereas a husband could divorce his wife following her adultery (Finer and McGregor, 1974).

This 'double standard' of acceptable extra-marital sexual behaviour was to be important in family law for much of this century. 'Bad wives' and 'bad mothers' were often defined as such following their adulterous behaviour. This ground for divorce was seen as legal justification to withhold child custody and/or financial support (see 3.4. and 3.5. below as well as 3.1. above) and is important in understanding much of the stigmatisation of lone mothers, and the idea that many lone mothers are immoral or fallen women (see Finer and McGregor, 1974).

The 1969 Divorce Reform Act went some way to abolishing this idea of marital breakdown being due to one of the parties being a 'bad' husband or wife, father or mother. Put on the statute books following much debate over a period of many years, it has been seen as a product of the permissive era in legislation (see section 3.1. above). In a complete revision of divorce law, it allowed divorce on the sole grounds of 'irretrievable breakdown'. The aim was to allow marriages that had irretrievably broken down to be ended with maximum fairness and minimum bitterness and, thus, the idea that one of the parties was 'at fault' became less important (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a)⁴. The 'indissoluble' marriage became a thing of the past as everyone who wanted a divorce was granted one sooner or later (previously a divorce could be refused by the courts). The 1976 Divorce (Scotland) Act similarly introduced irretrievable breakdown as the sole ground for divorce in Scotland (see the Board of Social Responsibility, 1992, pp. 16-17).

Within three years of the 1969 Act coming into operation, the number of divorces doubled (Jackson, 1982, p. 163). This upward trend has continued, although the rate has stabilised since the mid-Eighties (Lord Chancellor's Department, 1993b, p. 3).

The 1969 Act was the last major reform of divorce law in England and Wales. In December 1993, however, the government issued a Green Paper on divorce reform: *Looking to the Future: Mediation and the Ground for Divorce*. The White Paper, based on the content of the Green Paper, is expected to be published during May 1995 with the legislation enacted during the 1995/96 parliamentary session.

The Lord Chancellor's proposals follow the Law Commission's acceptance that the present divorce law is confusing and unjust and provokes hostility and bitterness, perhaps even exacerbating the effect on children of marital breakdown (Law Commission, 1990). With these criticisms in mind, the consultation paper puts forward a host of options for change. Irretrievable breakdown is to remain the sole ground for divorce but what is new is that after divorce is filed for there will be a year's so-called 'cooling-off' period. The emphasis is on mediation, with the couple offered the opportunity to attend a personal interview and encouraged to discuss their situation with a trained mediator and receive his/her neutral help in negotiating financial and child matters. Furthermore, for the couple to be eligible to achieve legal aid they must behave 'reasonably' in this mediation situation. Mediators are foreseen as replacing lawyers in the process, with first port of call on divorce being to the mediator rather than to legal professionals (Lord Chancellor's Department, 1993a).

The thrust of the proposals is to temper the adversarial and combative nature of divorce, and to give couples the opportunity to save their marriage if, on reflection, that is possible. The present system is seen by the government as causing children to suffer trauma as a result of parents in conflict, as well as being stressful for the adults involved. The emphasis on mediation is aimed at alleviating this stress and trauma. As with the 1969 Act, a main expressed objective is to support the institution of marriage.

The cost-cutting side to the proposals is emphasised in the Green Paper. It mentions the costs of divorce to the National Health Service, to employers, and to the legal aid fund. This last cost seems to be the main concern. The paper points out that legal aid for divorcing spouses is estimated to have cost £180 million in 1993/94. It states:

"The Government believes that the costs of dissolving a marriage, like the costs of forming it, should be borne by the couple themselves." (Lord Chancellor's Department, 1993b, p. 13).

Where there is a risk that children's interests might not be protected, however, or where there is disparity in the spouses' bargaining positions, there will still be public assistance available. This will be granted if the couple do not have sufficient financial means, and then only if they 'behave reasonably' during the mediation period. Reducing the burden on the tax-payer is, then, an important aim (Lord Chancellor's Department, 1993a).

The proposals can also be seen alongside the Child Support Act (see 3.4.) and the Children Act (see 3.5.) as embracing the government's stated aim of enacting child-friendly legislation. The proposals stress that both parents continue to be responsible for their children on divorce (as it is firmly believed by the government that this is best for children).

The Conservative government's ideological drive to privatise is also apparent in the Green Paper proposals. The move from courts and the legal system to what seems to amount to an independent mediation service can be seen in this light.

The first major reform in divorce law since 1969 is imminent, then, framed by the cost-cutting ethos of the 1990s as well as giving importance to the recognition that the divorce process is unnecessarily adversarial. A more consensual process is seen as being in the interests of children, something that the government has been keen to

promote across several of the recent policy measures taken or proposed, and discussed in this chapter.

In Scotland, the Law Commission has made recommendations less radical than those of its English counterpart. It has recommended a reduction in the separation period before a divorce is granted from two years to one year as it believes that, at present, the law encourages people to 'create' a fault ground in order to get a divorce sooner than the two year separation basis allows (The Board of Social Responsibility, 1992, p. 17). At the time of writing, however, this has not been enacted, and such an enactment does not appear to be imminent.

3.4. MAINTENANCE

Divorce inevitably leads to financial considerations between the two spouses, involving their children. This section looks at trends in private maintenance law over the years.

When examining private maintenance law one must distinguish between maintenance payable to the ex-partner, and maintenance payable to the children. Legal distinctions have also been made between maintenance payable in cases for which the couple have been married and have had children, and cases for which the children have been born out of wedlock.

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century common law did not recognise any enforceable duty of a father to support his child. Obligations did, however, arise under the Poor Law. For most of this period the parish could recover the cost of maintenance of bastard children from the father and, from 1844, unmarried

mothers could obtain an order from the magistrates' courts requiring the father to pay maintenance. From 1878 separated wives could also use the courts in this way (Finer and McGregor, 1974).

Moving into the twentieth century, affiliation orders, pursued through the courts, remained the only way that unmarried mothers could receive any maintenance through the courts from their ex-partners until relatively recently.

In the case of divorced and separated mothers the behaviour of the mother, in terms of whether or not she was 'at fault', often shaped the amount of maintenance payable as decided by the courts (see Smart, 1984b, p. 11). The 'innocent' wife was generally awarded one third of her ex-husband's income, with additional amounts for the support of the children. The 'one third rule' was, however, applied with discretion by judges, rather than being enshrined in law. The 'guilty' wife, on the other hand, may have been penalised by the court's refusal to grant maintenance, or by a lower maintenance award. This decision would be dependent on 'the scale' of her adultery (see Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a, p. 85).

This was to change with the enactment of the Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act in 1970. This Act followed the 1969 Divorce Reform Act in reforming the law on maintenance in line with the new divorce law. During the previous decade the 'one third rule' had fallen out of favour with judges. Instead, it had become common for judges to apply the concept that an innocent wife was entitled to be maintained at the same standard of living as her husband after divorce. The Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act took this notion and enshrined it in law, stating that its purpose was to place the parties, with regard to their conduct, in the financial position they would have been in had the marriage not broken down. The discretionary element of judges' rulings was also reduced, with the introduction of a specific list of considerations that

the judges were required to pay heed to before making maintenance orders (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a, pp. 81-88).

The next major piece of legislation in this area came fourteen years later. The principle of placing the parties to divorce in the financial position in which they would have been had the marriage not broken down, had been deemed, by this time, so impracticable as to become virtually meaningless (Burgoyne et al, 1987, p. 67). Under the Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 the courts were instead required to give priority to the needs of the children, and were told to promote the principle of self-sufficiency of the spouse by either a 'clean-break' - a once and for all financial settlement - or by maintenance orders of a limited duration, designed to provide a smooth transition from marriage to independence. Moreover, conduct was reintroduced as one of the factors to be taken into account when determining maintenance awards. Under this act, the courts were required to consider the earning capacity of the husband and of the wife when deciding on maintenance awards, and not just the current earning capacity but also the earning capacity should steps be taken in the employment direction (aimed at the wife who had given up work on having children) (see Burgoyne et al, 1987; Eekelaar and Maclean, 1986, pp. 49-53).

The Act was, in short, based on an assumption that husband and wife would be in a position to start on equal terms, with a 'clean slate', after the divorce.⁵ It has been criticised on these grounds, particularly by feminist writers who point to the hurdles women, in particular women caring for children, face in the labour market (see Land, 1983, pp. 79-82; Lewis, 1992, p. 63).

The situation in Scotland has been different (see Bird, 1993, pp. 181-191). Fundamentally the claim of a child to maintenance has always been the child's own claim, never depending on the parents' decision about whether or not to divorce.

Support for children has always been the first priority (Clive, 1984, p. 197-198). The courts in Scotland have never been under any obligation to attempt to put the parties to divorce in the position they would have been in had the marriage continued. Scottish law has largely left the redistribution of a couple's capital and income to the judge's discretion. The Family Law (Scotland) Act 1985 followed the 1984 Family and Matrimonial Proceedings Act, though, in implementing a system of rules to be used to decide on redistribution of resources (Thomson, 1987, p. 111). Finally, the Scottish courts have never had as much power to redistribute assets between husband and wife as have the English courts.

The Child Support Act 1991, the most recent piece of legislation pertaining to maintenance, applies throughout the United Kingdom⁶. Under this legislation no distinction is made between fathers who have and who have not been married to the mother of their children. In 1990, following concern that many absent fathers were not providing sufficiently for their children (see Department of Social Security, 1990b, p. i; Bradshaw and Millar, 1991, p. 77; Bird, 1993, p. 20; Child Support Agency, 1993, p. 3), the White Paper *Children Come First* (Department of Social Security, 1990a and b) was published, setting out a new system for the assessment, collection and enforcement of child maintenance.

The Foreword to the Paper stated that:

"Government....can and must ensure that proper financial provision for children is made by their parents whenever it can be reasonably expected.

While many absent parents make regular payments, 70 per cent regrettably do not. The inevitable result is that more and more caring parents and their children have become dependent on income support. This makes it difficult for them to achieve greater independence through working. And at the same time,

it places the responsibility for maintaining the children on other tax-payers, many of whom are raising children of their own.

It is indeed in everyone's interests that the system should be reformed. It is in the interests of children that they should be maintained by their parents. Maintenance provides them with a reliable source of income and they learn about the responsibility which family members owe each other.

It is in the interests of the caring parent if they have maintenance for their children. Maintenance provides an invaluable bridge from reliance on Income Support into the world of work." (Department of Social Security, 1990a, Foreword.)

As can be gleaned from the above quote, the emphasis of the White Paper, and of the resultant legislation, has been on responsibility. It is stressed by the government that parents are responsible for their offspring, as a good in itself and also to prevent the wider community (tax-payers) having to take on this responsibility. Furthermore, the government believes that if both parents are responsible towards their children the children will learn about the unconditional responsibilities that family members have towards each other, again a good in itself. Finally, the parent with care of the child will be able to take responsibility for her own life by going out to work rather than relying on the state for support.

In this way, the Child Support Act can be seen alongside the Children Act (discussed below in 3.5.) and the proposed divorce law reform (discussed above in 3.3.) as increasing parental responsibility. Indeed, in the Foreword to *Children Come First*, the government presents the Act as part of its programme to review and reform the family justice system. Ministers state that the programme's priority is "the interests of

the child; the emphasis is on parental responsibility" (Department of Social Security, 1990a, Foreword). As with all the elements of the programme, the proposals in *Children Come First*, say the government, are aimed at "giving priority to the child's welfare if his family breaks up and clarifying and highlighting parental responsibility for securing that welfare" (Department of Social Security, 1990a, Foreword).

The recommendations presented in the White Paper were enacted in the Child Support Act 1991. The Child Support Agency, set-up to operate this system, came on-stream in April 1993. The new system means that child maintenance can be assessed by a standard formula⁷, rather than being calculated solely by judges (based on some amount of discretion). The Agency is responsible for tracing 'absent parents' and, as well as assessing them, has the powers to collect and enforce payments. The caseload is being taken on in phases⁸, with the absent parents of those children whose parent with care is on Income Support, as well as new cases, being taken on at the moment. Lone parents in receipt of Income Support are legally required to name the father of the child in order that maintenance can be sought from him, unless such naming will cause 'undue harm or distress' to the mother or child. This Agency is the responsibility of the Department of Social Security rather than the family law system (Child Support Agency, 1993, p. 3).

There has been much controversy surrounding the Act, primarily centring round the formula which is seen by many fathers' groups and others as being too general in not allowing for certain essential expenditure (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9). In order to allay this controversy somewhat various reforms to the Agency's workings have been announced by the government since the Agency came on-stream. The most recent and most substantial were outlined by Social Security Minister Peter Lilley in January 1995. He announced that an independent appeals system would be set up for parents to appeal against assessments; that there would be

changes to the formula governing clean-break settlements made before April 1993; that there would be a widening of the criteria involved in making assessments to take account of the costs of second families and travel to work; that a more flexible formula would be used to calculate maintenance to provide a 'safety valve' for people who would be thrown into genuine hardship; and that extra money would be made available for mothers on benefit who, under present rules, have maintenance payments docked (to come into effect in 1997). He also announced that more than 50,000 cases would be deferred indefinitely, with those not on benefits (to be taken on by the Agency in 1996) no longer taken on in the foreseeable future.

The government has attempted, through the Child Support Act, to make the payment of maintenance to one's children throughout their dependent years something that is done by every parent, and something that is regulated by a standard formula rather than being at the discretion of individual judges. The Act and the Agency will be discussed in detail in Chapters 5 and 7 as they have been uppermost on government and media agendas over recent years. Of all the policy developments discussed in this chapter the Child Support Act has certainly been the subject of the most media attention.

3.5. CHILD CUSTODY⁹

Custody of children has always been separate from the principle of their maintenance. Thus, whether or not, for example, a father has any contact with his child he is liable to maintain him or her. Financial support does not mean automatic rights to see the child.

In the early nineteenth century all parental authority over children was paternal. The father always had custody of the children following marital breakdown whatever his behaviour and previous involvement with the children. The beginning of a challenge to this automatic father right came with the 1839 Custody of Infants Act which provided the first formal link between mother and child. The mother, on condition of behaviour, could have custody of children under the age of seven (Brophy and Smart, 1981, p. 4).

It was not until 1925 though, when the Guardianship of Infants Act was passed, that mothers were given the same rights as fathers to apply to the courts for custody of the children (Brophy and Smart, 1981, p. 6). From this time on custody was usually given to the mother unless she was guilty of adultery. As time went on, though, even the 'guilty' mother was given 'care and control' of the child though custody was awarded to the father (a purely pragmatic distinction, the effect of which was that the child resided with the mother). The maternal deprivation theories of the 1950s (mentioned in 3.1. above) again helped cement this move from paternal to maternal authority (Burgoyne et al, 1987, p. 76-78).

Unmarried fathers, though, have had a different standing in law to married fathers until relatively recently. It was not until 1959 that the Legitimacy Act gave the father of an illegitimate child the same rights to apply for custody or access as the married father.

The 1969 Divorce Reform Act marked the end of the notion, embedded in policy, that 'guilty' mothers should not get custody of the children. From this time on the court has examined each case on what is best for the child, notwithstanding adulterous affairs. This has usually meant that the mother gets custody (see Burgoyne et al, 1987).

Moving into the 1980s, the Family Law Reform Act of 1987 can be seen as a precursor to the Children Act of 1989. The Family Law Reform Act introduced the principle that the relationships between parents and children are to be construed without regard to whether or not the parents were, or are, married. It does not automatically give unmarried fathers the same rights as married fathers but does provide a mechanism whereby they can acquire these rights and responsibilities (Hoggett and Pearl, 1987, pp. 399-451).

The Children Act 1989 is the most recent piece of legislation in this area. It is a wide-reaching piece of legislation with much of it not relevant to lone-parent families specifically. In the area of child custody, however, it is extremely important. Billed as "the most comprehensive and radical piece of legislation relating to children" (Lord Chancellor's Department, 1992, p. 4) it enshrines five main principles:

- "- the child's welfare is the paramount concern....
- children are best cared for by both parents wherever possible
- the State and the courts should intervene only where it will clearly make things better for the child
- delay is not generally in the interest of the child
- the laws and procedures regarding children should be unified" (Lord Chancellor's Department, 1992, p. 4).

These broad principles translate more specifically into the following: firstly, there is a shift in emphasis away from 'parental rights' towards 'parental responsibility' with both parents responsible for children born in wedlock (but only the mother *automatically* responsible for children born out of wedlock). The father in this situation must make a legal agreement with the mother pertaining to joint parental responsibility.

Secondly, no orders have to be made about children when their parents divorce. This enables parents to continue as parents, encouraging them to co-operate for the benefit of the child. Where this is not possible the courts have been given a new range of court orders known as 'Section 8 Orders'. These replace the traditional 'custody' and 'access' orders. There are four types of Section 8 orders: 'residence orders', 'contact orders', 'prohibited steps orders', and 'specific issue orders'. Parents and guardians are entitled to apply for any Section 8 order, and the child him or herself can apply for one if he/she has the leave of the court. This last provision is radical. No age limit is specified but a child who is felt to be old enough to decide for him/herself which parent he/she wants to live with is now legally able to have a say (see Lyon and Lyon, 1991, pp. 905-1026).

In short, custody law as it stands at present in England and Wales has taken the child's 'best interests' into account for many years. The Children Act has, though, made explicit the provision that children are best cared for by both parents wherever possible.

The Act has received little criticism - it has, indeed, been widely-acclaimed. There have been complaints, however, that it is not being implemented quickly enough from some quarters, most notably in this context from fathers' rights groups such as Families Need Fathers.

The Act applies in full only in England and Wales. Only a few of the provisions relate to Scotland. Some of the principles enshrined in the Act are long-standing in Scotland however. Running through Scottish law on parent and child are three principles: the interests of the child are of prime importance; in order to promote those interests both parents have certain responsibilities; in order to enable them to fulfil those responsibilities both parents have certain rights (Clive, 1992, p. 111). Nevertheless a

Scottish Children Act seems imminent. In 1992 the Scottish Law Commission published its *Report on Family Law* recommending reform of the law relating to children in a family context. These recommendations centred around adopting many of the valuable features of the 1989 Children Act, including the replacement of existing parental rights of guardianship, custody and access with new rights of residence and contact, in a bid to reflect that even after separation both parents have a continuing parental role in the upbringing of the child. The Commission also recommended the abolition of the legal status of illegitimacy, the removal of legal discrimination against unmarried fathers, giving some statutory content to the notions of parental responsibilities and rights, and increasing the emphasis on the views of the child (see Clive, 1992 for a fuller discussion of all of these proposals). In November 1994 the Scottish Secretary announced plans for a Children Act to be enacted during 1995.

The overall trend in legislation concerning child custody has been that the dominant position of fathers apparent in the nineteenth century has given way to the dominant position of mothers in the twentieth century. The 1989 Children Act, and its soon to be enacted Scottish counterpart, signal a move towards a more equitable position, though, with recent policy objectives dictating that both parents continue to care for the child after parental separation wherever possible.

3.6. 'LEGITIMACY'

For most of this century as well as the last children born outside wedlock have been legally distinct from children born inside this institution. The legal term applied to children born outside wedlock has been 'illegitimate'.

The 1926 Legitimacy Act provided for a child born outside marriage to be legitimated by the subsequent marriage of his/her parents, an important status change as the law considered illegitimate children to be non-persons at this time. By 1975 a legislative commitment had been made to the principle of equal rights to all children, whether or not they were born in wedlock. It was not until 1987, however, that the Family Law Reform Act removed all discrimination against illegitimate children (see Hoggett and Pearl, 1987, pp. 399-451). Legal discrimination against children born out of wedlock was eliminated the previous year in Scotland under the Law Reform (Parent and Child) (Scotland) Act 1986 although, as was made clear in section 3.5, the status of illegitimacy still exists in law throughout Britain (Clive, 1992, p. 110).

The reforms in law enacted during the late 1980s can, though, be seen as indicative of the changing attitudes towards children born to unmarried mothers. There is now less stigma attached to such children as their numbers grow. If the Scottish Children Act succeeds in abolishing the status of illegitimacy perhaps English law will follow and ultimately children born to unmarried mothers will be viewed no differently to their counterparts born to married couples.

3.7. CONCLUSION

This chapter has dealt with trends in several policy areas salient to lone-parent families looking at developments during the nineteenth century and through the twentieth. Looking at these policy areas together rather than separately, several general points can be identified.

The 1960s marked the heralding in of policy specific to, and on the whole sympathetic to, lone-parent families. They were recognised as comprising a group which needed

help from the state, as such families faced 'special circumstances'. Lone-parent families were no longer treated simply as poor families with children as some of the particular difficulties of bringing up a child alone came to be recognised by policy-makers. Divorce legislation enacted during this time has been seen as a product of the permissive mood of the 1960s. This legislation along with the *Report of the Committee on One-Parent Families* and greater involvement of local authorities in housing all give a flavour of the change in emphasis from lone-parent families as deviants, to the recognition that they needed to be helped and not judged.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s another change is apparent, this time guided by the realisation, as their number has grown, that lone-parent families cost the state a lot of money. The trend to privatise responsibility for such families in order to save public money is the dominant one. The Child Support Act and the new housing and divorce proposals can all be seen in this light. Even the Children Act, with its concept of *parental* responsibility, has elements of this drive. Underlying all of this is a moral tone. The government clearly considers two-parent families preferable to one-parent families, although lone-parent families which do not rely on state support are viewed ambiguously as the government's emphasis on personal choice then comes into conflict with normative statements about 'good' and 'bad' family types.

The key factor guiding lone-parent family policy in the 1990s is cost to the public purse. Policy has moved from giving no concessions to this family type, to recognising, accepting, and aiming to help this family type, to the present day thrust of helping lone parents to help themselves as their number increases and such families become commonplace.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Although the social security system is the same throughout Britain, Scottish and English family law differ, as do Scottish and English developments in housing policy (Wales is also independent in this respect). English developments will be focused on here, with the Scottish side being dealt with only cursorily. This is primarily for reasons of space but, in addition, this is a background chapter for a study that focuses on images of lone-parent families in the so-called 'national', or London-based, media. It inevitably focuses on English family law when covering housing policy, divorce and other family law developments, and thus it is appropriate that the focus here is on English legislation. Specific developments in Wales have not been dealt with.

² Different writers have specialised in different policy areas, though rarely have these been brought together in one volume or chapter. For income maintenance policy see Department of Health and Social Security (1974a and b); Richardson (1984); Brown (1987); Millar (1989); Macaskill (1993). For housing and employment developments see Macaskill (1993). For divorce see Lee (1974); Stetson (1982); Phillips (1988). For maintenance see Levin (1984); Smart (1984a); Eekelaar and Maclean (1986); Bird (1993). For child custody see Smart and Sevenhuijsen (1989). For family law generally see Brophy and Smart (1981); Stetson (1982); Deech (1984); Smart (1984a); Hoggett and Pearl (1991, pp. 500-566). For Scottish family law see Thomson (1991). Department of Health and Social Security (1974a and b) is useful in all of these areas for details pre-1974.

³ John Bowlby (1958, 1965, 1971, 1975) was the best-known proponent of maternal bonding theory. He suggested that infants form a deep attachment to one person, usually the mother, which, if broken through separation, may have severe effects lasting into adulthood. His work was extremely influential and was often used, particularly in the 1950s, to imply that even temporary separations, for example the mother going out to work every day and leaving the child with someone else, could emotionally scar a child for life (Bilton et al, 1987, p. 293).

⁴ The Act established the sole ground for divorce as irretrievable breakdown but this was established by proving one of five 'facts' - adultery plus intolerability, intolerable behaviour, desertion for two years, separation for two years with consent, or separation for five years without consent.

⁵ It should be noted, however, that the 'clean-break' arrangement was pertinent only to maintenance for the ex-wife. Parents continued to have a legal responsibility to maintain their children.

⁶ Some provisions of the Act do, however, apply only in Scotland. See Bird (1993, pp. 181-191) for a discussion of these.

⁷ A contribution for the carer, usually the mother, is included in the formula.

⁸ Compliance with the Agency is mandatory only if the parent with care is in receipt of Income Support, Family Credit, or Disability Working Allowance. For other cases the parent with care has the choice of whether he or she wants to use the services of

the Agency. At present this service is only available to newly separated or divorced lone parents (Department of Social Security, 1993, p. 7).

⁹ 'Custody' is now an obsolete term legally. It has been replaced with the term 'residence'. The term 'access' has been replaced with 'contact'. The parent with custody of the child is now officially referred to as the 'parent with care'. For want of a smooth way of referring to the situation, however, the word 'custody' is used here.

4

THE ACTORS: A REVIEW OF PRESSURE GROUP LITERATURE

"Each policy problem, as it reaches the agenda, brings with it a whole *constellation of interests* who then engage in political activity in order to ensure that the processing of that issue is to their advantage. Indeed, the very agenda-setting process is often at the centre of the power struggle in society with pressure groups playing a central role in the struggles to attract the attention of decision-makers and the public at large." (Richardson, 1993, pp. 5-6, his italics.)

This study has two focuses: organisations, and processes. As Richardson (1993, pp. 5-6) suggests in the quote reprinted above, many organisations have an interest in the political processing of issues of importance to them, indeed many organisations exist solely to try to ensure that 'their' issues are processed in a favourable way. While Chapters 6 to.9 of this study focus on the agenda-setting and problem definition processes through which an issue travels during its life (see Chapter 1 for a discussion of this policy process framework), this and the following chapter focus on the organisations and groups which have a stake in the processing of issues. This chapter reviews, briefly, the literature on pressure groups, as such organisations and groups are known, in order to place the 'constellation of interests' in the lone-parent family policy area in context. Groups with an interest in lone-parent family related issues are then examined and discussed in Chapter 5. A focus of both of these chapters is the relationship between the media and pressure groups.

Firstly, what is a pressure group? Grant (1989, p. 9) defines a pressure group as:

"an organisation which seeks as one of its functions to influence the formulation and implementation of public policy, public policy representing a set of authoritative decisions taken by the executive, the judiciary, and by the local government and the European Community."

The above definition includes think tanks and formal groupings within political parties as, although neither of these engage in conventional lobbying, both seek to influence the direction of policy in one or multiple areas. This definition will be used in the context of this thesis.

4.1. TYPOLOGIES OF PRESSURE GROUPS

A characteristic of pressure group literature has been its preoccupation with creating typologies of groups. There are thousands of pressure groups in existence, too many to study individually. Many of those interested in pressure groups have, thus, attempted to create typologies in order that generalisations can be made (Grant, 1989, pp. 11-12). Such typologies are useful in revealing links between characteristics of groups and strategies used, and policy process outcomes. Common categorisations have included the 'sectional'/'cause' group distinction (Stewart, 1958, p. 25) , and the 'insider'/'outsider' distinction (Grant, 1978).

Sectional groups:

"represent a section of the community...Their function is to look after the common interests of that section and their membership is normally restricted to that section." (Stewart, 1958, p. 25.)

Grant (1989, p. 12) adds that sectional groups usually try to organise as large a number of their eligible membership as possible, with their standing with government

depending on the representativeness of the section of the population they claim to speak for.

Sectional groups are likely to pursue regular contact with government departments, shunning confrontational tactics (Jordan and Richardson, 1987, p. 21). They typically lobby on non-radical and limited, specific goals - the kind of goals often conceded by government without public controversy (Grant, 1989, p. 12). They often deal with complex technical issues, unlikely by nature to get on the public agenda (Grant, 1989, pp. 12-13). Indeed, such groups are likely to try to build a media image through public relations rather than through protest activity (Jordan and Richardson, 1987, p. 21).

On the other hand, cause groups, sometimes referred to as promotional groups (Potter, 1961, pp. 15-32):

"represent some belief or principle....They seek to act in the interests of that cause. Theoretically their membership is not restricted at all. Anyone can join and by doing so signify his acceptance of the belief or principle" (Stewart, 1958, p. 25).

Some cause groups seek a mass membership, others concentrate on the quality of the pressure function rather than on recruiting large numbers (Grant, 1989, p. 12).

Cause groups are, typically, resource-poor relative to their sectional cousins (Grant, 1989, pp. 14). The issues with which cause groups are concerned are more likely to be candidates for the public agenda, as they tend to be 'racier', non-technical issues with a potential for a large, diverse audience if exciting news-hooks are found on which to hang them. Indeed, cause groups are likely to be media-orientated rather than access orientated (Jordan and Richardson, 1987, p. 21).

The insider/outsider distinction is another way of classifying groups in the hope of being able to generalise about their behaviour. Sectional groups are more likely to be insider groups than are cause groups, and cause groups are more likely to be outsider groups than sectional groups, but this pattern does not always hold (Grant, 1989, p. 15). Insider groups generally have a better chance of influencing the government than do outsider groups.

Grant (1989, p. 14) defines insider groups as "regarded as legitimate by government and....consulted on a regular basis." He sub-divides this category further into: prisoner groups, low-profile groups, and high-profile groups. An insider group may be described as a 'prisoner group', a group that would like to break away from what is an unproductive insider relationship but is unable to do so because it relies on the government for resources (Grant, 1989, p. 16). An insider group may also be described as 'low profile' or 'high profile'. Grant (1989, p. 16) says that this categorisation is based on "the extent to which an organisation seeks to reinforce its contacts with government by using the mass media". Thus, a low profile strategy involves little media contacts, whereas a high profile strategy involves well-developed media relations.

Outsider groups do not enjoy close contact with government departments, sometimes out of choice, at other times because they do not have the skills needed to become 'insiders', and at other times simply because the government finds their aims and ethos unpalatable. Grant (1989, p. 17) sub-divides the outsider category along these lines, labelling these sub-divisions 'potential insider groups', 'outsider groups by necessity', and 'ideological outsider groups'. The first category is made-up of those groups who aspire to insider status but have yet to win government acceptance (Grant, 1989, p. 17). The second category also aspires to insider status but is not as near to attaining this as the first group, usually because it is not sufficiently politically sophisticated.

The third category, on the other hand, is made-up of groups which "do not accept the possibility of achieving change through the existing political system" (Grant, 1989, p. 18) and who usually follow unlawful tactics.

Whitely and Winyard's (1987) work is worth singling out for discussion here too. Their work on 'the poverty lobby' is particularly relevant as many of the groups discussed in Chapter 5 could be said to belong to this grouping. Whitely and Winyard (1987, p. 16) define the lobby as:

"those national voluntary organisations which regularly or sporadically attempt to influence the income maintenance policies of government in favour of the poor."

Of the three groups discussed in detail in the following chapter Gingerbread and the National Council for One Parent Families clearly fit this description and, indeed, the authors include specific analyses of these two groups in their study.

Whitely and Winyard (1987, p. 26) classify the groups in their study according to whether their primary objective is service provision or lobbying, whether they are representational or promotional (this is essentially the same as the sectional/cause distinction), and according to whether each group's strategy is open or focused, and to whether its status is accepted or non-accepted. In making these latter two distinctions they are rejecting the simple insider/outsider categorisation. They feel that it confuses two separate dimensions of strategy and status, pointing to groups that enjoy close contacts with Whitehall (insiders in terms of status) yet who make considerable use of the media and public strategies of protest (outsiders in terms of strategy). Similarly, they point to groups who pursue an insider strategy but who are outsiders in terms of status. By separating these two elements they feel that they are better expressing differences in these areas (Whitely and Winyard, 1987, pp. 31-32). Grant (1989, pp. 20-21), however, defends his use of the simpler classification, saying

that strategy and status are so closely entwined that it may not be desirable to separate them.

By using the above typology Whitley and Winyard (1987) build-up four-fold classifications. The most common are OPAL (open - promotional - acceptable - lobbying) and FRAS (focused - representational - acceptable - service).

Maloney et al (1994) also warn against the conflation of group strategy and group status inherent in Grant's (1978) insider/outsider model. Pointing to the ambiguity attending such a conflation, they develop a set of complementary sets of terms for status and strategy dimensions.

Firstly, they distinguish between insider, outsider and threshold strategies, with this latter characterisation taken from May and Nugent (1982, p. 7) to refer to groups which oscillate between using insider and outsider strategies.

Secondly, they turn to status. Using the insider/outsider distinction, they distinguish between core insider groups, specialist insider groups, and peripheral insider groups; and between outsider groups by ideology or goal, and outsider groups by choice. Core insiders are "seen as important and relevant sources by policy-makers over a broad area" (Maloney et al, 1994, p. 30), with specialist insiders having "a more specific interest in restricted policy areas but are seen by policy-makers as a reliable and authoritative source of information....in these niches" (Maloney et al, 1994, p. 30). Peripheral groups, on the other hand, are bodies whose relevance to a topic is seen by policy-makers to be marginal, or bodies which have "little or *no impact* on the thinking of civil servants" (1994, pp. 31-32, authors' italics). Maloney et al (1994, p. 32) believe that most groups who wish insider status can attain peripheral insider status if they utilise the appropriate strategies.

Maloney et al's (1994) outsider groups may be outsiders because their goals cannot be accommodated in the policy-making process (ideological outsiders), or they may be outsiders by choice not desiring to have a 'cosy' relationship with policy-makers (Maloney et al, 1994, p. 32).

Maloney et al (1994) suggest that the important cleavage for those interested in analysing policy-making lies not in the cleavage between insider and outsider groups, as much of the literature has assumed, but in the distinction between groups with real influence- their core and specialist insider groups - and groups without.

Both Maloney et al (1994) and Whitely and Winyard (1987), then, emphasise the importance of considering strategy separately from status in studying pressure groups and policy outcomes. The following section moves on to discussing strategy in more detail, specifically the strategies used by groups to get media attention.

4.2. PRESSURE GROUPS AND THE MEDIA

Most pressure groups in the 1990s are aware that to have the national mass audience media¹ sympathetic to the campaign or cause of a pressure group is a powerful asset. More and more groups are developing a coherent media strategy, the groups discussed in Chapter 5 being no exception. Although most pressure groups do not feel that they are strong enough to define the issues for public debate, or even to choose the issues on which debate is held (for a fuller discussion of this in relation to the lone-parent family policy area see Chapter 5), at least they feel they can modify the debate through their opinions and give the public a chance to hear a view other than the government's.

To go further than this and suggest that the media play a direct role in the policy process is to presume a linkage between media content and the policies or decisions emanating from the process which has not been proven in empirical research (Negrine, 1994, p. 142).

To use Golding and Middleton's (1979, p. 19) words, however, the media do:

"shape the political climate.....so that ultimately legislation and the overall allocation of resources are influenced by mass mediated versions of priorities and necessities [and] they influence the cultural context...by setting the tone for public discussion and providing the imagery and rhetoric...[for] administrators."

On the other hand, they add, the policy process is informed by a number of pressures, of which media agenda-setting is but one.

The important point in the context of this discussion is that the pressure groups examined in this study clearly feel that the national daily newspapers and the terrestrial television channels rank alongside the more traditional lobbying grounds of Whitehall and Westminster in importance. Whether or not the media do have an influence on policy, these pressure groups feel that they do.

Grant (1989, pp. 81-84) suggests that pressure groups use the media in six distinct ways. Excepting the use of the media in order to gain information, all of these refer to publicity generation of one sort or another.

Grant (1989, p. 81) uses the term *visibility* to refer to the "use of the media to establish a presence, and to recruit and retain members". Grant points out that constant exposure for the group in the media reassures its membership that it is active, and helps in the retention of members, as well as alerting interested members of the

public that the organisation exists. Such presence of a group's name in the national media may also alert those within government that the group is one to take notice of though, of course, a group that is visible for its radicalism, for example, is more likely to persuade ministers and civil servants *not* to listen to its aims.

Climate refers to pressure groups' efforts to "change the climate of opinion on an issue in a way that is favourable to their objectives." (Grant, 1989, p. 81.) This may involve changing elite opinion, but also involves changing public opinion more generally. Sympathetic images of relevant issues are most often used here in an attempt to change the context of public values in which policy is made.

When a news story breaks which concerns a group, a *reactive response* may be necessary. Grant (1989, p. 82) points out that, properly managed, these situations can be used to the organisation's advantage, creating favourable publicity.

Pressure groups may also use the media as a means of exerting *influence* on government. The ease of groups doing so must not be under-estimated however. Grant (1989, p. 82) points out that ministers will not change their policies because of one powerful editorial. A more concerted campaign over time may, however, yield results. That an issue is being covered at all is significant and may help to move the problem up the political agenda.

Finally, Grant (1989, p. 83) points to groups attempting to influence the *content* of media output. Pressure groups may lobby the media directly to get the issues they are concerned with covered.

Similarly, Davies (1985, p. 151) identifies three functions that the media can fulfil for a lobby organisation: a means of acquiring information, a deliberative forum, and a means of exerting influence.

Of the first, the *information acquiring* function, Davies (1985, pp. 151-152) notes, using a quote from Des Wilson, a veteran campaigner, how groups can not only use the media to alert them to salient stories, but how they may also recruit members in this way. Wilson explains how he and his fellow campaigners have used the media to alert them to members of the general public who have been interested enough in an issue to write to their newspaper on the subject. Such people are then approached and invited to become involved with the group.

Of the second function, using the media as a *deliberative forum*, Davies (1985, p. 152) says that groups can use the media to publicise and clarify their views. He says that they may do this by writing to newspapers, or by 'leaking' information.

Thirdly, says Davies (1985, pp. 152-153), the media may be used to *exert influence* over public debate and opinion. This, he says, requires knowledge on the part of the pressure group as to how the mass media are able to influence public opinion. He points to various factors which are important in shaping the type of issues covered, and the way in which they are covered, which groups should understand in order to use the media effectively.

These factors include the ritualised nature of coverage which means that key events such as the Queen's Speech will always be covered. Other important factors are: the partisanship of media proprietors, commercial considerations, and government influence (Davies, 1985, pp. 154-157). The views of the proprietors of newspapers in

particular, he says, may mean that some causes will be espoused while others will be ignored.

Commercial considerations mean that readers or viewers must not be alienated so 'newsworthy' issues are more likely to be covered, mundane issues not. Davies (1985, p. 155) defines a newsworthy story as:

"one which has some of the following elements: drama, novelty, controversy, and immediacy, and should be capable of being portrayed in a concrete way and by personalities, preferably celebrities."

The views of big advertisers must be respected too, or else vital advertising revenue may be lost.

Finally, Davies (1985, pp. 156-157) points to government influence as being important. He says that not receiving briefings from departments or ministers is damaging to journalists and newspapers. This leads to an agreement between journalists and government whereby journalists agree 'not to rock the boat', by writing stories that meet with the government's approval. Pressure groups must bear this constraint in mind, he says, when dealing with the media.

Davies (1985, p. 157) goes on to describe how different groups prefer to use (or not to use) the media. He says that some groups prefer to adopt a low-key approach. Such groups tend not to court media publicity, although they are content for their issues to be covered. They tend to be passive in this process, however, with journalists coming to them for a story rather than vice versa. Other groups may be more active deliberately seeking publicity, but may avoid 'stunts' which they might feel are detrimental to their relationship with policy-makers. Other may have no such reservations, and be content to use press secretaries, public relations specialists and even advertising agencies to overtly market their cause, while groups with less

financial resources may make use of press releases, and manufacture newsworthy events for the media to cover.

Through using the media in the above ways, then, pressure groups attempt to change the political agenda. It is somewhat easier, however, to simply observe and describe how pressure groups aim to use the media in this way, than it is to measure their effectiveness in actually causing such a change to take place. The question of which groups, on which issues, actually do change the political agenda in their favour, is very difficult, if not impossible, to answer. Whereas, then, the number of mentions groups obtain in the national media can be counted, and it can be noted whether these mentions are favourable or unfavourable, which groups' spokespeople appear in news items 'reacting' to a government decision, which groups views and/or activities feature as the sole focus of news items and so on, the actual *effect* (if any) that this coverage has on the government's actions can not be quantified so easily. The next section goes on to look at the methodological difficulties inherent in measuring pressure group effectiveness in influencing or effecting the government agenda.

4.3. PRESSURE GROUP EFFECTIVENESS

Both Grant (1989, pp. 114-116) and Matthews (1993, pp. 237-240) provide a comprehensive discussion of the problems associated with measuring pressure group effectiveness. This section is very much informed by their work.

Probably the foremost barrier to measuring effectiveness in influencing government is the way in which the British political process operates. It is shrouded in secrecy making it difficult to get at what is going on 'behind the scenes' at Whitehall. Ministerial memoirs are often the best way of getting an accurate picture in this area,

but unless a particular pressure group has played a significant part in the minister's career it is unlikely to get a mention.

Furthermore, groups' aims and objectives are often many and varied, and the stated objective may be a cover for a hidden agenda of the group's true objectives. Effectiveness then becomes vague - a group may see its stated aims fulfilled but its true aims may remain unfulfilled. It may settle for a compromise on certain issues but trumpet its success loudly to encourage members and bolster its image. Groups are, after all, unlikely to concede that they are ineffective.

Thirdly, there are usually many groups lobbying in any one policy area, and often on any one issue. It may often be difficult to say, in such a situation, which group was most successful in getting the mutual aims attained or if, indeed, any pressure group was influential. Group action may have been completely irrelevant to the attainment of objectives. Matthews (1993, pp. 237-238) refers to this as the danger of inferring influence from outcomes. He points out that the party's own policy commitments, the arguments put forward by civil servants, the climate of opinion, or the views of foreign governments may all have been more important than the action of the group or groups.

Grant (1989, p. 115) also points to the difficulty in comparing substantial pressure group influence on a policy unfavourable to a group, with a small influence on a policy the group is in favour of, and warns that failure in the short-term may have more beneficial consequences in the longer-term.

Finally, the government may pay lip service to group demands, and even in some cases pass legislation, but the exercise may be symbolic. Enacted measures may not be implemented, or government pronouncements may be purely cosmetic.

Inferring influence from a group's internal resources, from its access to Whitehall, and from its structural position in society should also be avoided. There are no simple correlations between a group's budget and/or size of membership and its effectiveness, nor between this and its status. A group may have a large budget that is spent unwisely with no co-ordinated pressure strategy, or it may have a large but inactive membership. It may have regular audiences with ministers and civil servants, but may not be listened to. Neither is it as simple as claiming that a position in the economy enabling threats of sanctions to be made will mean that the government will comply with the group making these threats (Matthews, 1993, pp. 238-240). Typologies such as Grant's (1989, pp. 117-130), discussed below, should not, therefore, be relied on as an explanatory tool. It is, however, very useful in pointing to factors to be taken into account when discussing pressure groups.

Grant's (1989, pp. 117-120) typology firstly points to *domain organisation* as affecting pressure group effectiveness. By this he refers to the characteristics of members, and the competition between groups for members and influence.

For example, in the area of characteristics of members, Whitely and Winyard (1987) found promotional groups were more effective in the lobbying of Whitehall and Westminster than representative groups. Promotional groups usually displayed more expertise in this area. Whitely and Winyard also found that civil servants placed a great deal of weight on whether a representational group was truly representative, or merely selectively so, with the former category looked upon more favourably (1987, pp. 132-133)..

Different groups lobbying on similar issues may be damaged by this division of support, as the presence of more than one group may produce a non-united voice, counter-productive in achieving what may be similar ends. The electoral clout of the

client group is also important, for example whether it has the public image of deserving or undeserving when lobbying Whitehall and Westminster.

The *resources* available to groups can also play a part in determining whether or not a group is effective. Factors relevant here are internal group structures such as decision-taking and conflict resolution mechanisms, financial resources, staff resources, membership mobilisation capabilities, sanctioning capacity, and choices of strategy (Grant, 1989, p. 117).

A smooth running internal structure will obviously help facilitate a successful pressure function. No one model appears to yield success over another, however, with successful structures dependent more on co-operation between all elements of the group in presenting an organised and coherent grouping. This applies when it comes to dealing with Whitehall, Westminster, or the media.

The greater the financial resources, the easier it becomes to lobby effectively - such a function needs a large, suitably qualified staff. Buksti and Johansen (1979) say that organisations with fewer than six people on the staff are 'weak insiders'. Too many staff can, however, be counterproductive, bringing with them the problems traditionally associated with a bureaucracy.

The source of funding should also be considered. Government grants can impinge on a group's independence, with lobbying for radical aims or open criticism of the government difficult. The government has the sanction to threaten withdrawal of funds unless the group goes along with most of its proposals, at least privately.

A useful resource is the ability to mobilise the membership in support of a particular campaign (Grant, 1989, p. 124). This is particularly important in gaining favourable

media attention. If groups can produce 'real life' examples of disadvantaged client groups to speak to media representatives and be interviewed, photographed or filmed, this usually pays off in terms of coverage agreeable to the group able to produce these people. The mobilisation of membership to launch a letter writing campaign to the press, or a complaining force to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission can also be useful and effective in getting a group's definition of the issues heard.

More drastically, a group *may* increase its effectiveness through striking, or threatening to strike. Relatively few groups are, however, in a position to sanction such an action, and it may well backfire in an age where standing up to the unions is often seen as an admirable political action. Other sanctions do exist, though, such as the threat by a large group of withdrawing their members' support from the governing party at the next election. This is clearly only a credible threat if most of the members are supporters of the governing party. An insider group may also threaten to heavily criticise the government, and thus create bad publicity in the media.

As relates to a group's status, Whitely and Winyard (1987) found that effectiveness was less associated with an insider or outsider strategy than with good use of publicity, reliable research, and professional presentation of a case.

The external economic and political environment may also be important (Grant, 1989, pp. 126-130). Public opinion and attitudes, the political party in office, economic circumstances, and delegated authority from government to pressure groups, are all important here.

Public opinion and attitudes must be seen as the societal context in which pressure groups are operating. An issue stance that is perceived by the government to be a 'vote-winner' will be more popular with the government than one which is thought to

be widely unpopular with the electorate. A group's campaigns should always be seen as being played out amongst 'the general public', or the electorate, with perceptions of how this 'mass' thinks and behaves being very important.

The particular government in power can also be important in considering pressure group effectiveness. Individual ministers may feel more favourable towards a particular group, or the culture of the government in power may be important. Whitely and Winyard (1987, p. 138), for example, found that the influence of groups campaigning on poverty was reduced during the first term of the Thatcher government, due to both the ideological beliefs of the administration and the economic recession.

4.4. CONCLUSION

Measuring whether pressure groups have been effective in placing issues on government agendas is not, then, an easy variable to measure - probably the reason why there has been little empirical research on group effectiveness (Grant, 1989, p. 113). Direct observation of the policy process over a long period of time is needed to even begin to produce such a study focusing on the government agenda as dependent variable. What can be measured, however, is pressure group perceptions of effectiveness in this area. This will be done in the following chapter, but it should be stressed here that it is important to digest these perceptions alongside the likelihood that groups may overestimate their overall effectiveness if only to justify their existence and to make themselves attractive to members. Groups' effectiveness in getting their views on the media agenda, in some cases an intermediate step in getting them on government agendas, can also be measured.

In the chapter that follows, the three core pressure groups in the lone-parent family policy area will be discussed in detail. As well as looking at how these organisations function and the characteristics of the organisation, members' perceptions of their effectiveness in influencing the government agenda will be discussed. In Chapters 7 and 9, their effectiveness in influencing the media agenda will be examined by measuring the number of times each of these groups has been cited or quoted in coverage, how often events initiated by each of them have sparked coverage, and by comparing their definitions of issues with issues propounded in the press. In the following chapter each group's tactics in dealing with the media are discussed as are their perceptions of their effectiveness in this area in order to paint a picture of the organisational context in which these pressure groups are attempting to set the media agenda.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The broad focus of this study is on the national (London-based) daily newspapers and the four terrestrial television channels. All of these have a mass audience. When referring to 'the media', unless otherwise stated, it is to these newspapers and television channels that the term refers.

5

THE ACTORS: THE LONE-PARENT FAMILY POLICY AREA EXAMINED

The aim of this chapter is to provide information on what have been identified as the three national¹ pressure groups most directly concerned with lone-parent family related issues. The history, organisational structure, membership, strategies, tactics, and status in the areas of lobbying the government, media, and Westminster are all discussed for the National Council for One Parent Families, Gingerbread, and Families Need Fathers. Other peripheral groups identified as having been concerned with lone-parent family related issues from time to time, as well as single issue campaign groups, are also discussed in less detail towards the end of the chapter.

This chapter is written from the perspective of the pressure groups. The data used in the writing of this chapter were collected from a reading of pressure group literature (see Appendix 3), supplemented by contact with executive members of the three core groups. Comments made regarding status and effectiveness are, thus, based on judgements made by the groups about themselves. As was discussed in Chapter 4 (see section 4.3.), this method may over-estimate status and influence, a point that is acknowledged here. The utility of looking at how pressure groups feel about their strategies and tactics, and the results of these, should not, though, be under-estimated.

Regarding the main theme of the study - the roles of political actors, including pressure groups, in setting and shaping the media agenda - analysis of how pressure groups feel about their roles will be supplemented in Chapters 7 and 9 with a look at the concrete results of their efforts in getting their views across. This chapter, then,

looks at the organisation of pressure groups and the way in which they operate, touching upon their self-perceived effectiveness in lobbying. For a more complete conclusion on their influence in setting media agendas, this chapter should be looked at alongside Chapters 7 and 9.

5.1. THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR ONE PARENT FAMILIES

5.1.1. History

The National Council for One Parent Families (NCOPF) was formed in 1918 as the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC). The founder was Lettice Fisher, an economics lecturer at Oxford University. Fisher was concerned about the high levels of infant mortality amongst illegitimate children, and about the stigma that such children had to bear throughout their lives (Whitely and Winyard, 1987, p. 45).

The organisation was founded with a dual purpose - to offer support and services to unmarried mothers and their children, and to pressurise governments into action on what it saw as the important issues of the day. Both of these functions were carried out effectively throughout its first fifty years in existence (for a detailed history see Macaskill, 1993).

In 1973, the Council, in a move that had been developing since the mid-1960s, changed its name to the National Council for One Parent Families. The Council had become aware, during these years, that poverty struck all types of lone-parent families, and had therefore decided to widen its remit. The name change reflected this.

Fundamentally, however, the Council remained the same. The duality of service provision and pressure function remained and continues today, strengthened further by the organisation's overhaul of the late 1980s ('modernisation') (discussed below). The National Council for One Parent Families is, now, both a successful pressure group and an efficient provider of services to lone-parent families, and to those concerned with lone-parent families. From here on it is the pressure function that will be looked at, though it must not be forgotten that the provision of such a high-standard of services to lone-parent families and others is likely to favourably influence the image of the group amongst civil servants, ministers, and M.P.s, so enhancing its status as a legitimate pressure group.

5.1.2. Organisation and Membership

It is the National Council *for* One Parent Families and not *of* One Parent Families. That is, the Council is not run exclusively by lone parents, as is Gingerbread, but rather operates to aid lone-parent families, with membership open to anyone on payment of a small subscription fee. It runs many services for professionals who work with lone-parent families, rather than only providing services directly for lone-parent families. Whitely and Winyard (1987) would call this group a promotional group, although many of its members are lone parents so pushing it some way towards the representational end of the continuum.

It is a relatively rich group, enjoying an income of almost one million pounds in 1993-1994. Income comes from grants and donations including, in this financial year, central and local government grants of £286,000, and £400,000 from the Employment Services Agency to pay for its Return-to-Work programme run for lone parents. This income is supplemented by money made from selling information in the form of

training courses and publications. This raised £89,742 in 1993-94 (NCOPF, 1994a, p. iv).

This 'wealth' is reflected in the permanent headquarters that the group has (by no means the norm in poverty lobby groups or other pressure groups), and the staff of 26. Publications are professionally presented (again by no means the norm in poverty lobby groups), with several databases kept up-to-date, making most demands for information easy to meet quickly. In short, the Council in the 1990s is run along the lines of a successful business.

The staff is divided into eight teams or departments. The Director's Department is made-up of the Director and her Personal Assistant, the Press Officer, the Policy and Research Officer, and the Administrator. The other divisions are: the Training and Information Services Team (3 members of staff), the Rights Team (5), Finance and Administration (1), the Finance Team (2), the Publications Team (3), Fundraising (4), and Membership and Administration Services (3).

The appointment of a Press Officer is significant. That a full-time post has been devoted to this function reflects the importance given to media relations. The Press Officer herself has not been, however, the figurehead associated with the NCOPF (as is the case with Bruce Lidington, for example, Press Officer with Families Need Fathers, discussed below in 5.3.). Sue Slipman, the Director, has instead come to personify the NCOPF, and to some extent the lone parents' side of the whole debate, for anyone following it in any detail. During the second half of 1993 she was a frequent feature of television news programmes and relevant documentaries - a 'rent-a-quote' for lone-parent family stories and features (though Chapter 7 shows that she was less successful in getting her views heard in the press).

Indeed, the role of Sue Slipman as Director should not be underestimated. Personal explanations are often rejected in the social sciences, on the basis that one can never know whether events would have been different had a different person been involved, or whether the environment itself was conducive to change and this change would have happened whoever was involved. All that can be said with certainty is that Sue Slipman's tenure, and the modernisation of the organisation (improved management, diversified funding base, highly developed information service), have coincided. Whether the two are related cannot be ascertained.

Certainly, the late 1980s and early 1990s have seen growing professionalism in charities and pressure groups in general - needs must to survive. Media contacts have also become increasingly important across the board as awareness spreads that the media is a powerful tool in the lobbying game. Also true, however, is that Slipman is widely regarded as an extremely competent Director². She comes across well on television, arguing her case clearly, reasonably and simply. Judgement on this latter point is clearly subjective to a certain extent, but one can usually offer a more objective opinion on criteria such as calm tone of voice when she/he speaks, conciseness of point, clarity of argument and appropriate use of examples, avoidance of what could be labelled extreme views, non-partisanship, and a smart, professional appearance.

In short, the group is now run along the lines of a business, serious about competing in its field and providing a good product for its customers. Having a capable Director at its head does not completely explain its smooth-running, but neither is it irrelevant.

5.1.3. Lobbying Government: Strategies, Tactics, and Status

Since the mid-1980s, when the organisation underwent modernisation, the whole emphasis of the Council has changed from one of lobbying to improve benefits for lone-parent families, to one of calling for a change to the system so that lone mothers (who want to) are able to work, so becoming financially independent of the state³.

This approach has made it more popular with the government than did the 'clamouring for increased benefits' approach. Helping women to help themselves goes down well with the Conservative Party, it being a common theme in government rhetoric throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Any call for increased benefits was seen, on the other hand, as part of the 'something for nothing' society, a manifestation of the 'dependency culture' that was again a feature of Conservative Party rhetoric during the 1980s, this time a negative feature.

This change in tactics is a good example of a pressure group changing its demands in order that it can win the approval of government and, thus, be more effective in getting its demands heard and acted upon. The Council has taken the view that lobbying for something that is unlikely to be acted upon by the government is a waste of time, and has concentrated instead on measures that would help lone-parent families in another way *and* would have more chance of being implemented.

The provision of high-quality information services was also given priority in its quest to become a valued insider group. As well as providing for the client group that the group wants to help, it provides information to ministers (as well as to M.P.s and the media). Furthermore, the Council is well aware that in an age of high-tech computer facilities, a group that is still typing out information on the office typewriter and binding it in coloured paper, is probably not going to get a second look. Modernisation of the organisation therefore included a switch to more state of the art

information technology, with, as a result, recent publications reaching a high standard in terms of presentation as well as content. Quality information requires access to computational resources in the 1990s. Groups must aspire to this to be truly accepted as insiders, both in the world of government and parliamentary lobbying, and in the world of media contacting.

As a result of the group's modernisation, the NCOPF seems now to be a well-established insider group, thought highly of by those that matter in Whitehall (Hepplewhite, 1992). The group has regular meetings with government ministers and opinion formers, and is undoubtedly listened to, even if all it has to say is not taken-up by the government.

The NCOPF is not, however, a puppet of the government. As Alistair Burt (the Social Security Minister responsible for the Child Support Agency) said at the Council's 1992 conference, the NCOPF and the government do not always see eye to eye, and on these occasions the NCOPF will, and often does, speak out against government policies and proposals both privately and publicly. The NCOPF is still independent, and is no 'prisoner' group, but enjoys its close relationship with government, believing it to be productive in achieving the aims of the organisation.

The group's modernisation seems to have been successful in its ultimate aim: increased effectiveness. It works closely with the state run Training and Enterprise Councils in order to help lone parents that want to return to work, and has worked with the Benefits Agency, the Child Support Agency, the Careers' Service, vocational training agencies, and childcare suppliers, amongst others. It has in all cases felt that it has influenced the direction of policy to the good. It works with policy think-tanks of all political persuasions to develop new approaches to family policy based around the

principle that marriages and partnerships may well end, but parenting is for life. Again, it feels that this work is effective.

Sue Slipman and other key Council staff have been particularly effective in building-up a rapport between themselves and important players in the policy area. Sue Slipman and Alistair Burt, in particular, are reported to have an excellent working relationship. Ros Hepplewhite, the first Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency (Hepplewhite resigned in September 1994 and was replaced by Ann Chant), George Young, Housing Minister, and Gillian Shephard, as Secretary of State for Employment, and as Government Co-chair of the Women's National Commission (she no longer holds either of these posts), have also worked closely with Slipman and the organisation. Obviously a good rapport without the backing of a high level of information would be of little use, but personal relationships such as these must not be forgotten. The ability of the present Director to get on with the people she hopes to influence is important, and in this way the personality and skills of those running the organisation should be considered.

Indeed, it is very much an organisation that is run from the top. Appeal to the membership to lobby the government (or to lobby M.P.s and/or the media) has been limited.

To sum-up, the NCOPF's insider status has been strengthened over recent years. The NCOPF feels that the government respects the group and listens to it, even though all it has to say is not taken-up. It believes itself to be a successful lobbying group with its behind-the scenes influence unable to be measured within the scope of this thesis, but it certainly seems to be an active player in the policy-making process.

5.1.4. The NCOPF as Westminster Pressure Group

The NCOPF abandoned the lobbying of Westminster in the mid-1980s. Until then, the group had used a two-pronged strategy - the lobbying of Westminster, and the lobbying of Whitehall. At the time of the organisation's overhaul, however, this was reviewed and it was decided that better use of resources would be made by concentrating on Whitehall. The lobbying of Westminster was not, in the opinion of the Directorate, producing results. Time, money, and effort has, since, been devoted to the areas of lobbying the government, and using the media to further its aims.

Literature sent to lone parent members has included a handful of appeals to write to M.P.s, but these appeals have been infrequent and low-profile. The group is, though, happy to provide M.P.s with information about the group, its aims, and lone-parent families generally.

5.1.5. The NCOPF as Media Pressure Group

All three of the groups looked at in detail here have a high-profile strategy when it comes to dealings with the media. The NCOPF believes strongly that behind the scenes contact in Whitehall is not enough, it must be supplemented with a favourable public image of its client group. It wishes to foster a high public profile so ties with the media have been cultivated. As a result, the NCOPF believes that journalists tend to recognise it as a reliable source of information and comment (and again the high standard of the information service that the NCOPF offers is important). It says that it is approached regularly to provide comment on lone-parent family related stories (the NCOPF as *reacting* to news stories). The group believes that these media ties also make it possible for it to play a more *proactive* role in this area. The brief discussion below will centre on the NCOPF's views on its effectiveness in carrying out these two

roles (Chapter 7 looks in more detail at the NCOPF's role in setting the media agenda from the perspective of how often the group has been mentioned in press reports).

The Council has implemented several press campaigns over the last few years. During 1991, for example, the group launched a campaign to draw attention to complaints from lone parents about Department of Social Security harassment in relation to the Child Support Act. The group believes that media interest helped it to bring pressure on the Benefits Agency to amend some of its policies in this area, resulting in an officially recognised Charter of Rights for Lone Parents. It also collaborated at this time with journalists, on several major national newspaper articles on the problems that lone parents face when attempting to return to work.

These, and other campaigns over the years, were essentially proactive, but cannot be said to have grabbed the attention of the news media in any widespread or long-term way. When the news media covered lone-parent family issues during the second half of 1993 in exactly this widespread and long-term way, the NCOPF noted that it was the government that sparked the main stories (see Chapter 7). The NCOPF felt that it was left with the job of reacting to what the government was saying. It did this job well, however, and believes it influenced the way that issues were covered *within the framework of the government's definition of the issues*. It has called itself 'the most powerful voice' in the 1993 debate on lone-parent families (NCOPF, 1993), and believes itself to have been "highly successful in influencing the public debates around issues facing lone parents" (NCOPF, 1994b, p. 1). Certainly, as was mentioned above, Sue Slipman featured often on *television* news, but as will be seen in Chapter 7, did not feature particularly regularly in newspaper reports. This question will, then, be investigated more thoroughly in Chapters 7 and 9.

The NCOPF does concede that, in regard to proactive coverage, it has been able to get mass media space for its concerns from time to time, but this space has been very limited. Stories have been one-off rather than spreading over a period of a week or more, low-profile (not on the front page or commented on by the leader), and space has tended to be given in one newspaper, but not taken up by all or most of the dailies, and not spreading to the television news. The Council is aware that this level of media coverage, while doing more good than harm, is unlikely to come to the notice of more than a very small proportion of 'the general public' (or potential voters in the government's eyes). It is therefore unlikely to affect public attitudes and opinions, and unlikely, as a result, to put pressure on the government.

This putting pressure on the government is the ultimate aim of the group's media strategy, but smaller scale influencing of individuals in how they perceive lone-parent families is also seen as important by the Council. Part of the hardship lone parents' face, according to the group, is in the attitudes of the public towards lone-parent families. The Council believes that there is still a stigma attached to being a lone parent. It thinks that from potential employers, to people in the benefit office, to casual acquaintances, there are many who carry with them preconceived ideas about what a 'lone parent' is like, with these ideas often offensive to the lone parent herself. The NCOPF believes that by using the press and television even in a small-scale way, some of these attitudes can be changed. These low-profile, one-off features on lone-parent families instigated by the Council are not, therefore, seen as a waste of resources but are welcomed, perhaps less as part of its pressure group strategy than as a part of its service provision strategy.

It was mentioned above that appeals to lone parent members to lobby the government and M.P.s have been low-profile and not oft-repeated. Appeal to these members has also been limited in the area of contacting the media in the period focused on in this

study. Media contacting has been largely down to the Press Officer and the Director, with lip service having occasionally been paid to the importance of grass-roots action. This has not, however, been emphasised. Since the period focused on in this thesis though, there have been more urgent calls for lone parent members to make their voices heard.

This change can probably be put down to the media coverage of the Child Support Agency. This coverage has taught the NCOPF a lesson that it is not likely to forget - lone parents must themselves speak out on issues that concern them. The NCOPF believes that the media took the side of the absent and non-paying fathers on this issue, and that it did so because these men organised themselves into "militant bands of campaigners" (NCOPF, 1994b, p. 3), while lone mothers were silent, but not without reason:

"To install a telephone and pay for calls, to buy a car and find the money for road tax, insurance and petrol, to buy childcare and babysitting fees, to afford and organise travel of any kind - all of this is beyond the means of lone parents. Yet all of this is needed to rally to a cause.

We do not have the mobility to march. We do not want to parade our children in front of the media. We are often hesitant and sometimes fearful of airing our divorce details in public. Yet we need to find a voice if we want to get a better deal for ourselves and our children." (Member of the NCOPF speaking to M.P.s and journalists at an event engineered by the NCOPF executive, published in NCOPF, 1994b, p. 3.)

Following the media debate on the CSA (looked at in detail in Chapters 7 and 9) lone parents have been urged to speak out and to contact the press, and also to contact M.P.s. There is an accompanying realisation, however, that this is difficult for many

lone parents, with the resources unavailable in many instances. Indeed, this has been one of the reasons why grass-roots action was not advocated sooner. This partially dictated the strategy of the executive arguing on the behalf of lone-parent families, as part of the group's problem was seen as its powerlessness in this area.

This 'lesson' learnt from the Child Support Agency coverage is likely, however, to change the NCOPF's media strategy in that it is now very aware that much of the media likes, and sometimes even requires, a 'real' person or real people around which to base their news reports and features. Hence the event engineered by the NCOPF mentioned above. In March 1994 the Council bussed in lone parents from all over England and Wales to talk about the Child Support Agency to assembled journalists and M.P.s. The purpose was to appeal to the media to balance their coverage of the CSA by highlighting the plight of lone parents.

Although this time period is outside this study's focus period, during which a systematic and comprehensive analysis of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* was undertaken, a less rigorous examination of the news media for 1994 indicates that this was the turning point in coverage of the Child Support Agency. The event was covered by the main television news programmes, and was mentioned in most of the newspapers. Furthermore, in the months that have followed, absent parents' complaints about the Child Support Agency have usually been accompanied by 'the lone parent' view on television news, and in the national newspapers lone parent voices are being heard more often in discussions of the CSA. Indeed, Fiona Fox, the NCOPF Press Officer, tells of how a week after the organised event, the absent fathers tried to use the first anniversary to generate "another flood of articles highlighting their plight". This time "nearly every journalist covering the absent parents' protest came to us looking for lone parents to balance the story!" (NCOPF, 1994b, p. 1).

The above anecdote tells of how the media can be used to put across the lone parents' views in a way that may win public support for their situation. In this way it can be an effective tool in helping a pressure group to achieve its aims. It can also, however, be a powerful weapon, as the NCOPF found out in September 1993. The *Panorama* programme, a widely-respected current affairs programme, broadcast "Babies on Benefit" during this month. The programme, coming in the middle of the public and government debate on lone-parent families, presented a picture of lone parents as young, single, feckless and irresponsible benefit scroungers. The policy answer to this problematic group, said the programme, was to cut benefits. To offer benefits at the level the state currently did, continued the programme, was irresponsibly encouraging young women to become pregnant and thereafter expect the state to support them. The programme presented a picture of lone mothers having to live a mostly miserable life of dependency on the state due to these benefit 'incentives'. The overall message was that it would be better for everyone, particularly potential young lone mothers, to cut state support.

The NCOPF felt that this was "a disgusting programme that fed every ill-informed prejudice and myth about lone parents" (NCOPF, 1994b, p. 4). Furthermore, it felt that the programme had "distorted statistics" (NCOPF, 1994b, p. 4) in order to come up with the picture of lone parents that it broadcast.

Such a programme was not conducive to the NCOPF's aims of creating a favourable public image of its client group, but the damage was even more far-reaching. The programme was screened on the eve of the Council's biggest fund-raising event of their 75th anniversary year, the annual fund-raising ball to be attended by many of 'the Great and the Good'. Many of those attending the occasion, a large number of whom were long time supporters of the Council financially, were hesitant about donating any further money. They believed, after having watched this programme, that they were

doing more harm than good. The third negative impact came with the programme being used by other high-profile players in the debate of 1993, to 'prove' the assertions they were making about lone-parent families. That *Panorama* had made these assertions was seen as providing them with legitimacy and respectability.

The "Babies on Benefit" programme illustrates the power that one programme can have, this power being particularly strong because of the trust that people place in such a flag-ship current affairs programme to present 'the truth'. The NCOPF submitted a detailed complaint to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission, basing its complaint on four major factual inaccuracies presented in the programme. The complaint was upheld by the Commission which said that the programme was "unfair and unjust to lone parents as a whole" (cited in NCOPF, 1994c, p. 2).

5.1.6. Summary

In summary, the NCOPF can be said to be a highly professional group that appears to have reaped its rewards in being able to make ministers listen to what it has to say on at least some issues. This influence seems to have worked in a reactive, rather than a proactive, manner. Similarly, the group feels that its relationship with the media has been successful reactively, but less successful proactively. This subject will be returned to in Chapters 7 and 9 when the group's perceptions on this will be supplemented by measuring their success in being cited or quoted in the press and being responsible for agenda-setting events; and by setting their views on issues against those expressed in the press in order to identify overlaps which may indicate that the group has been successful in setting the media agenda.

5.2. GINGERBREAD

5.2.1. History

Gingerbread was formed in 1970 by a single mother who wanted to meet others in her situation and with her problems. The name came from 'ginger', meaning to challenge the authorities, and 'bread', slang for money. The organisation grew quickly. After eight months it had eight part-time workers, and after a year, a co-ordinating committee was set-up as membership crept towards the one hundred mark. Twenty-five years later the organisation has over 7,000 members.

Like the NCOPF, Gingerbread describes itself as a group for lone-parent families. Gingerbread and the National Council for One Parent Families are similar in their overall aim - to improve life for lone-parent families. Their specific aims also coincide on a number of issues. Gingerbread differs from the NCOPF in a number of ways however. These will be highlighted in the discussion below.

5.2.2. Organisation and Membership

Gingerbread is more representative in nature than is the National Council. Gingerbread is made-up almost exclusively of lone parents, and is also managed and run by lone parents. It also has a much greater input from the grass-roots level when it comes to policy ideas than does the NCOPF.

Structurally, too, Gingerbread differs from the NCOPF. Gingerbread's National Office is merely one part of the organisation, rather than being the leading part as is the National Council's equivalent executive. Gingerbread is much less hierarchically run than is the NCOPF, with the former's members having a relatively large say in the running of the organisation. Its network of more than 200 local self-help groups throughout England and Wales means that it is fairly decentralised. The national

organisation, based in London, supports these local groups, as well as being responsible for lobbying and campaigning. Twelve regional councils act as an interface between the branches and the national organisation.

In 1993/94 Gingerbread had an income of nearly £333,720 - not a particularly large sum of money with which to run an organisation. Most of this came from grants from public bodies, including grants from the Department of Health and the London Borough Grants Scheme.

Considering the sparsity of funds, it is not surprising that Gingerbread's staff count is considerably lower than the NCOPF's. Gingerbread has a staff of seven at its headquarters: a Chief Executive (currently Kieran Murphy), a National Development Officer, a London Worker, a Finance Officer, an Information Officer, an Administrative Assistant, and a Receptionist.

Another difference between the NCOPF and Gingerbread lies in the latter's functional emphasis. Whereas the NCOPF balances its pressure and service functions, performing both to a high standard, Gingerbread has concentrated on service provision. It describes itself as: "The national support organisation for lone parents and their children" (Gingerbread, 1993b), with its pressure function secondary to this primary role. It sees its campaigning role as part of the wide-reaching service function, rather than as a well-developed entity in itself. As a result, Gingerbread as a pressure group does not have the high level of competency of the NCOPF. Campaigning is patchy and periodic, contrasting with the professional and comprehensive NCOPF model.

Gingerbread's publications and information services are not as prolific as the NCOPF's either. Running on a staff of seven, with a very limited budget, it is not surprising that

Gingerbread comes up wanting in this respect in comparison with the larger and more generously funded NCOPF.

5.2.3. Lobbying Government: Strategies, Tactics, and Status

As mentioned above, the national office is the part of the organisation that is responsible for pressuring government on lone-parent family issues. It bills itself as 'the authoritative voice' of lone parents, in recognition of its close contact with lone-parent family groups at the local level. It sees its representative nature as a point on which it can get 'one-up' on its rival the NCOPF, and sees its grass-roots nature as advantageous.

It does not tend to live up to this billing however. Probably due to its decentralised structure, goals are not well-defined, and it tends to fluctuate between lobbying and service provision. The result is that both functions, as nationally administered, seem to suffer. Indeed, Whitely and Winyard (1987, p. 123) found that the great store the group sets by local autonomy meant it found it difficult to respond quickly, and with a coherent voice, to policy developments. They found that Gingerbread was, thus, not always accepted by the policy-makers whom they interviewed (Whitely and Winyard, 1987, p. 32).

The group cannot, therefore, be described as a core or specialist insider group, although it does meet with government ministers from time to time. It is probably best categorised as a peripheral insider, occasionally listened to by government but certainly not accorded the same respect as is the NCOPF in policy-making circles. Key is its inconsistency in the quality of its arguments on policy. Its main strength lies in meeting officials to discuss *individual* cases.

Gingerbread's effectiveness as a pressure group should not, however, be underestimated. It is a member of several umbrella organisations which work to lobby government on more specific issues - the Child-Care Umbrella, the Social Security Consortium, Coalition for Child Benefit, and the Family Courts Consortium. More significantly, it has secured a place on the Women's National Commission, the main government advisory body on women's issues. It has regularly undertaken activities at political parties' annual conferences. It certainly considers the lobbying of government to be important, even if its actions do not always live up to its aims.

5.2.4. Gingerbread as Westminster Pressure Group

Unlike the NCOPF, Gingerbread does count the lobbying of Westminster as part of its pressure strategy. The group has several M.P.s amongst its patrons, with many more pledging support. These contacts, from all parties and from both Houses, are aware of Gingerbread's work and its concerns, and Gingerbread hopes that this awareness will shape the way their contacts respond to relevant issues in the House. The M.P.s in question appear to value Gingerbread's contact because of its closeness to lone parents (see Gingerbread, 1992; Gingerbread, 1993a; Gingerbread, 1994). For example, Earl Russell, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson in the House of Lords on Social Security, said:

"1993 will be a difficult year for lone parents. With the coming into force of the Child Support Act, they will need a great deal of advice on the working of a new law. At the same time, members of both Houses of Parliament will need early warning of where the shoe is pinching. I will look with confidence to Gingerbread for help with both these jobs." (Gingerbread, 1992, p. 9.)

It seems that Gingerbread's success in making contacts in this area lies in the group being well-respected for its service provision, then, rather than in the success of sophisticated pressure techniques.

5.2.5. Gingerbread as Media Pressure Group

Gingerbread has always been very aware of using the media to achieve its aims, which are three-fold. Firstly, it wants to promote a positive image of lone parents in the media. Along with the NCOPF, it believes that a major problem faced by lone parents is negative media images, as such images contribute to public mistrust of these families. Secondly, it feels that one way of getting through to government and changing policies for lone-parent families is through the media. Thirdly, publicising the group and its activities through the media is good for fund-raising, and for boosting membership numbers.

In its earlier years, the group staged several dramatic events in order to get media attention. In 1977, for example, members held a twelve hour vigil outside 10 Downing Street on the third anniversary of the publication of the Finer Report. This culminated in members handing a wreath to the Prime Minister to symbolise the death of many of the Finer proposals⁴ (Whitely and Winyard, 1987, p. 99).

Nowadays, the group tends to employ less spectacular methods. Like the NCOPF it has learnt from the media's 1993 coverage of the Child Support Agency. The group now tries to supply 'real' examples of lone parents' situations to the media in order to promote a positive image of lone parents to overcome what it feels have been unfavourable and inaccurate media images. Such 'real-life' examples have tended to be on an individual rather than a mass scale. It pursues opportunities for media coverage wherever possible, and issues regular press releases.

Gingerbread believes that its recently improved media strategy *has* paid off, with the Chief Executive Kieran Murphy (and previously Mary Honeyball who held this post until April 1994) approached regularly for their views on relevant issues. The National Office regularly puts journalists in touch with Gingerbread members in order to allow

what it calls "the reality of lone parents' lives" to be heard. The group has pondered, however, over whether this success in the area of media coverage is in fact due to its improved strategy. It suspects that it may be the case that the media have simply become more interested in lone-parent families over the last couple of years, with its strategy having little impact.

The organisation feels that its role has been largely reactive, and is not entirely comfortable with this. It feels that the media coverage that it has managed to instigate about the group, its activities, and the issues with which it has been concerned, has primarily involved a counteracting of negative images, previously put forward by the media, with positive images. For example, recently it persuaded one of its members to tell her story to the media. She was a forty-year-old divorced mother whose husband had left the family home. She had worked before her husband left her four years previously, but had to turn down jobs since then because she couldn't afford childcare. She described herself as a Conservative voter who would no longer be voting that way. She was 'produced' by Gingerbread to demonstrate that not all single mothers were never-married youngsters who had never worked for a living.

The *Panorama* programme "Babies on Benefit" also disturbed Gingerbread. It, along with the NCOPF, felt that negative images were promoted in this programme, helping to sustain the stigma of being 'a lone parent'. It saw the programme as presenting an image of single mothers as promiscuous and selfish, sleeping with any man in order to become pregnant and have a baby. It objected to this, saying it was an atypical presentation of lone-parent families. Unlike the NCOPF, though, it did not prepare and launch an official complaint.

It is probably Gingerbread's status as a representative lone parent organisation that has led to it being approached by journalists when information, a story, or a real life

case study is wanted. Overall, compared to the NCOPF's media strategy, Gingerbread's strategy has been less well-thought-out, and less professional in terms of presentation and following the correct procedures when it comes to issuing press releases and packaging usable quotes. Managing the media is a considerable skill. Gingerbread is amateur in this area, where the NCOPF is professional.

5.2.6. Summary

Gingerbread's strength lies in its representative nature and its service-provision emphasis. It exists for different reasons than does the NCOPF, its pressure function is secondary to its role as a lone-parent family support group. It is, however, this very role that it believes has made it effective in the lobbying of the media and M.P.s. It sees its closeness to lone-parent families as a positive aspect in regard to this, believing that it listened to precisely because of its service-provision/support emphasis. It sees its grass-roots nature as ensuring its authenticity as an organisation which is aware of the nature and problems of lone-parent families.

5.3. FAMILIES NEED FATHERS

5.3.1. History

Families Need Fathers (FNF) is rather different from the previously discussed groups. It does not represent lone parents, but looks after the interests of the other parent: the so-called 'absent parent'. That FNF objects strongly to this phrase, though, reveals a lot about the group's beliefs. Its main concern is to help maintain a child's relationship with both parents following divorce and separation. It does not want the father (as it is usually the mother who has their children living with her full-time) to be absent. It

aims to do all it can in supporting fathers who wish to maintain contact with their children.

FNF was founded in 1974 by several professional men who found themselves excluded, against their wishes, from their children's lives following divorce. It was initially a small self-help group, providing a network of contacts around the country. Newly separated men were put in touch with long-time non-resident parents in order that they could be assisted in avoiding losing touch with their children. Since then it has grown to become *the* nationally recognised organisation for divorced and separated fathers.

In common with Gingerbread and the NCOPF it offers advice and support to its members. Booklets, fact packs, information leaflets, and magazines are produced by all of these groups with this service aim in mind. It also has a pressure function. FNF states that it lobbies M.P.s, the Law Commission, and the Judiciary in order to try and improve the lives of its client group. As part of the overall pressure strategy, it places a high premium on using the news media to increase public awareness of the problems faced by its client group.

Recently there has been a debate within the organisation as to whether or not its name should be changed. Families Need *Fathers* is seen as excluding mothers who are having contact problems, and is seen as being sexist by some members. There is also the criticism that the name does not focus sufficiently on child welfare, concentrating too much on the father. It has discussed including the word 'parents' in its title, perhaps changing its name to 'Parents Forever' following its sister organisation in Scotland. This decision has been put on hold, however, as it has been decided that the group is at a crucial stage in its development. It has just begun to be taken seriously by the media, and considered a valuable source from which to obtain quotes and

information. A name change runs the risk of less media attention, an outcome that FNF does not want.

5.3.2. Organisation and Membership

FNF is more akin to Gingerbread than to the NCOPF in relation to its membership. It is very much a representative group, being run by its members who are themselves divorced or separated fathers⁵. Office holders take on the posts by election, but these are not performed full-time, instead being taken on in addition to the men's full-time jobs. The exception to this is the full-time staff member, employed to run the national office. Recently, FNF obtained the funds for a permanent office in London, raised from members' donations, and this staff member was appointed. Previously, contacts were made from member's homes, with regular meetings held in pubs or public halls. These meetings still occur, but there is now a permanent address for postal and telephone enquiries. This step was seen as vital in order that the organisation was taken seriously, by the media in particular.

Funds are extremely limited. The organisation does not receive government or other grants as do the two lone-parent family organisations. Charitable trusts and other benefactors have not been forthcoming either. Funds have to be raised through members themselves. Subscription costs are higher than the lone parent groups, and members are encouraged to make regular donations in addition to the subscription fees. They are also encouraged to approach their employers, their Local Authorities, and other corporate bodies with whom they have contacts. Members are asked to donate equipment for the running of the organisation too. Appeals for a photocopier and computer were made when the office was opening.

While the NCOPF and Gingerbread are catering for clients whose prime problem is often poverty, the FNF cannot be said to be part of the poverty lobby. Its members are less likely to be experiencing such poverty⁶. Appealing directly to members for funds, therefore, is permissible and often successful. This is, in fact, seen as the only option, as without 'the pull' of child poverty that the NCOPF and Gingerbread can play on, the provision of funds from outside sources is seen as unlikely.

Nevertheless, funds are meagre so the organisation is run largely by members who perform vital functions voluntarily. There is a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Administration Officer, Information Officer, Regional Officer, and a Training Officer. Five committees co-ordinate the running of the organisation. These are: the Executive Committee, the Finance Committee, the Information Committee, the Legal and Policy Committee, and the Organisation Committee. This committee system was implemented recently, after complaints that the national FNF was doing little to support the local groups.

Like Gingerbread, the organisation has a number of branches (around 22) in England and Wales. With a permanent staff of only one, however, it is not surprising that the national organisation is less well developed. This does not mean, though, that its running compares unfavourably to the more generously staffed Gingerbread. Considering this loose structure, the organisation appears to be run remarkably well. The ethos of the organisation seems very much to be one of collective action, with a non-hierarchical structure, and everyone pulling their weight in attempting to meet the aims of the group. It is largely a voluntary effort, growing out of strong beliefs that have emerged from the divorce and separation experiences of the members. The organisation has over 1,000 members, with pressure put on every one of them to do more than pay his or her annual subscription and turn-up at the odd meeting. The low

membership number must, then, be seen alongside the pressure that members are put under to become actively involved in the organisation.

The public face of FNF, the equivalent to the high profile Sue Slipman or Mary Honeyball/Kieran Murphy, is the organisation's Information Officer, Bruce Lidington. He has appeared regularly in the newspapers and on television in relation to the Child Support Agency, and in relation to the abduction of children by non-residential parents. Like Slipman, he cuts a good figure on television, arguing cogently, presenting relevant statistics and anecdotes, and providing a respectable and professional front for the organisation.

5.3.3. Lobbying Government: Strategy, Tactics, and Status

The group is clearly an outsider group but would like to gain insider status. At the moment it is in a very early stage of development, having just gained a permanent office and staff. If the commitment of its members increases, however, alongside its funds, it is likely that the organisation may one day achieve this aim. Strategy and aims are now clearly articulated, and the importance of good quality information and logical, cogent arguments (rather than obviously biased polemics, often favoured in the past) has now been realised. The group has certainly passed through its initial stages of being primarily a support organisation on a father-to-father level, and is now looking to provide support for these fathers by changing the system. Lobbying government is likely to be part of a future pressure strategy. The group is neither an ideological outsider, nor an outsider by choice. It is the case, rather, that it has not yet become organised enough to co-ordinate contacts with government.

5.3.4. FNF as Westminster Pressure Group

Families Need Fathers differs from the NCOPF in particular, in concentrating on lobbying Westminster rather than Whitehall. A central strategy in the area of parliamentary lobbying has been the involvement of the mass membership in campaigns. Members are urged to write to their M.P.s, for example, and to make their voices heard as often and as loudly as possible. Explicit instructions are relayed through local branch newsletters and through the group magazine. In February 1994, for example, members were told to write to Marion Roe M.P. (Chair of the Health Select Committee). They were told which points to make, and were instructed to duplicate their letters, sending one to their own M.P.. On another occasion members were urged to write to their M.P.s during a specified week to complain about the Child Support Agency. A rota of people has also been organised to read *Hansard* and inform the National Organisation of relevant happenings. It is frequently emphasised that everyone must play a part in campaigning for the organisation to be successful, a tactic that seems to pay off in terms of member involvement.

Families Need Fathers has, over the last few years, become well-respected by many M.P.s. The group works with the belief that individual M.P.s are probably more sensitive to the force of large numbers of complainants than is the government as a whole, as it is the M.P.'s own career that is at stake if he/she does not respond to constituents' problems. A well-orchestrated campaign of letter-writing by members of FNF to multiple M.P.s is, therefore, believed to have an effect in that M.P.s will perceive the subject of the letter to be a 'public issue' and will pressure ministers accordingly. FNF is experienced in conducting such campaigns, and stresses that the quality of the communication does not matter, sheer force of numbers is instead the objective. The campaign against the Child Support Agency seems to have been a successful example of this type of lobbying, with many M.P.s reporting that their

postbags have been bulging with complaints about the Agency, and some observing that it is an even less popular issue than was the poll tax.

5.3.5. FNF as Media Pressure Group

Families Need Fathers puts its primary emphasis not on lobbying M.P.s, however, but on publicising its cause through the media. One of the key objectives of FNF is to inform the public about the importance of fathers maintaining contact with their children following divorce, and to change the image of the so-called 'absent father' as a feckless and irresponsible runaway. It also sees media publicity as a way of increasing its number of members. It is the former function that will be concentrated on below, a function at which the group believes it has become very good over the last few years.

Sue Slipman was cited as being one of the reasons for the NCOPF's success in becoming a valued insider group. Bruce Lidington, Press Officer, has played a similar role in making FNF a high profile group in the lone-parent family policy area. He has been Press Officer since 1991. To attribute the success to Lidington (or to Slipman) is too simple however. Lidington has tightened up the organisation's procedures when it comes to contacting and dealing with the media. Like Mary Honeyball of Gingerbread, however, he believes that it has been a change in attitude by the media that has most benefited the organisation, more than anything it has done procedurally. During the 1990s the media seem to have become interested in publicising non-custodial parent stories, and in giving these parents a hearing. What FNF has done is merely to make sure it effectively cashes in on this, publicity-wise.

At the end of 1993, following the media debate on lone parents and, in particular, coverage of the Child Support Agency, Bruce Lidington felt that FNF was 'winning its

cause'. He said that until about 1991 non-custodial parents had not been recognised by the media as having any social standing or worthwhile point of view, and there was an almost complete lack of coverage of this population group. Indeed, Lidington described non-custodial parents at this time as being "the largest adult minority in the country" (FNF, 1992, p. 3). He believes that it was their non-appearance in the media that led to the government labelling them 'absent parents'. Ultimately, Lidington and FNF would like the media to acknowledge that "non-custodial parents are 50% of the adult equation when it covers matters arising from family-breakdown" (FNF, 1992, p. 3). After coverage during 1993 his feeling is that this aim has come closer to being fulfilled.

Again, the membership of FNF has been strongly urged to play its part in getting publicity for its concerns. It strongly encourages members to monitor the media, writing or phoning in if anything they see or read displeases them. One issue of *Access* (FNF, 1992, p. 4), the group's magazine, published the telephone numbers of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and the Independent Television Commission alongside a message that implied it was the *duty* of members to actively participate in 'spreading the word' about non-residential fathers. Campaigns involving a mass influx of letters into national newspapers on suggested issues are also a regular feature of the national magazine. Members are told that newspapers do not publish letters because they are well-written, but because they represent the views of the readers. Therefore, members are told, the more people that write in the better, as although only the best will be published, it is the bulk of letters received that has provided the impetus for their publication. The main message to members is: let the media know that fathers are getting a raw deal by writing in and getting your friends and relatives to write-in. Anyone who has been involved with the media in any way is urged to get involved in using his/her skills to benefit the group.

Direct action in the form of marches and engineered 'events' have also been organised by FNF. The group believes that these have proved particularly popular is getting coverage in the national tabloid dailies. FNF is aware that photographs of marching fathers with their new partners and children can provide a handy peg on which these newspapers can hang a story on the Child Support Agency. The laying of wreaths at Millbank, the birthplace of the CSA, mirrors a tactic used by Gingerbread sixteen years previously, with both having been organised with good photo-opportunities in mind. For FNF these engineered events and photo-opportunities have been combined with Lidington arguing the case for non-custodial parents in reasonable and cogent terms, in the hope that this 'package' will attract media coverage.

Overall, the group has being pleased with the coverage of it and its issues over the last few years, and during 1993 in particular. Like Gingerbread and the NCOPF, however, it is vehemently critical of a handful of particularly unfavourable media portrayals. Specific television documentaries come in for the most criticism. Such programmes are highly regarded by television viewers as presenting 'the truth of the matter', not subject to the expected biases of newspaper coverage. Unfavourable portrayals on such programmes therefore cause particular consternation to pressure groups.

The *Public Eye* series on the family broadcast in December 1991 is one example of a programme that came in for criticism from FNF. The series was shown on five consecutive evenings, with the first four programmes addressing some aspect of the evolving nature of the family, and the final programme showing a debate on the issues covered by the previous programmes. FNF was concerned that none of the programmes featured non-custodial parents, and that the studio debate comprised only supporters of two-parent families, and lone mothers. It felt that non-custodial parents were ignored and therefore marginalised, not seen as being part of 'the family'.

Other broadcasts have been criticised for portraying such fathers, but portraying them in an undesirable light. For example, a *Critical Eye* programme broadcast during 1992 was thought by FNF to have shown selective evidence and used statistics wrongly in order to prove that families do not need fathers, and are frequently better off without them, due to their violence. It was also concerned by a spate of advertising campaigns in 1992 which it said showed fathers in a bad light, often portraying them as child-abusers. A National Society for the Protection of Children advert was particularly objected to in this regard. Following this and a similar National Children's Bureau advertisement, members were urged to examine adverts carefully for 'gender issues' and to complain if they were unhappy with what they saw.

A programme that undoubtedly caused harm to the organisation itself, however, was a March 1993 edition of *World In Action*. Entitled "The Child Snatchers", it showed members of FNF, through secretly filmed incidents, as clearly condoning child abduction. FNF has since claimed that the selectivity of the editing of the secret film presented a distorted picture of the organisation, but, nevertheless, FNF's name may have been tarnished by this. A damage limitation exercise seemed to diffuse this issue remarkably quickly however. In the media debate that followed, shortly after this, Families Need Fathers was given some amount of coverage and, as far as was discovered in the reading and watching of material for this study, there was no references to FNF as an illegitimate organisation. The allegation does not seem to have been raised in association with the group outside of this programme, and seems to have been largely forgotten, except by some members who are concerned to ensure that such a tarnishing of the group's image does not occur again. Executive officers are well aware that a group does not gain insider status with such allegations attached to its image.

Of the three groups discussed so far, FNF is probably the most aware of the importance of favourable media coverage. This slant probably arises from its status as an outsider group. As government ministers do not have regular formal contacts with the group, it must look elsewhere for the chance to make an impact. With the help of an Information Officer who is clearly aware of how the media operates, the group has stressed the importance of having a high profile in the lone-parent family policy area. This is seen as doing no harm in the group's quest to be recognised directly by policy-makers.

5.3.6. Summary

Families Need Fathers progress from a little-known support group to a recognised pressure group in the space of a few years is quite remarkable. Members believe that this has occurred because they have been willing to make their voices heard in the media.

5.4. OTHER ACTORS

Focusing on the above three groups was justified in the introduction to this chapter in that their core interests are lone-parent family related issues. There are several other groups, however, whose 'heartland' focus is on other themes, but for whom the lone-parent family policy area may be of marginal, consequential or ancillary concern, either generally or in relation to specific events. Such groups will be discussed in this section. Also discussed here are those single issue groups which have campaigned on just *one* issue salient to the lone-parent family policy area. They should be viewed separately from the above three groups as they do not have the same long-term

attachment to the lone-parent family policy area. This section is, then, concerned with peripheral pressure groups, and short-term campaign groups.

5.4.1. Lobbying Organisations

Other pressure groups which have been active in lobbying and which have attempted to generate publicity for specific issues in the field include the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), the National Association of Widows (NAW), Cruse, the Citizens' Advice Bureaux (CAB), the Mothers' Union, Relate, the Daycare Trust, and the Social Security Consortium. None of these groups would describe themselves as lone-parent family or 'non-residential parent' pressure groups, but from time-to-time they become concerned with the kinds of issues relevant here.

The Child Poverty Action Group is possibly the best-known group in the poverty lobby, and has worked to the high professional standards recently attained by the NCOPF for many years (see Whitely and Winyard, 1987, p. 28). The group was formed in 1965 following a series of meetings arranged by the social and economic committee of the Society of Friends. The committee was concerned that the governments of the 1950s and 1960s had failed to raise the level of family allowance (Whitely and Winyard, 1987, p. 46, p. 52). As a result the Child Poverty Action Group was formed with the aim of bringing about a major reduction in family poverty - an aim that still stands today.

With this remit, it is unsurprising that the group has regularly found itself dealing with lone-parent family concerns. In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, it helped put family and child poverty on the government agenda (see Field, 1982; Whitely and Winyard, 1983, p. 13). Most famously, perhaps, the group was involved in campaigning for the introduction of Child Benefit in the 1970s, and is widely recognised as being

influential in its introduction, and for being an influential pressure group generally (see Whitely and Winyard, 1983; Field, 1982, pp. 64-74; Whitely and Winyard, 1987, pp. 110-136; Grant, 1989, p. 82). The CPAG's strategy has centred on publicly-staged campaigns. It has used the media in order to gain public and governmental attention, in most cases successfully (see Field, 1982, pp. 51-63).

Whitely and Winyard's (1987) concluded that the group was an insider group in terms of status, but an outsider group in terms of strategy. They described how the CPAG has deliberately avoided regular contacts with civil servants, preferring to influence government largely from outside the corridors of power. On the other hand, though, it has been accepted by governments and civil servants as a group to be listened to and taken seriously, often being heard through its placed media releases.

The National Association of Widows and Cruse can be seen as akin to the NCOPF and Gingerbread respectively in that NAW concentrates on campaigning, whereas Cruse has a service provision emphasis. They deal specifically with one category of lone parent: the widowed mother/father. Their client groups are mostly made-up of widows without dependent children, however, so only a small proportion of their work deals with the issues with which this study is concerned.

NAW does have contacts with Whitehall and Westminster. It sees itself as being particularly popular with M.P.s. This is possibly because support for widows is seen as falling into the 'motherhood and apple pie' category - it is a 'safe bet' area in that no one is likely to say that looking after the interests of widows is undesirable. It claims to have been consulted by government departments on several occasions over the years since its founding in 1971.

Cruse, on the other hand, is more of a support organisation for the bereaved. It takes a stance on public issues only occasionally rather than seeing campaigning as an integral component of the organisation. Part of the reason for this may be that it receives a large proportion of its income from the government. It is therefore reluctant to speak publicly on government policy (Whitely and Winyard, 1987, pp. 29-39).

The Mothers' Union is a religious organisation with the aim of strengthening and preserving marriage and 'Christian family life'. The Union's work over many years has included a careful watch on legislation affecting the family, and recently it has spoken out publicly on moral issues surrounding the growth in the number of lone-parent families.

Relate is better known as a counselling service for divorcing couples. It does, however, speak out on government policy in this area. The Citizens' Advice Bureaux falls into the same category. Well known to many Britons as a place to go to get advice, it publishes reports from time to time and tries to publicise these through the popular media.

Finally, in this category, the Daycare Trust has been concerned with providing information to policy-makers and others on daycare facilities for children. During the lone mothers and welfare state debate of 1993 which featured prominently in the media, the organisation attempted to relay its concern about the lack of daycare facilities in Britain onto the media agenda by emphasising the role increased facilities could play in removing lone parents from benefit dependency.

5.4.2. Single Issue Campaign Groups

Falling into a rather different category come the Finer Joint Action Committee, the Divorce Law Reform Association, and the Campaign for Justice in Divorce. These groups were single issue groups, all active for a short time only. The latter two achieved their common aim and disbanded, the former fell apart, a victim of too many disparate views.

The Campaign for Justice in Divorce formed in the early 1980s with the sole purpose of reforming the law on maintenance. It objected to the legal rights of an ex-wife to life-long maintenance from her ex-husband, a principle that was enacted in law at the time (see 3.4.). The 1984 Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act satisfied the group, though, and it folded. The Divorce Law Reform Association has a similar history.

These organisations were made-up primarily of middle-class men and their second wives. Both campaign groups were well organised. It was, indeed, openly acknowledged by the Lord Chancellor and the Law Commission that the complaints of these middle-class men led the former to refer the issue to the latter. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act went on to contain some of these recommendations (Levin, 1984, pp. 185-186).

The Finer Joint Action Committee folded too, only its aims were not achieved. The coalition, formed in the 1970s, was made up of social welfare groups concerned that the recommendations made in *The Report of the Committee on One-Parent Families* (1974 a and b) were enacted, and not forgotten. It lobbied, in particular, for the enactment of the Guaranteed Maintenance Allowance. Whitely and Winyard (1987, p. 62) found that although not successful in this area, it was an important influence in the introduction of Child Benefit Increase (later One Parent Benefit) in 1976.

A more recent phenomenon has been the formation of many groups, Britain-wide, set-up to protest about the Child Support Act.. Those involved in these groups have protested, in particular, about the amount of maintenance they, or their husbands/sons, are being asked to pay towards their children's upkeep. Many of these groups have formed at a local level, and have vigorously lobbied the M.P. of the area, making their complaints known to him/her and to the local newspapers. An example is the Campaign for Equality in Parenthood operating in the Aberdeen area. It is described as a fathers' rights group by its founder, and is typical of the local groups that have sprung-up since the Agency came on-stream in April 1993.

Aside from action at a local level, a national network has formed to co-ordinate these local groups. Known as the Network Against the Child Support Agency, it is an umbrella group with those involved in co-ordination claiming its membership numbers the tens of thousands (FNF, 1994, p. 14). The Network has organised marches, letter-writing campaigns, and some of its members have tried to launch a campaign of civil disobedience, including the withholding of maintenance payments.⁷ Absent Parents Asking for Reasonable Treatment (APART) and the Campaign for Fair Maintenance are two of the largest groups operating under the Network's umbrella.

The Campaign Against the Child Support Act is the other umbrella organisation campaigning against the CSA. The Campaign is largely made-up of radical left-wing organisations who were already in existence when the Agency came on-stream and who exist to promote other issues aside from the Child Support Agency. The Campaign organisation itself, though, exists to focus on the single issue of the CSA. It is co-ordinated by the Wages for Housework Campaign and Payday men's network, and has over 75 affiliated organisations, most of which are local groups, such as Edinburgh and Lothian Woman's Aid, Greater Manchester Anti-Racist Alliance, and Northampton Lesbian Line. The Campaign advocates a policy of non-co-operation by

the mothers and the fathers involved with the Child Support Agency, and urges all of its supporters to write to local and national media protesting about the Agency (Campaign Against the Child Support Act, 1993).

Both of these umbrella groups have a media-centred strategy. Both are openly very critical of the government, although the groups that make-up the Network make use of letter-writing to M.P.s and ministers as part of their strategy. Both, however, acknowledge that they are very much outsiders.

5.4.3. Party Groupings

The All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Widows and One-Parent Families, the All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Parenting, and the Conservative Family Campaign, are all groupings which have attempted to influence government and public debates in the lone-parent family policy area.

The All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Widows and One-Parent Families is no longer in existence. It was set-up as a result of the Finer Report but, like the Finer Joint Action Committee, the momentum was lost and the group disbanded. Gingerbread wanted to resurrect it in the late 1980s but was unsuccessful, partly due to the lack of time the group had to pressure for such a revival.

Recently, however, an All-Party Committee on Parenting has formed. Whereas the Committee on Widows and One-Parent Families can be seen as being set-up as a result of the Finer Report, this newer group can be seen as a response to concern about parenting following the murder of toddler James Bulger by two ten year old boys, as well as a response to the 1993 media debate on lone-parent families.⁸ 'Parenting', of course, does not refer solely to 'lone parenting'. The Committee has

formed, though, amidst a concern about 'bad' parenting which has often been associated in newspaper reports with lone parenting (see Chapters 7 and 9).

The Conservative Family Campaign has also been prominent in the lone-parent family arena. The campaign group was launched in 1986 by four Christian Conservatives active in the moral lobby (Durham, 1991, p. 155). The Campaign claims the support of over 40 M.P.s including Lady Olga Maitland, and Ann and Nicholas Winterton (Conservative Family Campaign, 1993, p. 1). It places a strong emphasis on gaining access to ministers and to Conservative Central Office in order to argue its views, and although it is a specifically Conservative body it has not held back in criticising the government (Durham, 1991, pp. 157-158).

5.4.4. Think-tanks

Two think-tanks have been important in the lone-parent family policy area. These are: the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). Few data are available on how these organisations perceive their effectiveness. This section is concerned, rather, to review the work that these think-tanks have done relating to lone-parent families.

The IEA was founded in 1957 (Grant, 1989, p. 50) as an educational charity to expound the ideas of free market economists such as Hayek. It has served as a vehicle for developing thoughts and debate in this libertarian area, being financed from a variety of private sources (Dennis and Erdos, 1993, inside front cover). It was particularly influential during the late 1970s and into the 1980s, when it probably helped to change the climate of opinion as to what governments can and should do by raising the problems of government intervention in particular (Grant, 1989, p. 50).

The Institute of Economic Affairs' relevance to this study lies in its publication of *Families Without Fatherhood* by Norman Dennis and George Erdos (1992; 1993 2nd edition). The authors, who declare themselves to be socialists in the preface to the book, assert that it is the absence of fathers from working-class families which is the main cause of social dislocation and of the incivility of young working class men in the 1990s.

Charles Murray, an American political scientist, has also published a paper with the IEA which is relevant to this discussion. Entitled *The Emerging British Underclass* (1990), it points to illegitimacy as being behind the rise of the underclass and of many resultant social problems in Britain.

The Institute for Public Policy Research was founded in 1988 to provide an alternative to the free market think-tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs. It is a left-of-centre think-tank, although it is independent of any of the political parties, and is funded by private donors, trusts and some trade unions (James, 1993, p. 496). It is relevant to this discussion because the Commission on Social Justice operated under its auspices. Although independent the Commission was set up by John Smith when he was Leader of the Labour Party. It billed itself as "a wide-ranging inquiry into social and economic change in Britain" (Institute of Public Policy Research, 1993).

The Commission published its final report in October 1994, entitled *Social Justice - Strategies for National Renewal*. The document contains a detailed programme for the reform of the welfare state. One of the many concerns with the status quo expressed in the report is the poverty of lone-parent families. Specific recommendations aimed at this group include: changes to be made to the Child Support Agency, including an appeals system and provision for lone mothers on

benefit to keep £15 a week of any maintenance paid; and the drawing-up of 'a statement of parents' responsibilities to reflect the diversity of family forms and provide a reference point for all parents. It also recommends extending the availability-for-work test to all mothers of older children (possibly children over 5), but says that no parent will be required to take a job if adequate childcare is unavailable, and that lone parents will not be required to take the availability for work test until a year after their relationships have ended. The adoption of a scheme which would provide lone parents with good childcare in order that they could enter employment or training on a long-term basis is also recommended.

Opposition Spokesperson on Social Security, Donald Dewar, and John Smith's successor as leader of the Labour Party, Tony Blair, have had close links with the Commission throughout its reporting period, and have endorsed the final report. This has led to expectations that at least some of the Commission's recommendations will form the basis of Labour's welfare manifesto at the next election.

5.4.5. The Church

Although one may not primarily think of the Church of England as a pressure group, it does act as a sectional pressure group in relation to its own particular interests, and as a cause group on wider social issues (Grant, 1989, p. 10). These interests have included 'the family'. The Church of England, as 'the established church', has been the most prominent church in this policy area.

In the 1950s and before, the Church of England was the most influential opponent of change in the matrimonial law. Its stance was that divorce was an extremely dangerous threat to the family, and marriage should be a lifelong obligation. Around 1958, however, its views on the issue became more relaxed. In the early 1960s, a

group of churchmen, lawyers, and laity was convened by the Archbishop, who recommended that the notion of breakdown of marriage should be substituted for the matrimonial offence as the basis of divorce law. This was a major factor in releasing the log-jam obstructing reform. Divorce law reform followed soon after (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974a, pp. 75-78).

The church's part in this particular legislative reform has been well documented. Its participation in 'family issues' continues however. In its role as the country's 'moral guardian' it sees fit to speak out on the standards of the day. It has attempted to answer questions such as whether it is 'moral' to have children out of wedlock, or to divorce and leave children with only one parent. In the 1993 debate on lone parents, it was concerned with the moral nature of the debate itself, as well as the moral nature of lone parenthood.

5.4.6. Summary

All of the groups and organisations discussed above can be said to have had a stake in lone-parent family related issues at one time or another. Some actors have attempted to shape particular debates over a short time period, for example the Campaign Against the Child Support Agency in recent years, or the Campaign for Justice in Divorce in the early 1980s. Other groups have retained a longer-term interest in certain broad areas, such as the Child Poverty Action Group, the National Association of Widows, and the Church. Other actors have declared their stake through one particular contribution to particular debates - for example the Institute of Economic Affairs with its *Families Without Fatherhood* publication, and the Institute of Public Policy Research's Social Justice Commission and its reports. In Chapter 7, their success in shaping and initiating media debate will be examined more closely.

5.5. CONCLUSION

What can the above discussion contribute to pressure group theory? Several observations about the three core pressure groups, in particular, can be drawn out. Table 5.1. (see page 126) summarises the key characteristics of these groups and can be referred to alongside this concluding discussion. Following Whitely and Winyard (1987) and Maloney et al (1994), the importance of considering strategy and tactics separately from status in studying pressure groups and policy outcomes is stressed.

Firstly, it seems that in studying pressure groups, the priority that the group gives to its pressure function is key to understanding strategies used. In the case of Gingerbread, FNF, and the NCOPF, this is related to the resources of the client groups they serve.

In the case of Gingerbread, the group exists in order to provide supportive and tangible services to its client group, with its pressure function growing out of this desire to assist its clients. The group's limited budget means that its pressure activities have had to be played-off against its service activities, and it is the latter that has taken priority as the group feels that its client group is in need of substantial support. Its pressure emphasis is more nominal than real. Conversely, however, it appears that the regard that journalists, ministers, and M.P.s have for the group grows from its grass-roots nature. Gingerbread feels that it is presumed to truly know the situation of lone parents, and therefore its status as an information-provider for all of these is boosted.

FNF, on the other hand, has grown from a service organisation into a pressure organisation, partly because its client group of divorced and separated fathers has not had the same need for the kind of concrete support that its lone parent counterpart has found helpful. For these fathers, the most helpful 'support' that the group could

provide would be to change various aspects of policy that they have found unhelpful. More short-term and concrete supportive measures such as providing cheap holidays, running Return-to-Work courses, and publishing lengthy brochures about welfare rights, have not been demanded by separated/divorced fathers as they have been by lone parents. FNF has therefore found itself free to pursue pressure functions first and foremost.

The NCOPF sees both functions as important, with its Director's department concentrating on lobbying, and the rest of the staff concentrating on support activities. As the largest organisation of the three, the NCOPF can afford to devote resources to both activities. It has not had to make the choice that Gingerbread has. It can therefore pursue the long-term goal of solving some of the problems that lone-parent families have tended to face by changing policy, while also making life better for them in the short term by providing support and services.

When a group has a representative membership, as do all three of the core groups studied here, it may be steered towards supportive functions if its client group is resource-poor. This may sap its own budget if money is limited. Groups such as CPAG, on the other hand, which are purely promotional, are more free to follow an undiluted lobbying strategy.

A consideration of the resources of the client groups of the three groups discussed here is also important when examining the strategies used in lobbying. For example, all three groups feel that it is important to build good relations with the media, whether as part of their lobbying function or as part of their service function. Different strategies are used by each however.

	The NCOPF	Gingerbread	FNF
Type of group	Service/Pressure: equal emphasis	Service/Pressure: service emphasis	Service/Pressure: pressure emphasis
Membership	Open to all	Lone parents only	Largely separated/divorced fathers
Income	£966,566	£333,720	No accounts available: limited funds
No. of staff	26	7	1 plus 8 active volunteers
Press Officer?	Yes	Yes	Yes (unpaid)
Focus of tactics	Government and media	Media, government, and parliament	Media and parliament
Tactics: government	Non-radical, information provider	Inconsistent lobbyist	Not applicable
Tactics: parliament	Not applicable	Close contact with limited no. of M.P.s	Large-scale letter writing campaigns
Tactics: media	Proactive and reactive	Largely reactive	Proactive and reactive
Status: government	Accepted and valued	Accepted	Not accepted
Status: parliament	Accepted in past, no longer a focus	Accepted	Accepted
Status: media	Legitimate source: largely reactive	Legitimate source: largely reactive	Legitimate source: reactive and proactive
Recent (self-reported) successes	Childcare Allowance; Official 'Statement of Rights' for lone parents dealing with CSA	Childcare Allowance; CSA 'undue harm' clause	Child Support Agency: substantial operational reforms

Table 5.1.: Characteristics of core lone-parent family related pressure groups

The NCOPF has attempted to 'place' news stories by issuing press releases and sending them to major news media. As was discussed above, however, it considers this tactic to have resulted in occasional isolated news stories rather than anything more substantial. It has also made itself available for comment on all relevant news stories that have broken, and believes that by doing this it has had more of an impact.

Similarly, Gingerbread has made itself available for comment and, again, believes that this has produced results in terms of coverage of its views. The organisation has, though, expressed discontent that this is all it has been able to do. Again, its scant resources and service focus have meant that it feels a more proactive role in this area has had to be forfeited.

FNF, however, has felt very satisfied with its media profile over the period studied here, believing its tactics used to have been successful. It has emphasised the principle of mass action, believing that the greater the number of people who make their views known, the greater the impact will be in terms of coverage. As well as merely issuing press releases, then, and being available for comment when a story breaks, FNF members, along with members of campaign groups set-up to protest against the CSA, have constantly bombarded the news media with their views. It is interesting to note that the form and presentation of these views has often been outlined in a fairly specific way in group newsletters, with fathers and others instructed in what to say. The group has also used organised 'events' in order to try and generate coverage - such as marches complete with gimmicks such as wreath laying as fathers 'mourn' lost chances to see their children. By organising such 'picture-opportunities', FNF has hoped that the news media will see the 'event' as a potential story, ready packaged for consumption. Perhaps most importantly, however, FNF has been willing and able to provide 'real people' with 'real problems' who can be interviewed by the media.

Gingerbread and the NCOPF, on the other hand, have stressed mass action less often, and have found it more difficult to provide 'real people' who are willing to talk openly to the media about their situation. This may be down to the differences in the resources and structural characteristics of the client group of these two groups. Look at the quote from a lone mother involved with the NCOPF on page 93. She points to the difficulty in paying telephone bills, buying a car, getting childcare, and travelling generally that many lone mothers have because of their relative poverty (see 2.2.1.). She also mentions the hesitancy of many lone mothers to drag their children through the media by divulging personal details. This fear is, perhaps, more salient to custodial parents than to non-custodial parents as class-mates and friends of the children involved are more likely to recognise the former if she appears on television or in the paper.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to ascertain whether and how the resources of lone parents and of absent parents affect their ability and willingness to become involved in lobbying the media. It is suggested here, though, that the relative lack of resources of lone parents and their particular situation (namely bringing children up alone) may make it more difficult for them to organise in the way that absent fathers have, both in lobbying the media and M.P.s.

What about groups' perceptions of their overall effectiveness? In the time period studied here, it appears that the success claimed by FNF and the Network Against the Child Support Agency in helping to contribute to substantial reforms to the CSA is greater than those claimed by the NCOPF and Gingerbread. The absent fathers' groups believe that the tactics of mass protest used by their members, which included many of them emphasising that they were middle-class Tory voters, played a part in bringing about these reforms. The claimed policy successes of the NCOPF and Gingerbread are more modest, although not unimportant. These groups have stressed

the success of less confrontational insider tactics, providing a contrast with the highly-public confrontational tactics favoured by FNF and the campaign groups.

Ultimately, however, it should not be forgotten that FNF was able to mobilise membership successfully, and in a way that exerted a threat to the Conservative government through these (largely) men threatening to withdraw support for the Conservatives at the next election. The NCOPF and Gingerbread were unable to organise such a force. This may, indeed, be the key to a series of policy successes, and may override any long-term insider relationship that a group may enjoy. It may be that a group is able to help shape legislation in collaboration with policy-makers, but if that legislation is then reformed after mass public protests, or even altered before reaching the statute books in anticipation of such protests, then the end result may be attributed more to the groups involved with public protest than to the insider groups.

The following chapters look at the processes of agenda-setting. Chapter 6 reviews the agenda-setting literature, while Chapter 7 takes the British media agenda as its focus, examining how this agenda has been made-up. This empirical work should be seen as supplementing the above examination which has focused on this question from the perspective of pressure groups themselves. How pressure groups aim to influence media agendas has been covered, now the spotlight turns to the media agenda itself and looks at the results - how successful have pressure groups been in getting their views publicised in this way? The focus is broadened too, to look at the roles of other political actors in getting their views publicly heard.

FOOTNOTES

¹ 'National' pressure groups refer here to London-based groups catering for England and Wales. Scotland has its own sister group or equivalent group in each case - the Scottish Council for Single Parents is the equivalent to the NCOPF, Gingerbread Scotland is Gingerbread's sister organisation, and Parents Forever Scotland is associated with FNF.

² This is a view reached by speaking to several of her colleagues and to several professionals working in the lone-parent family related field.

³ As well as lobbying government and the media on this, the NCOPF has set-up Return-to-Work courses, and provides much information on overcoming 'the barriers to work' that lone parents face.

⁴ While this action can be seen as a direct lobbying of government, it was primarily an attempt to grab media attention.

⁵ There are a small number of women members, and also grandparents of children whose parents have split up. The former have joined the organisation because they want help in making reluctant fathers keep in touch with their children, rather than because they themselves are having problems maintaining contact with their children.

⁶ Although this has become an issue as the Child Support Agency has been accused, by FNF and by others, of throwing non-residential parents into poverty.

⁷ One of its founders has made clear that he advises members against unlawful action, but he does not condemn these types of actions, saying that they are understandable under the circumstances.

⁸ Whilst not strictly relevant in a discussion of pressure groups, but in this same vein, mid-1994 has seen Virginia Bottomley appointed as minister responsible for family issues. Again this post was created following the events just described.

6

AGENDA-SETTING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

6.1. INTRODUCTION

When studying public policy-making, it is obviously important to look at how issues get decided and at how policy is implemented. Indeed, traditionally this was the focus of studies of policy-making. In the early 1970s, however, Cobb and Elder (1971, 1972) introduced the concept of *agenda-building*. They pointed out that the policy process did not begin with decisions being taken on issues by those in power. For Cobb and Elder, and many following them, how issues came to be considered at governmental level (on *policy agendas*) in the first place was, in itself, an interesting question. Such literature on agenda-setting is now plentiful, and it is now widely recognised that such processes should be studied.

This approach builds on the notion of an *agenda* being present at any specified level within a political system. By conceptualising such an abstract list of discussed or considered topics, attention is drawn to the question of *which* problems, trends or other phenomena come to be examined. There is an infinite number of issues which *could* be present on each agenda, but a finite number which *have been, are or will be* present. By recognising this, the approach has at its centre the question of how some issues come to be present on agendas while others do not. It focuses attention on the *selectivity* of the handling of issues (see Burch and Wood, 1990, pp. 130-135).

Feed 'agenda-setting' into any bibliographic retrieval system, however, and a number of articles will emerge that have this term in their titles or abstracts, but which are not concerned with the above. There are, in short, two almost completely separate bodies

of literature which use this term as their conceptual centre. As well as the *policy studies* literature referred to above, then, there exist many studies which take a *mass communication* perspective.

This second, separate, body of literature has grown from McCombs and Shaw's (1972) publication "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media". The concern of writers here is 'the public agenda' - issues thought to be important within a specified time period by 'the general public' or a selected part of that public - and how that public agenda is affected by the mass media (see McCombs, 1976; Shaw, 1977; Swanson, 1988).

Common to each of these approaches is the idea that it is useful to conceptualise agendas (lists of topics discussed or considered) in order to study the nature of effects of one part of the political system¹ on another in terms of which issues are considered important. This use of the concept does, however, seem to be the only commonality. It is unsurprising, therefore, that rarely do writers from one tradition cite writers from another (see Rogers and Dearing, 1988, p. 574). Nevertheless, it does seem somewhat negligent of those interested in agenda-setting, from whatever perspective, to completely ignore around one half of the work that has been done on the topic. Whilst finding Swanson's (1988) argument, that the two main approaches cannot be integrated, convincing, Rogers and Dearing's (1988, p. 574) point that scholars in the two research traditions should become more fully aware of each others' research and theory may have some utility in bringing new ideas to each approach. At the least, practitioners of agenda-setting research should be aware that their use of the term needs to be set in context. Too many use it believing its theoretical baggage to be unambiguous when this is not, in fact, the case.

In addition, there is a third body of literature in existence - that on the sociology of journalism and news - which does not use agenda-setting language, but which has at its core the idea of selected issues receiving attention, this time on the media agenda. This approach, which treats media agendas as dependent variables (rather than policy or public agendas as dependent variables) could usefully be developed in the context of the agenda-setting literature. Each of the two main traditions acknowledges the importance of the mass media, in various ways, in modern society. How its own agenda is set should now be examined in more detail, rather than taken as given as an influence on both public and policy agendas.

Below, the policy studies agenda-setting literature will be discussed with a focus on what has been written about media agendas in this tradition. The chapter that follows will examine the British media agenda² over a two year period. The literature review below will provide a context for this empirical study which, like most of the policy agenda-setting studies reviewed, positions itself in a policy process framework (see Chapter 1 for discussion of this framework).

Firstly, policy agenda-setting studies generally will be reviewed, with those studies that have been particularly influential discussed in more detail. Many of these studies consider the role of the media in their focus on policy agendas. Conclusions in this area, although often only a small part of studies' findings, will be discussed. Secondly, nondecision-making and the concept of non-issues will be discussed in order to emphasise the importance of looking at which issues do *not* attain agenda-status on the agenda of interest, in addition to those that do. Finally, gaps in the literature will be identified, with a framework for the following chapter set out with the aim of filling some of these gaps.

6.2. AGENDA-SETTING PROCESSES: POLICY AGENDAS, MEDIA AGENDAS, AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO

Most policy agenda-setting studies work from a policy process framework (Cobb and Elder, 1972; van der Eijk and Kok, 1975; Nelson, 1984; Dahlerup, 1984; Kingdon, 1984; Outshoorn, 1986). Agenda-setting is seen as a pre-cursor to hard decisions made by policy-makers. Firstly, "the large number of problems government *could* address is reduced to the much smaller number of problems government *will* address" (Nelson, 1978, p. 18), and then policy is formulated and implemented. It is in this context that agenda-setting has been called the 'pre-decisional' stage of policy-making (Cobb and Elder, 1972; Kingdon, 1984).

Out of the quite considerable amount of work that has been done on the subject, four studies stand-out as being the most influential. These are: Cobb and Elder's (1972) work, largely because it was the first to develop the agenda-setting approach as it relates to policy agendas in any depth (they called it *agenda-building*); Kingdon's (1984) work because of the innovative stream model of agenda-setting that he presented that has since been cited by most policy agenda-setting studies undertaken; Downs (1972) work for its conceptualization of the *issue attention cycle* that has informed much work that has followed; and Nelson's (1984) single issue case study of child abuse which has come to be considered as a classic case study in this theoretical area.

Cobb and Elder's (1972) agenda-building approach is based on four observations which focus on the political system as a *biased* entity:

- i) the distribution of influence and access in any system has inherent biases;
- ii) following from the above, the range of issues and decisional alternatives that will be considered by a polity is restricted. Since the existing bias of a

political system both reflects and legitimates the prevailing balance of power among organised groups, it follows that the range and type of issues and alternatives considered will represent the interests and most salient concerns of previously legitimised political forces, with old issues always tending to command the most prominent positions in formal political deliberations;

iii) the system's inertia makes it very difficult to change the prevailing bias in terms of the types of issues and alternatives that are not only considered, but are also viewed as legitimate concerns of the polity;

iv) so-called pre-decisional processes often play the most crucial role in determining which issues and alternatives are to be considered by the polity and the probable choices that will be made. Therefore, how an issue or demand becomes, or fails to become, the focus of concern and interest within a polity is a critical question.

Cobb and Elder's (1972) work has clearly grown from Schattschneider's (1960) influential *The Semi-Sovereign People*. His observation that "Some issues are organised into politics while others are organised out" (1960, p. 71) summarises the above four points, and forms the central assumption of all policy agenda-setting studies.

Kingdon's (1984) *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policy* refers to Cobb and Elder's work and, again, has its legacy in Schattschneider's (1960) work. Kingdon's primary influence, however, comes from organisational theory, more specifically Cohen et al's (1972) garbage-can model. Drawing upon this model, Kingdon has developed an innovative approach to agenda-setting. He conceptualises three streams that run through the political system: a problem stream, a policy stream, and a political stream. The problem stream is made-up of those problems that people in and around government recognise as being important; the policy stream is made-up of solutions

and ideas for policy; and the political stream is made-up of political events such as a change of government, interest group campaigns, and changes in the national mood.

Most of the time, these three streams run independently of each other. Periodically, however, they come together in a largely unpredictable and non-rational way. It is when these streams come together - a problem has been recognised, a solution has been identified, and the political conditions are conducive - that the greatest agenda change can occur.

Those in the policy stream are alerted that such a situation may be imminent by the opening of a *window of opportunity*. This may happen when a problem becomes particularly pressing, for example, or when a triggering event occurs 'in the real world', or a committee of inquiry has been set-up to look into a policy area (i.e. when changes occur in the problem or political streams). In short, Kingdon (1984) tells of how agenda alternatives are generated in the policy stream, but agenda change comes from changes in the problem or political streams.

Policy entrepreneurs, or those actors in the policy stream who want to see 'their solutions' implemented, must manipulate and take advantage of changes in the problem and policy streams. They must try to attach their solutions to problems occupying policy-makers (problems that may, at first sight, appear unrelated), and they must take advantage of changes in the political system that may mean that their problem-solution package is more likely to be considered and positively acted upon.

Kingdon (1984) shows how the above model fits a range of issues. He describes, for example, how 'the solution' of an urban mass transit system was put forward on several occasions as the answer to several different problems that were concerning the government. This particular example also serves to emphasise that certain groups

have a clear stake in advocating certain policies and programmes, often because it means an expansion of their turf (see also Nelson, 1984 for a discussion of how the Children's Bureau 'hung onto' the issue of child abuse as their own). Policy entrepreneurs often have a clear self-interest in promoting a particular solution as the answer to a whole range of problems.

The key characteristics of the Kingdon (1984) model which have given it its status as possibly the most influential agenda-setting model yet put forward are:

- i) its treatment of solutions as separate from problems;
- ii) its conceptualization of agenda-setting processes as untidy and non-rational;
- iii) the important role it gives to pure chance while recognising that interested actors can take advantage of these chance occurrences to get the outcomes they want.

Kingdon (1984, pp. 61-64) devotes some attention to the role of the media in the agenda-setting process. He finds that the media are *not*, in fact, seen as being important in setting policy agendas by those involved with policy agendas. Indeed, he says that policy-makers ride "serenely above the media storm" (1984, pp. 61-62). This he puts down to the fickleness of the media (and presumably the electorate) manifested by the pattern of intensive and high salience coverage of an issue in the mass media for a short period before its place is poached by another issue (see also discussion of Downs, 1972, below). Policy-makers learn to disregard yet another call of 'crisis' from the media.

Related to this, Kingdon (1984, p. 62) finds that the media's agendas are largely set by what's going on in government. In this he puts forward another reason for the unimportance of media agendas to policy agendas, as he observes the media's

tendency to give prominence to stories related to events coming at the end of the policy-making process, such as those framed around legislation or implementation problems.

Having found that the media's agendas do not generally set policy agendas, Kingdon (1984, pp. 61-64) does, however, emphasise that the media do still play a considerable role in policy agenda-setting processes in several respects.

Firstly, the media act as a common base of knowledge for policy-makers and other political actors (Kingdon, 1984, p 63). Although those within what Kingdon calls a policy community may not all communicate regularly with one another, they all have access to the same newspapers and news broadcasts.

Secondly, Kingdon (1984, p. 63) says that the media magnify movements that have started elsewhere by publicising them. In this way, although the media do not generally create issues, they can and do shape and structure issues.

Thirdly, if the media affect public agendas, as much of the mass communication literature has found, or even if they are *perceived* to affect public agendas, then they affect policy agendas via these public agendas (Kingdon, 1984, p. 64). Governments are perpetually concerned about winning votes and, as such, perceived public opinion is a very important consideration when policy agendas are being set.

Kingdon's (1984) findings are backed-up by Walker's (1977) study which looks at the relationship between policy agendas and media agendas. He focuses on the agenda in the U.S. Senate, over the 1960s and 1970s, and looks at whether this had an effect on media content. He finds that generally it did, with issues concerning senators receiving

significant coverage in the mass media. As does Kingdon (1984), Walker (1977) finds that the media tend to react to events and issues rather than leading them.

Downs (1972) article is the third seminal study of relevance here. His work has been much utilised by those interested in media coverage and policy agendas. Downs (1972) argues, with reference to environmental issues, that an *issue attention cycle* exists³. This cycle is such that the public and politicians may become concerned about a particular problem but, after they begin to act⁴ to solve it, perhaps devoting resources to it, they often realise it will not be easy, or cheap, to solve. As this realisation dawns, their interest in the problem wanes, and they begin to move their attention to another problem. This cycle continues indefinitely.

In the context of this study, Downs' (1972) work is particularly valuable for its discussion of the dynamics of the media agenda. He identifies the tendency of the mass media to cover a story on their front pages or in other prominent positions for a short time only, before that story is displaced by the next 'big news story'. This is an obvious point but one worth bearing in mind in order to emphasise that 'the news' is a social construction and not a reflection of what is happening in 'the real world' on a daily basis (the underlying assumption of the sociology of journalism literature reviewed below). Thus, although the problem of poor construction of roll-on/roll-off ferries has not changed in the recent past, it is a headline concern of the mass media for only a few days following a ferry disaster in which many people were killed. Furthermore, as there can be only one top headline for each news broadcast, and only one leading headline for each newspaper front page, an event or other phenomenon which may have been the subject of this headline if it had happened on Tuesday, does not have this status when it happens on Wednesday as a more newsworthy event has taken this position.

The main criticism of Downs' (1972) model has focused on his lack of recognition of the institutionalisation of a problem. Peters and Hogwood (1985), and Baumgartner and Jones (1993, p. 151) both point out that in response to public and political attention to a problem institutions may be created to deal with the problem. Thus, although public and, in the narrowest sense of the word, political, attention may fade, the existence of these institutions means that interest in the problem still exists despite the relative lack of public and government attention to the problem. These institutions will protect their turf and, often, try to expand it by continuously trying to draw attention to 'their' problem, and related problems.

Nelson's (1984) study also has much to say about institutions guarding an issue as their own, and continuously trying to protect and expand their turf. Her study of the issue of child abuse is oft-cited as being theoretically strong and a prime example of how to conduct a single issue agenda-setting case study.

In examining how the issue of child abuse gained entry to a range of governmental agendas, Nelson (1984, pp. 22-23) identifies four stages of the agenda-setting process, as seen from the perspective of the government organisation concerned. These are: issue recognition, issue adoption, setting priorities among issues, and issue maintenance.

Firstly, for an issue to be recognised, a government official must notice a particular topic and decide that government should do something about this topic. Secondly, for an issue to be adopted, the official must decide whether to respond. For this to happen, policy-makers concerned must collectively perceive the issue to be a suitable topic for the government to become involved in, and they must believe that an appropriate solution and response can be found to the problem. If this is the case, priorities are then set, which involve officials reordering the agenda to include the new

Probably of more relevance here, though, is the British literature on the sociology of journalism which explicitly focuses on media agendas. As was said in the introduction to this chapter, such literature does not generally use the language of agenda-setting, but its findings have a lot to offer this perspective. This literature focuses on how news is produced⁵. It acknowledges that every newspaper printed and every news programme broadcast has selected certain items for inclusion within its limited pages or limited time frame. It points to and examines organisational and individual level routines and conventions which shape this process. Key studies include those by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980, 1982), Golding and Elliott (1979), and Golding and Middleton (1982). A comprehensive and up-to-date review of this literature can be found in Negrine (1994). Such a review will not be repeated here, instead the focus will be on Golding and Middleton's (1982) study of the coverage of social security issues in the British media over a six month period. Although it was published over ten years ago the themes raised and covered are supremely salient here.

Golding and Middleton's (1982) work avoids much of the overtly political analysis that characterises the Glasgow University Media Group's work (see Harrison, 1985 for a critique of its work) whilst covering many of the same themes. They contend that news-gathering and production processes, and the visibility of various institutions and figures shape the content of news (see also Golding and Elliott, 1979). Personal factors, such as the journalist's own view of the world, combine with both organisational constraints, such as having to meet deadlines and sell papers or win the television news ratings war, and with the dominant societal value system, to shape the type of issues that are covered and the way in which they are covered.

Although Golding and Middleton (1982) do not explicitly analyse the relationship between media and policy agendas, they find that, in the social security policy area,

once an event or other phenomenon has been designated 'A National Scandal' or 'A Crisis' in the mass media, it enters the policy agenda.

On the other hand, however, Golding and Middleton (1982) find that the *precipitating event* (see also Solesbury's, 1976, *particularisation*) which sparks news coverage and its designation as a crisis or scandal usually comes from governmental sources, with legislation, the publication of government reports, and statements from government press releases and conferences comprising most precipitating events. They point out that journalists can save a lot of time and effort if they frame a story around what a government minister, for example, has said that day. This is acceptable news, and does not require the journalist to 'sniff out a story' by combing the streets waiting for something exciting to happen. Golding and Middleton (1982) also found that pressure groups too were often given a voice in news items. This was, however, usually in reaction to what government representatives had said or done. Golding and Middleton (1982, pp. 123-124) find that this passive model of news gathering shapes, to a large extent, which issues are covered on a daily basis.

As such, Golding and Middleton's findings are similar to Kingdon's (1984) and Nelson's (1984). All find that issues tend to move from policy to media agendas rather than vice versa, but the media amplify the issue so that it has more resonance on policy agendas than was originally the case.

Thus far, the slant of the discussion has been towards speaking in terms of issues that reach agendas. For a full picture of agenda-setting processes which, as was said at the beginning, are concerned with the selectivity of a small number of issues that *do* receive governmental attention from a larger number of issues that *could* receive governmental attention, one must also pay attention to these latter types of issues. To have an 'agenda-setting heading' and then a 'nondecision-making heading' separates

two types of processes in a way which does not reflect the concurrent and integral nature of the negative and positive sides of agenda-setting. Nevertheless, there is also this division in the literature. A somewhat distinct body of nondecision-making literature has grown-up as a subset of the broader agenda-setting literature which primarily concerns itself with which issues reach agendas, how, and why this is the case.

6.3. NONDECISION-MAKING AND NON-ISSUES: THE OTHER SIDE OF AGENDA-SETTING

As suggested above, a consideration of which issues do *not* attain governmental and media agenda-status is an essential part of studying agenda-setting processes. Looking at what *doesn't* get on the agendas is just as important an area of study as what does, if we are to fully understand the power issues behind agenda-setting.

Nondecision-making is an integral part of the agenda-setting process. It is a way in which issues are kept away from agendas (in the nondecision-making literature the focus has been on issues being kept away from policy agendas, though the concept may be used in a study of any type of agenda).

Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963, 1970) introduced and developed the notion of nondecisions in the context of the agenda-setting stage of the policy process. They wrote about the ability of elites to keep certain issues off policy agendas. Thus, it may be a power to be able to push or pull preferred issues onto policy agendas, but it is also a power to push issues away from the same agendas. The latter is an example of a *nondecision*, and the ability to exercise a nondecision. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) call this *the second face of power*⁶.

Bachrach and Baratz define a nondecision variously as:

- "that practice of limiting the scope of actual decision-making to 'safe' issues by manipulating the dominant community values, myths and political institutions and procedures" (1970, p. 18);
- "a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker" (1970, p. 43);
- "a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced, or kept covert; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decision-making arena; or failing all of these things, maimed or destroyed in the decision-implementing stage of the policy process" (1970, pp. 43-44);
- and "an attempt to prevent an issue from reaching the decision-making stage" (1970, p. 57).

They (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970, pp. 44-46) also describe the mechanisms through which nondecision-making can occur. These are:

- i) force;
- ii) threat of sanctions;
- iii) the "invocation of an existing bias of the political system - a norm, precedent, rule or procedure - to squelch a threatening demand or incipient issue" (1970, p. 45) and;
- iv) the reshaping or strengthening of the mobilisation of bias⁷ through the establishment of new barriers or new symbols against the challengers' efforts to widen the scope of the conflict.

Van der Eijk and Kok (1975, p. 277) criticise Bachrach and Baratz's work for inconsistency across definitions. They say that it is unclear in which stage of the political process nondecisions can be found; whether they are a result of conscious

strategy or not; whether they are characterised by mechanisms, results or both; and whether nondecision-making works systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain actors (1975, p. 279). Such criticisms accurately point to the diffuseness of Bachrach and Baratz's conceptualization. This diffuseness is not helpful in using the concept to study such examples of issues being kept off relevant agendas.

Probably even more damagingly, however, Bachrach and Baratz's conception of nondecision-making has been criticised for its non-researchability (see Polsby, 1980, pp. 189-232; Wolfinger, 1971 for wide-ranging discussions about the impracticality of using Bachrach and Baratz's conception in empirical studies). One aspect of this impracticality will be discussed here, as it is particularly problematic in the context of this study: the notion of objective interests.

As Wolfinger (1971, p. 1077) says of Bachrach and Baratz's nondecisions:

"what is a nondecision depends on one's beliefs about how well contemporary political discussion and action match the ultimate political good."

In other words, whereas decisions that are made at a governmental level can be counted and described, at least roughly, there is an infinite number of decisions that are *not* made at governmental level. How does one decide, out of this endless number of potential issues, which are non-issues and examples of the nondecision-making process? Can one say that everything which has not been done in a polity is evidence of the second face of power at work, privileging certain elites who have a stake in the status quo?

This does not seem to be what Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963, 1970) were saying. Rather, their non-issues are a selected and defined sub-set of all of those issues in society which do not exist! The implication is that they are the issues that *should* be issues but are not. To conceive of a list of issues that should be issues but are not,

however, inevitably involves subjectivity on the part of the person drawing-up the list. If that person is the researcher, is the research then valid? It merely reflects the researcher's perception of him or herself as able to draw-up a normative model of issues that should be dealt with by governments but which are not.

Crenson (1971) too, in a study of the issue of air pollution, uses his judgement that air pollution is undesirable as part of his argument that certain elites have power. His reasoning is that because air pollution is not dealt with by the local governance, then there must be a powerful elite keeping it off the agenda - so preserving the status quo which favours the elite as business-people, concerned with cost cutting

As Polsby (1980, p. 216) points out, though, if an issue is not raised to a government agenda, there are two possible reasons. It may be being suppressed, as Crenson (1971) assumes, *or*, there may be widespread agreement that it is not an issue, that it is not important enough to merit government attention (and this agreement does not have to be conscious, it may be that it has not occurred to anyone that this is an issue for concern). One cannot, then, as Crenson (1971) does, say that an issue is not raised to the government agenda because privileged elites are working against it and preventing it from being raised. It may be that no one is fighting to raise the issue anyway. As such, it says nothing about the second face of power - the power of elites to suppress an issue.

Similarly, Dahlerup (1984) recognises women's equality with men as a good which should be achieved. She writes of 'objective interests' present in society in this and other areas. She describes how nondecision-making is at work if 'objective interests' are not expressed in the first place. This idea of *false consciousness* conceives of groups in society not necessarily knowing what is good for them because societal forces are at work, dictating what is acceptable and normal. This dominant ideology

privileges the status quo and prevents disadvantaged groups realising that their own interests are not being served. They have come to accept this status quo and not question it, even though their own interests are not being served.

Such an analysis builds on Lukes' (1974) 'third face of power'. He describes how routine internalisation of roles and 'false consensus' can lead to an acceptance of the status quo by those in whose interests it works against. For Lukes (1974), power can be used to prevent grievances even being expressed. Thus, Lukes (1974, p. 34) argues that "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests", including by "*influencing, shaping or determining his very wants*" (1974, p. 23, author's italics).

This view that someone (usually the researcher) can take on the role of supreme observer of these processes and tell disadvantaged groups what they really want, if only they were sufficiently aware of it, is problematic. In Chapter 8 (section 8.1.2.) a fuller discussion will take place of the researcher's role in academic research (as opposed to his/her role in the political process). Here it is sufficient to say that such blatant subjectivity has no place in studies of agenda-setting. The focus is on which issues attain agenda-status (and by implication which do not), and the researcher is justified in observing this, within the confines of the inevitably narrow scope of each study, and looking for reasons why this is the case in his/her chosen policy area or on his/her chosen agenda. This should include consideration of poorly articulated grievances that may be associated with resource-poor groups⁸, and consideration of the extent to which groups or individuals regard a grievance as a personal, rather than a government, problem. This latter judgement is likely to be based on other people's general perceptions that a certain problem is a personal problem, rather than something that should be dealt with through public policy. Once, however, one moves

from studying what happens to what one thinks should have happened, one is moving from a descriptive, and perhaps theory-building, study, to a political treatise.

When studying agenda-setting, one must be aware that it is a small number of issues that achieve agenda-status on any specified agenda. There is a clear notion of *selectivity* present in this idea that only some issues attain agenda-status. Some issues do make it onto the agenda *and some issues do not*, and it is as interesting to ask 'why not?' in the case of the second set of issues, as it is to ask 'why?' in the case of the first. This second set of issues should not, however, be drawn from the issues that the researcher feels should be on the agenda, as a result of his/her preferred theoretical perspective. This list should be drawn from an observation of other agendas at work in the policy area being studied, or in the community being studied. One can examine these related agendas and ask why some issues from them successfully manage to achieve government agenda-status or media agenda status, while others do not. As such, it is not the researcher's preferred issues that have failed to achieve agenda-status that are non-issues, it is the issues put forward by actors in the political system concerned with the specified policy area which have not been successful in being considered at any specified level.

Nondecision-making can and should be studied. In this study, these terms are used to get at the negative side of the agenda-setting process, just as important as the positive. That is, the question of which issues do *not* get on the media agenda should be asked as well as which issues do get on this agenda. This may be a much narrower conception than Bachrach and Baratz's (1962, 1963, 1970), but it is easily measurable, and can tell one about the processes of power at work without relying on subjective assumptions about 'valid issues'.

6.4 CONCLUSION

Policy agenda-setting studies generally recognise, usually implicitly, the importance of the mass media in policy agenda-setting processes. This importance has not, however, generally been made explicit and developed in any depth. There is a well-developed, and completely separate, body of literature on how news is produced, though, and the policy agenda-setting literature could benefit from some of this literature's themes being developed around the concept of agendas and its concomitants.

British media coverage comes under regular fire from politicians of all parties for the nature and breadth of its coverage of issues (or its non-coverage of issues). By using the notion of government and media agendas, and by examining the appearance of issues on one or the other or on both, one can begin to understand the relationship between the two types of agendas. By further looking at named sources in news items (*voices*), and by seeing if a precipitating event is apparent, and if so what that event is, one can more fully comprehend the nature of the government-media agenda relationship, as well as the nature of the relationship between other political agendas and the media agenda.

The importance of looking at which issues *have not* been covered has also been emphasised. By categorising and quantifying voices in news items, one can get some idea of *whose* issues are being covered. By further examining what is going on in a variety of political arenas at this time, one can see which issues of concern to those interested and involved in lone parent issues are *not* being taken-up by the media.

In the following chapter, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* newspapers will represent the British media agenda (with the limitations of this recognised), with coverage of lone-parent family issues examined over a nineteen year period. Such an examination

will elucidate the ways in which British newspaper agendas are set, clarifying, in particular, their relationship with other political agendas.

Such an approach combines the media as dependent variable analysis as performed by Golding and Middleton (1982) and other sociology of news writers, with the use of concepts and assumptions from the policy agenda-setting literature, while acknowledging the importance of the media as an influence on the public agenda.

FOOTNOTES

¹ 'Political system' is used in a broad sense here to include governments, mass media, the electorate, pressure groups, and social movements.

² 'The British media agenda' has been operationalised as a comprehensive and systematic content analysis of *The Times* newspaper over a two year period, plus a similar but less comprehensive analysis of terrestrial television news and other national dailies on selected days when a certain lone-parent family issue was known to have gained prominence in the news.

³ Downs' model should not be seen as a universal model. It applies only to certain issues (see Hogwood, 1992).

⁴ Hogwood (1992, p. 4) points out that Downs (1972) does not make it clear whether the cost of dealing with the problem is realised before or after there has been a concrete response (as opposed to a consideration) from policy-makers.

⁵ It has underlying it the assumption that news is a social construction, and not a mirror of what is happening in 'the real world'. The ontological basis of this constructionist view will be discussed more fully in Chapter 8.

⁶ Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) "Two Faces of Power" was largely a reaction to Dahl's (1961) *Who Governs?. Who Governs?* is one of the so-called community power studies of the 1960s which focused on important decisions made in municipal governments of selected communities in the United States. Bachrach and Baratz's 'second face' was to follow from this 'first face' of power manifested in decisions made on important issues as described in Dahl's (1961) study in particular, and by the community power studies in general.

⁷ Schattschneider coined the term 'mobilisation of bias' in *The Semi-Sovereign People* (1960). This oft quoted dictum refers to the tendency of institutions to favour some interests over others. Specifically, he refers to the bias against new policy ideas, and the bias against non-upper-class interests ("the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 35)). It has, however, been used by many writers, including Bachrach and Baratz (1970) and others in the policy agenda-setting tradition, to refer to any systematic exclusion of types of issues from political agendas.

⁸ The discussion of pressure groups in Chapter 5 broached the relative powerlessness of lone parents as a group in comparison to divorced/separated fathers as a group. This is not a study of power so this issue will not be discussed in any depth, but an awareness of the lack of power of this resource poor group is important (see Christy, 1987 for a discussion of the relationship between sex and political participation, including the importance of resources such as money).

7

AGENDA-SETTING: LONE-PARENT FAMILIES, AND THE MEDIA

7.1. INTRODUCTION

The question of lone-parent families and the state, and the operation of the newly implemented Child Support Agency were two of the biggest media stories of 1993. Over the last twenty or so years, however, lone-parent families have not often featured in media reports. This chapter discusses agenda-setting, lone-parent families, and the media, looking briefly at the handful of stories which have generated coverage between 1974 and 1992, and focussing on the two 'big issues' of 1993. *Who* put these issues on the media agenda and *how* will be a focus of this latter discussion. The analysis presented below is largely descriptive in nature, though explanations emerging from this analysis have been put forward.

7.1.1. Methods

1. *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*¹ have been systematically and comprehensively searched for stories which feature lone-parent families and other related subjects for the years 1992 and 1993. Computerised databases have been used for this purpose². These work by searching every article for words or phrases as specified by the user. As such, the more comprehensive the search string used, the more likely it is that a desired set of items will be retrieved in its entirety.

The search strategy used (comprising variations on 58 terms derived from close examination of newspaper clippings already collected manually over a period of many

months) is shown in Appendix 1. Using this search string many 'false hits' were obtained, as were many stories of only tangential relevance. The comprehensiveness of the search string, however, suggests that few relevant stories were missed. This was partially checked by a daily reading of a paper copy of *The Times* towards the end of the analysis period which verified that only a very small number of items was missed by a search of *The Times* on CD-Rom. This seemed to be due to an error on the part of its compilers in failing to include some articles on the database rather than being due to any shortcomings in the search strategy. Cross-checking of filed clippings from earlier in the analysis period also indicated that few relevant stories were missed by Textline.

Once all articles had been obtained, they were read through and irrelevant articles were rejected. For example, many articles on the Czechoslovakian airline CSA were picked-up, as were items which talked about 'divorce' in the same paragraph as 'children', but which were not concerned with divorce and children in the sense of lone parenthood and its concomitants. Articles that used the search terms in the sense in which they are useful to this study, but were found in an article which was only indirectly related, were distinguished from more relevant articles. For example, in all sorts of contexts women were described as 'single mothers' but the context was not relevant to the work here, it was merely descriptive, set aside other adjectives such as age, colour of hair, and job. These articles were not rejected - seeing the terms of interest used in different contexts is itself of interest and articles were coded with this in mind - but they have not been used to contribute directly to results presented in this chapter.

The 'directly relevant' articles left were then coded as follows:

- i) the precipitating event (the event responsible for sparking news coverage) for the item was noted (this was, in the large majority of cases, obvious);

- ii) the 'type' of article was noted - for example, whether it was found in the 'news' or the 'comment' section of the paper, whether it was a leading article, whether it appeared on the front page, and whether it was written by a named correspondent or columnist;
- iii) those cited or quoted (the voices) within the item were noted;
- iv) a summary of the article's themes was written³; and
- v) the broad topic of each item was noted. This was done after several readings of the set of articles as a whole, after it had become apparent that coverage could be divided into such topics categories as the Child Support Agency or reform of the divorce law.

For each topic category articles falling into each of the coding categories i) to iv) were counted. The two topics on which most articles have appeared - the 'big issues' - have been looked at in isolation, with the results of their counts presented in this chapter.

2. In order to set this two-year period in context *The Times Index*⁴ has been used to examine the frequency and subject of lone-parent family stories from 1974-1991. A simplified version of the search strategy reproduced in Appendix 1 was used, with other time-dependent terms derived from secondary research also used (for example, 'the Finer Report' was searched from 1974 until the mid-1980s, as was 'gym-slip mothers' during the mid-1970s).

Although the results derived from using such a method are not likely to be as accurate as those derived from using databases such as Textline and *The Times* on CD-ROM, one can gain an understanding of trends and patterns apparent across the years. The numbers of articles traced are less important in any absolute sense, than seen as a series, with the peaks and troughs of coverage noted.

So saying, however, the search strategy used seems fairly exhaustive, with readings of secondary analyses of the period used to ensure that no major time-dependent phrases or terms were missed. It is not, therefore, unreasonable to expect that most articles of substantive relevance have been detected.

The indexing system alone gives some information about the content of each item. It is this information that has formed the basis of the analysis in 7.2. below, rather than a complete reading of articles and systematic coding as was carried out on articles derived from the Textline and CD-Rom search and outlined above. Analysis for the 1974 to 1991 period is, therefore, limited to discussion about the numbers of articles appearing during this period, their subject matter as stated in *The Times Index*, and their type of articles (for example, comment, editorial, letter, news item).

It is acknowledged, however, that such a reliance on *The Times Index* is at the mercy of the indexers leading to the possibility of articles lying undetected because they have not been consistently indexed.

3. To offset the methodological difficulties of relying on two newspapers to represent 'the media agenda', other national daily newspapers and television news programmes have also been content analysed on selected occasions⁵. On days when it was thought or known that a certain news story would be hitting the headlines, all the national dailies⁶ were obtained, and the main news bulletins and news programmes on the four terrestrial television channels were tape recorded.⁷ Relevant parts of these were analysed as described above under method 1, but as the representative nature of these sources cannot be guaranteed, analysis here is more impressionistic in nature, and quantitative results are not presented.

4. Results derived using methods 1, 2, and 3 have been looked at alongside happenings in the parliamentary, governmental, and pressure group arenas.

i) For the *parliamentary* agenda, the database POLIS (Parliamentary On-Line Information System) has been used. Using a search strategy adapted from that presented in Appendix 1 (relevant terms from the *POLIS Manual*, Meridian, 1989, were added) (see Appendix 2 for a reproduction of this search strategy), information was obtained on which relevant topics had been discussed in Parliament and in what form. *Hansard* was then looked to in order to obtain the full text of these identified written answers and happenings on the floor of the Houses.

ii) To represent the *government* agenda, the results from the POLIS search were also used. POLIS names official and other publications, which can then be obtained in paper form. Speeches given by ministers and referred to in newspaper reports have also been used. Where such speeches have not been published, or have not been broadcast in their entirety, sequences broadcast on television news have been put together with sequences printed in newspapers. It is recognised, however, that this is an unsatisfactory way of gauging the exact message of ministers, as the media will have used excerpts selectively.

iii) To represent relevant *pressure groups'* agendas, literature, correspondence, and information gained from conference attendances has been examined⁸.

Together, the data derived as above give a fairly comprehensive picture of media agendas over a nineteen year period, and it is hoped that analysis of other arenas can be used to make some observations about the interaction of various systemic agendas.

7.2. LONE-PARENT FAMILIES: THE COVERAGE 1974 - 1993

One sure conclusion can be presented immediately under this heading - this population group has not featured strongly on the pages of *The Times* or *The Sunday Times* for much of the period examined. The presence of indexing terms such as 'one parent families', 'lone parent families', and/or 'single parent families', and unmarried mothers' throughout does, however, indicate that such a categorisation has been meaningful over the years. Indeed, it is the case that during every year at least a small number of relevant articles has been found.

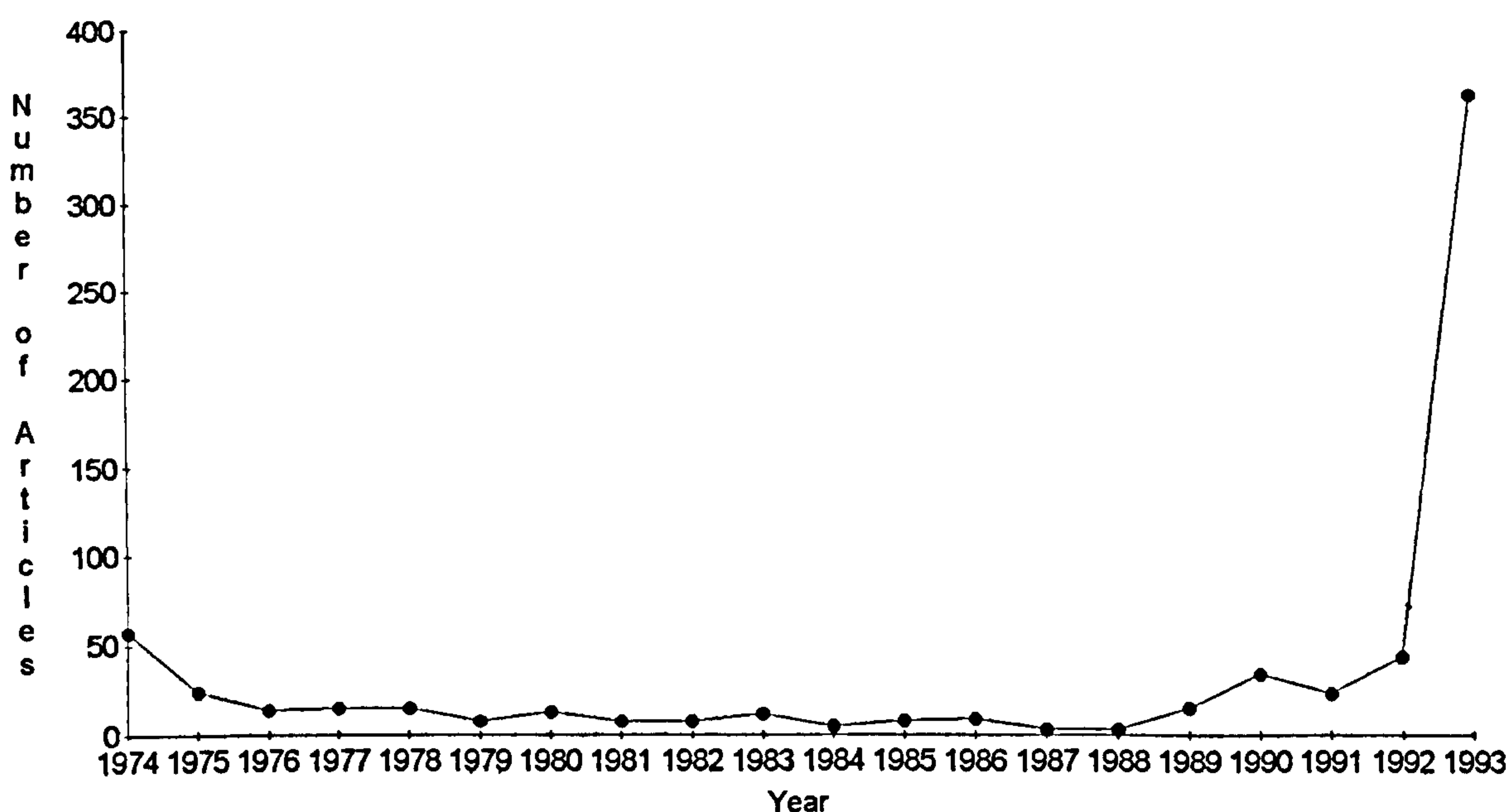


Figure 7.1.: The number of lone-parent family related newspaper articles appearing in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* 1974-1993^{9 10}

Figure 7.1. shows that the number of articles focusing on lone-parent family related issues has been at a constantly low level for much of the period analysed. The first year examined - 1974 - has the second highest number of articles, but with an average of slightly more than one relevant article per week, coverage can only be described as being at a very low level. Of most note, though, is the final year looked at - 1993. 363

relevant articles appeared in this year - an average of almost one article per day. It is only in this year that lone-parent families can be said to have made the news.

Before coverage in this untypical year is examined, however, the period 1974 to 1992 will be looked at more closely. There was a very low level of coverage throughout this period, but several precipitating events can be identified that have generated either a short burst of news items and articles, or have been the subject of a steady and prolonged drip-dripping of articles. It seems that lone-parent family related stories were not generally news, so looking at the circumstances in which stories did appear may alert one to issue characteristics which were able to put issues on the media agenda.

The precipitating events identified are: a speech made by the high-ranking Conservative Keith Joseph (33 articles were indexed under this heading); the publication of *The Finer Report* (6 articles on the date of its publication, with a further 25 following); and ministerial plans¹¹ to reform the child maintenance system (21 articles).

During the 1970s, the only apparent blip in a very low level of coverage followed a speech made by Keith Joseph. In the October of this year, the media reported him giving a speech where he said that impoverished mothers with low I.Q.s were responsible for damaging cycles of deprivation¹², and would continue to be so unless preventative measures were taken. He described how these types of women give birth to children with similarly low I.Q.s, who are similarly deprived, and who go on to reproduce in a similar way. The greatest controversy, which was the focus of coverage, surrounded his remark that such women should be made to use contraceptives in order that this cycle of deprivation be broken.

This was a headline-making speech for a short time. In the week or so after he made the speech, 3 leading articles were printed on the subject, and 5 comment articles appeared (the remainder were letters and news items, 8 and 17 respectively). Discussion was largely framed around the ethical implications of his eugenicist message. The relevance of media coverage of his speech to the work here, lies in the identification of many of the poor mothers that he referred to as unmarried mothers. The morality of their actions and their status as a social problem were both discussed. This was, however, very much a sub-theme of the coverage. Unmarried motherhood *per se* was not a focus, and in the weeks after this issue had disappeared from the front pages, and from the newspapers altogether, there was no sign that Joseph's speech had made unmarried mother stories more newsworthy.

Although no other such blips were apparent, *The Finer Report* also precipitated a relatively large number of articles (31). Such articles clustered around stages in the Report's life - for example, its publication (a leading article, a comment article, and 3 news items marked this event), the first anniversary of its publication (4 news items, framed by pressure group efforts to put the Finer Report back on the political agenda by organising a march to Westminster), and the Commons debate on it and lone-parent families generally (marked by 3 news items, a comment article, and a letter). This pattern is not remarkable - any Committee Report published now would be likely to generate a similar number of articles, and its progress similarly followed, but it is worth remarking on as, if coverage of Keith Joseph's speech is excluded, the majority of relevant articles which appeared in the year after the Report was published take *The Finer Report* as their reference point. If lone-parent family related stories appeared, it was in relation to the recommendations made in *The Report* or what pressure groups, M.P.s, or ministers had to say about *The Report*. It put lone-parent family related issues on the agenda, albeit very low down this agenda.

Coverage was generally sympathetic, probably because this largely sympathetic *Report* framed coverage. The impoverishment of many lone parents and their children, and the need for this problem to be alleviated through public policy, was stressed. Interestingly, *The Daily Mirror* made lone-parent families a subject of a campaign during this period, as it was also to do in 1993 with its 'Lilley The Fink: Fight for Single Mums' campaign. The first time round the paper called its campaign 'The Fight for Bread and Butter Children'.

As the publication of *The Finer Report* became more distant, and it became clear to all involved that most of its recommendations would not be taken up by government, the number of lone-parent family related articles dropped to an even lower level. For most of the 1980s, coverage was at a very low level. Instead of a number of articles appearing in *The Times Index* under 'One Parent Families', 'Single Parent Families', or whatever was the preferred term of the day, long lists of articles appeared under the heading of 'The Family'. On closer examination, lone-parent families appear largely to be conspicuous by their absence. Items focused on ministerial statements which seemed to be aiming to demonstrate the Conservative Party's claim to be 'the party of the family'¹³. The traditional nuclear family seemed to be what ministers had in mind, with lone-parent families either implicitly or explicitly defined as deviant. When mentioned by name, lone-parent families were presented as being a social problem, with the moral objections to lone parenthood coming very much to the fore as their status as 'families' in any 'proper' sense was questioned. Perhaps in this coverage, the seeds of the 1993 welfare state debate can be found.

During 1989 and through 1990 and into 1991, a fairly high proportion of relevant articles (though a low number) focused on government plans to reform the child maintenance system (21 articles in total). 13 news items appeared reporting ministerial statements about the need for a change in the child maintenance system or reporting

other actors' reactions to these statements. Five letters on the subject were published, and two comment articles appeared, both stressing that fathers would now be made to be financially responsible for their offspring.

Such coverage was followed through as the White Paper *Children Come First* (1990) was published, the Child Support Bill began its passage through parliament, and the Child Support Act was put on the statute books. The story from then onwards will be taken-up below in 7.3.2..

Some time has been spent above discussing the three precipitating events that generated the most articles during the period 1974-1992. It has been stressed that for none of them, though, is the number of articles sparked particularly high. Keith Joseph's speech did provoke a high number of articles in the week after its delivery but then disappeared from the pages of the press. Showing a different pattern, articles generated by the Finer Report, and by the government's plans to reform the maintenance system never dominated newspaper coverage, but did appear over a long time span. What the period looked at here is notable for, however, is *the lack of* articles focusing on lone-parent family related issues. Such issues were not, by and large, news. Stories that did appear grew out of journalistic monitoring of the parliamentary and governmental arenas. A speech by a high-ranking Conservative, the publication of a Royal Commission Report, and ministerial plans to reform the maintenance system would all have been routinely noted by political journalists. Only Joseph's speech sparked a burst of coverage as what he said was presented as controversial and worthy of much comment. For a week or so the issue of birth control for the poor was at the top of the media agenda. At no other time during 1974 to 1992, however, was there another such issue. Moving on to looking at 1993, however, this pattern can be detected several times over. Lone-parent family related

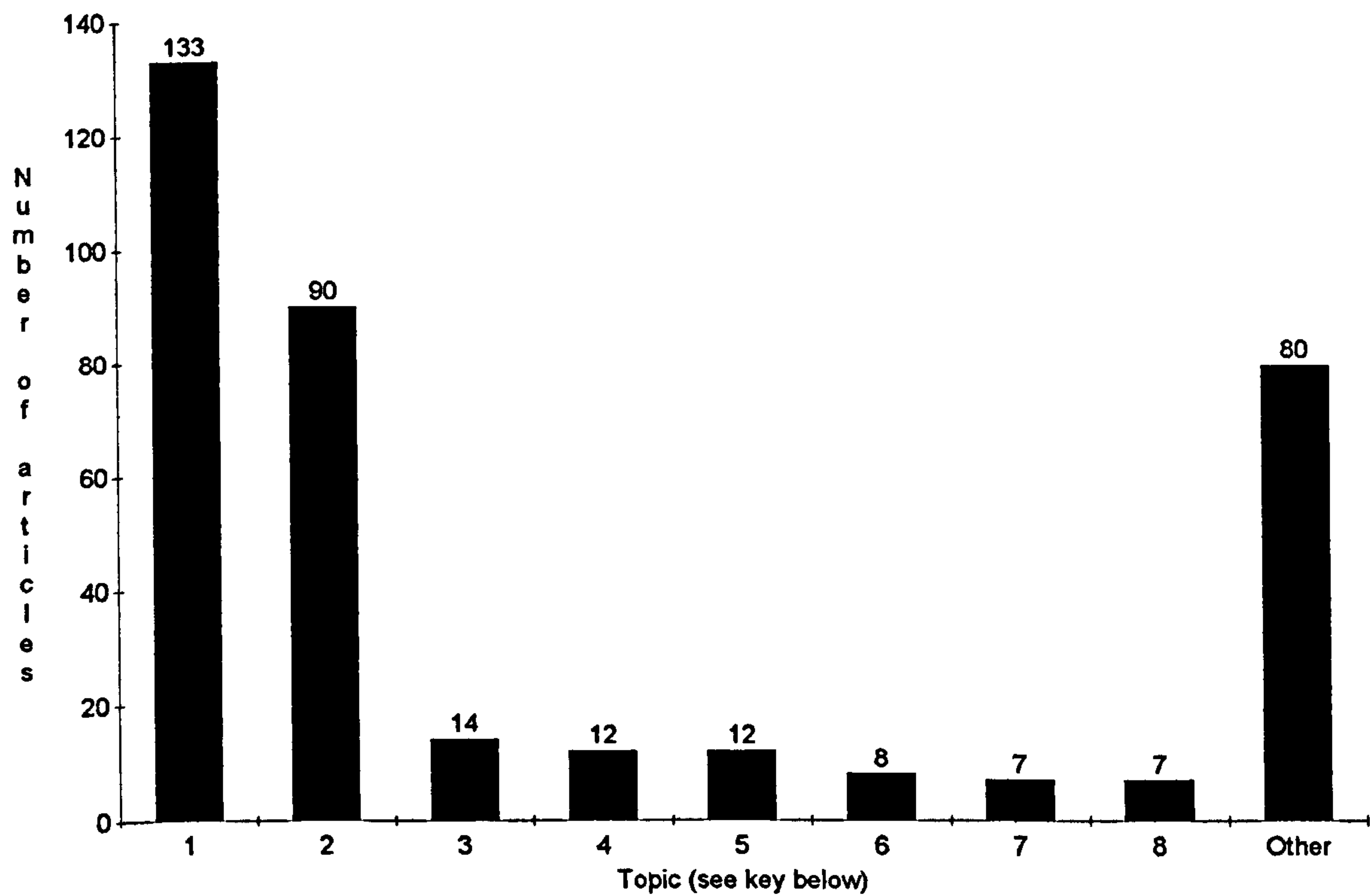
issues dominated newspaper coverage on various separate occasions. Coverage during this period will now be examined more closely.

7.3. LONE-PARENT FAMILIES: THE BIG ISSUES

Searching *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1993, 363 directly relevant items were found - 283 from *The Times* and 80 from *The Sunday Times*. Single parent issues of one sort or another made the news in 1993 as never before. As figure 7.2. (below) shows, most of these 363 articles are about one of two topics: lone-parent families and the state (133), and the operation of the Child Support Agency (90). Other topics which were covered at a lower level include: the Princess of Wales' and the Duchess of York's status as single parents (14); the Woody Allen/Mia Farrow custody case (12); ministerial plans to change the divorce law (12); the kidnap of Oliver Malkin from his mother, who had custody, by his father (8); and the case of a twelve-year-old boy claiming that his interests had not, under the Children Act, been taken account of sufficiently in deciding which parent should have custody (7). The discussion below focuses on the two 'big issues' - lone-parent families and the state, and the Child Support Agency.

7.3.1. Lone-parent families and the state

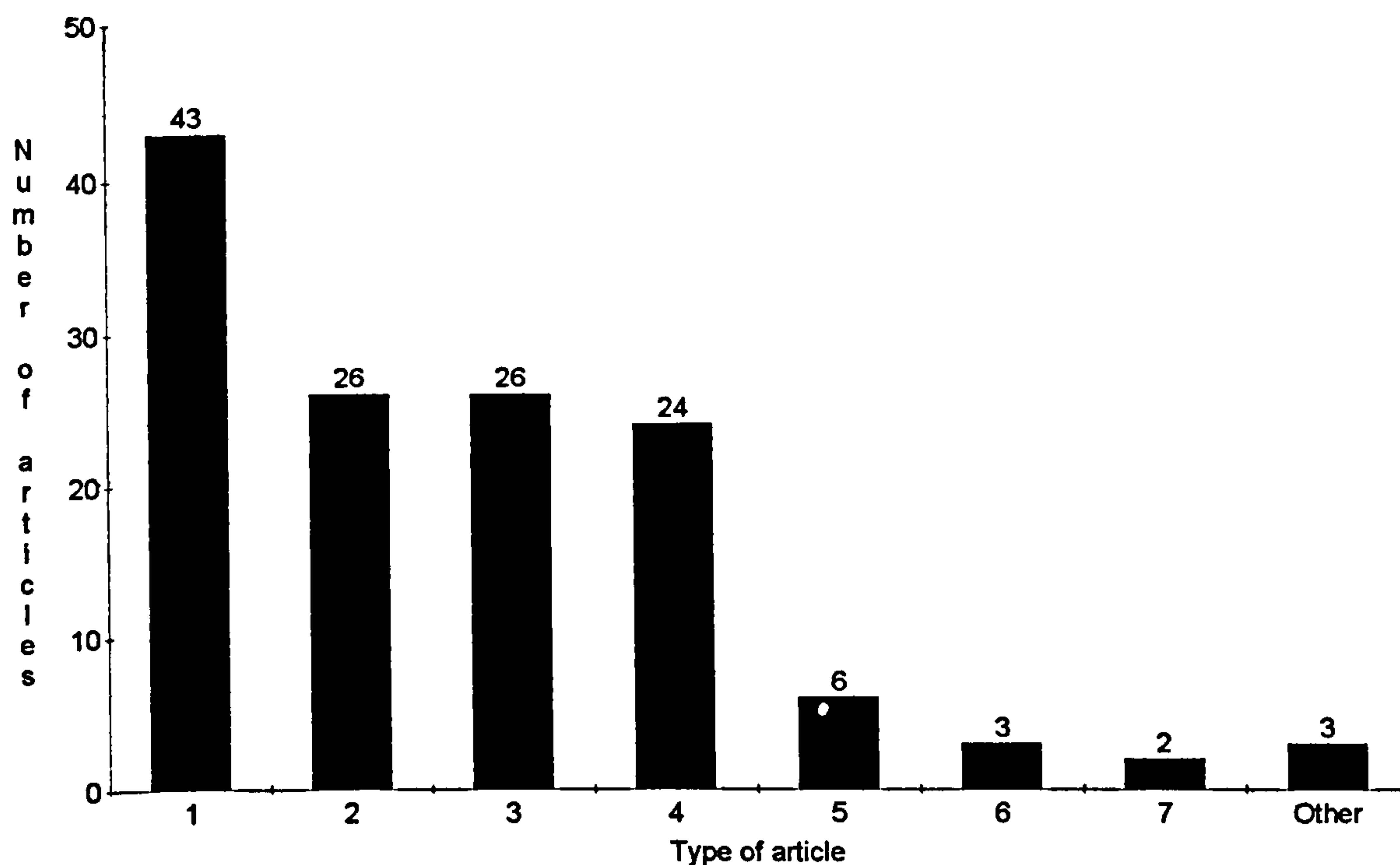
Figure 7.2. below shows that 133 articles appeared in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1993 centring on lone-parent families and the state (131 of which appeared between the beginning of July and the end of December 1993). Below, discussion will centre around the type of articles which appeared, the events which precipitated these articles, those cited or quoted in these articles, and the themes present therein.



- Key:**
1. Lone-parent families and the state
 2. The Child Support Act/Agency
 3. Members of the Royal Family as single parents
 4. Reform of the divorce law
 5. The Woody Allen/Mia Farrow custody case
 6. The abduction of Oliver Malkin by his father
 7. The murder of James Bulger and its relationship to the growth in lone parenthood
 8. The custody case of a twelve-year-old boy who claimed that his interests were not being taken into account

Figure 7.2.: The number of articles in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* by topic (1993)

ARTICLE TYPES



Key: 1. News article
 2. Comment article
 3. Letter
 4. Front-page news story
 5. Leading article
 6. Particularised feature in news section
 7. Diary item

Figure 7.3.: Lone-parent family and the welfare state articles in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* by type (July 1993 to December 1993)

Figure 7.3. (above) shows that the largest number of articles (43 articles, making-up 32 per cent of the total number of articles on this theme) were non-front-page news articles. This is unsurprising, as most items appearing in newspapers fall into this category.

The salience of the issue is indicated, however, by the high percentage, as well as the large number, of front-page news stories on this topic (24 news stories, making-up 18 per cent of coverage). The front page of a newspaper is very limited both in actual space and in the number of articles which can appear. 24 articles over a six-month period does, then, indicate that this issue was fairly high on the media agenda.

Another indicator of an issue being high on the media agenda, rather than just appearing on that agenda, is the number of articles appearing in the analysis section of the paper (ie. comment or leading articles). As can be seen from figure 7.3., the number of such articles for this topic was fairly high at 32 over a six-month period (almost a quarter of all articles which appeared).

That 26 letters appeared on the topic of lone-parent families and the state is also notable, for a different reason. Letters being written in large numbers may indicate that the issue is high on public and/or elite agendas, although without access to newspaper offices and monitoring of mail there is no way of knowing how many letters were written to newspapers.

PRECIPITATING EVENTS

Figure 7.2. shows that the murder of James Bulger was the topic of seven articles relating to lone-parent families in 1993. Such articles are not directly related to the topic examined here, but before the precipitating events for this are discussed, coverage of the James Bulger murder and its *indirect* relevance should be discussed.

The murder of two-year-old James Bulger is an event which will probably be remembered by the British people for a long time to come. In February 1993, two-year-old James Bulger was killed by two ten-year-old boys. Although the boys were not convicted of James' murder until November 1993, they were suspected of the crime from a very early stage. This event was to bring the issue of family breakdown, in the context of the moral disintegration of Britain, to the fore for a short time. Seven articles emphasising this theme appeared in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in the fortnight after the boy's murder.

As mentioned above, this 'event' would not seem to have anything directly to do with lone-parent families. It is important, however, in two ways. Firstly, it publicly emerged at the time of their trial, nine months later, that the child murderers were both from lone-parent families. This is likely to have been known by those working in and around Westminster and Whitehall, including journalists on the national dailies, from the time of their arrest, with reporting rules merely restricting their backgrounds being discussed openly until after the trial. What effect this knowledge had on the reporting of the incident, particularly in respect of the themes developed as described below, cannot be ascertained here. That the two boys had this family background *may*, however, have been part of the reason for the subsequent characterisation in many parts of the media of single-parent families as one of the evils of the 1990s. Whether this was the case or not, though, this characterisation did occur: the second reason why the Bulger murder is important in this discussion of media coverage of lone-parent family issues.

The Bulger murder was predominantly held to be an example of the moral and social decline of Britain in the British media. Juvenile crime became 'a media issue' after this murder (it was, indeed, simmering before the tragedy - it is possible that the murder was given so much publicity because it 'fitted-in' with themes already being covered by the media). It was in the week before Bulger's murder that back-bench M.P.s and senior police officers demanded a change in the law that prevented children under 15 from being kept in custody. This event had already precipitated coverage of the issue. Juvenile crime was presented, in the seven articles referred to above, as being partly, or even largely, down to the growth in the number of lone-parent families in Britain.

Some quotes taken from these seven articles best illustrate the nature of the coverage. In *The Sunday Times* (21.2.93) sold on the Sunday following the arrest of the two

ten-year-olds, the editorial was entitled "Are our children out of control?". Contributing to what it called "The national dialogue", it asked:

"Has the age of video nasties, drugs, *one-parent families*, football hooliganism, yuppiedom, Thatcherism, Kinnockism, lousy education, violent computer games, trainers, the whole rotten lot, finally given us what we so richly deserve?" (my emphasis).

Another editorial, "The Brutality of Britain", appeared that day commenting, in the context of the Bulger case:

"The socially disastrous consequences of children being without fathers from birth can be seen in the uncontrollable behaviour of today's sink estate male teenagers" (*The Sunday Times*, 21.2.93).

The juvenile crime issue that rose with a ferocity following Jamie Bulger's murder was, certainly, about more than lone-parent families - it had at its centre the idea of a Britain that was rotten to the core. Single-parent families were part of this however - they were posited as being a part of this decay, and a primary cause of juvenile crime. Themes exemplified by the quotes above were to be developed over the following weeks¹⁴.

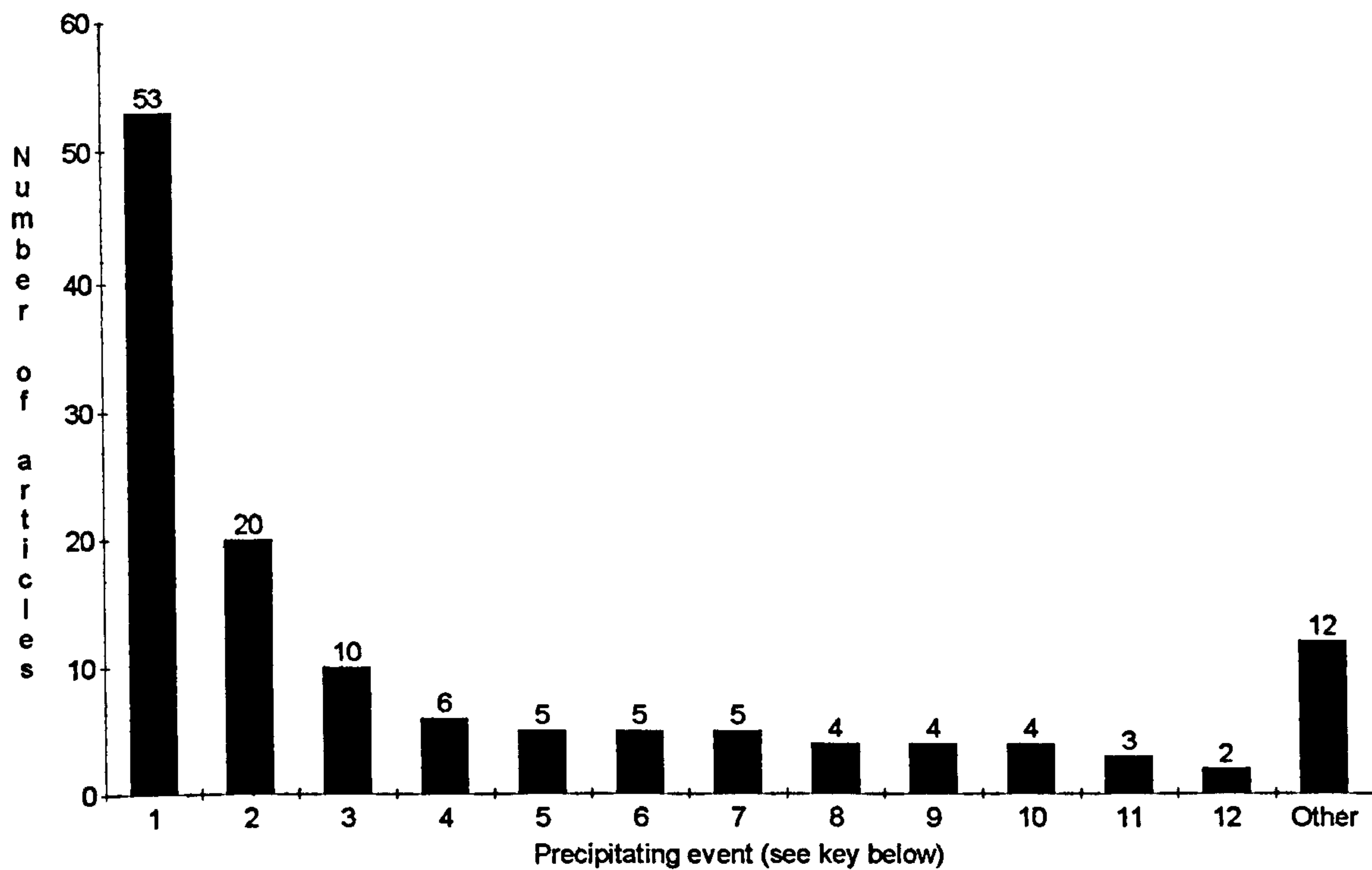
Coverage of the James Bulger murder shows a pattern not apparent in coverage of any of the other issues discussed in this chapter. The newshound model of journalism seems to be at work, with articles framed around comments clearly sought by journalists to fit-in with this theme of the disintegrating moral fabric of society.

For example, in *The Sunday Times* the views of Charles Murray¹⁵ are sought, and 'left-wing' academics Norman Dennis, George Erdos, and A.H. Halsey¹⁶ are cited (though not in response to the murder, their work is instead plundered by journalists

themselves). Journalists travel to Merseyside (the scene of James Bulger's murder) to talk to unemployed youths and community leaders about the situation, and similarly they go to the Blackbird Leys estate in Oxford, scene of prolonged riots in 1991. Professional views are sought in the shape of a senior social worker who works with children, and a consultant child psychotherapist. *The Sunday Times* thus clearly links the murder of the child with the large number of single-parent families in Britain, and its own journalists search for evidence to back this up. Passive reporting, the move from policy to media agendas documented by Kingdon (1984) and Nelson (1984), has given way to the sniffing out of 'news', though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to see whether and how this issue then moved from media to policy agendas.

The contention here is that the single-parent family debate that emerged in the later months of 1993 should be seen as not only following the above coverage (as it indisputably did) but as very much linked to this. In the aftermath of the James Bulger murder single-parent families were not always focused on directly, as they were to be later on in this year, but they were implicated as villains in a plot that was later to put them directly in the dock.

The trial proper started in July 1993 when John Redwood, Secretary of State for Wales, followed-up his visit to a housing estate in Cardiff with a speech that declared that single-parent families were (as cited in *The Sunday Times*, 3.7.93) "one of the biggest social problems of our day". Ministers setting the media agenda with their comments was typical of coverage of lone-parent families and the state which followed (see figure 7.4. below), with the majority of articles (40 per cent) precipitated by the comments or doings of government ministers.



Key:

1. Ministerial speech/statement/plan/action	7. Leak of Cabinet Office document
2. Another newspaper article/t.v. or radio prog.	8. Pressure group report/statement
3. Court case	9. Comments by Sara Keays
4. Publication of an academic report	10. <i>Sunday Times</i> poll
5. Publication of official statistical data	11. Occurrence in House of Commons
6. Speech by a religious leader	12. Speech by an Opposition member

Figure 7.4.: The number of *The Times*' and *The Sunday Times*' articles on lone-parent families and the welfare state generated by various precipitating events (1993)

Government ministers were undoubtedly the primary agenda-setters for this issue. The question remains, however, of whether they were deliberately setting the media agenda, or whether comments were intended only for the specific audiences in front of whom they were made. Was a series of well-planned and carefully orchestrated comments made, or did the media go wild over one remark made among many at the Conservative political centre summer school, taking on the issue from there as other ministers made related comments? Two points can be noted.

Firstly, the outburst over these comments came in the context of the annual government spending round. As is fairly usual, the media had been following this

spending round, looking keenly for hints of cuts. Several reports had appeared earlier in the year suggesting that this area was ripe for cut-backs (with, indeed, several ministerial statements reported in the previous year, most infamously, perhaps, Peter Lilley's Conference speech extract where he voiced his aims in tackling the fraudulent actions of young ladies who get pregnant to get a council house in his rewrite of 'The Mikado'). These reports were, however, the subject of isolated articles.

The Redwood comment, on the other hand, followed on the heels of the 'exclusive briefing' of *The Daily Express* by Peter Lilley, Secretary of State for Social Security. He was reported as telling the newspaper that the state's generosity to single-parent families was making this family form seem attractive and was, thus, misguided. Furthermore, this interview appeared on the same day that a press release from the Department of Social Security was sent saying that ministers were looking at ways of curbing the annual cost of state benefits for single-parent families. As well as being precursed by such comments, Redwood's comments were also followed-up in this way. Following his speech and the media storm it caused, similar comments were made, and were reported, by ministers Michael Portillo (Chief Secretary to the Treasury), Peter Lilley, and John Gummer (the environment secretary), amongst others.

If the Redwood comments did *not* have the aim of courting publicity, but were instead something picked-up on by the media to the chagrin of ministers, then why were these comments precursed and followed-up by similar comments by different ministers in this way? It certainly appears that it was a concerted attempt by ministers to set the media agenda in preparation for the announcement of cuts in lone-parent family benefits. It is likely, also, that interested pressure groups and M.P.s were aware that such a 'campaign' was to happen, and prepared themselves accordingly. Certainly, it

seems that government ministers were intent on setting the media agenda in this area and, in large part, they succeeded.

Redwood's remarks, accompanied by those of other ministers, generated stories for much of July before such coverage tailed off somewhat. The next 'phase' of this ongoing debate was to be precipitated by the trial of and the Appeal by mother Heidi Colwell who left her infant daughter 'Home Alone' ¹⁷ while she went out to work (full-time) at a local travel agency. Articles were very much framed around the implication of the event for the question of lone-parent families and the state. Media comment had previously been made regarding a couple in the U.S. who left their daughters home alone over Christmas while they holidayed in Acapulco, and in February of 1993 a British Home Alone case had been reported involving Yasmin Gibson, a bit-part actress, who left her twelve-year-old alone in their flat while she holidayed in Spain. Gibson was, in fact, a single mother but this was not focused on in coverage of her case, merely mentioned descriptively from time to time. The Colwell case was covered, though, very much in terms of the need for state provided childcare for single mothers so they could go out to work and break their dependence on benefits.

That the Colwell case hit the headlines as 'a single mother story', rekindling the debate on single motherhood and the state as originally opened by government ministers, is significant. Perhaps it would have hit the headlines in this way if it had not been pre-cursed by the July coverage, but it is likely that what Golding and Middleton (1982, p. 60) referred to as *sensitizing* occurred. That is, the Redwood remarks, and other ministerial comments, had sensitized journalists so that their surveillance procedures and journalistic categories were sharpened to capture similar and subsequent events and give them considerable prominence¹⁸.

Throughout the second half of 1993 when the question of lone-parent families and state support was a media issue, articles fed off each other to quite a large extent (20 articles were precipitated directly by other articles). Such a pattern indicates a cohesiveness to coverage, and suggests that a real debate is going on in the media rather than the appearance of a series of articles on the same theme which are unrelated beyond that.

Publication of academic reports which could be framed in terms of the question of lone-parent families and the state, speeches by religious leaders on the subject, and the publication of relevant official statistical data, all precipitated several articles during the period (see figure 7.4. on p. 170), but these types of events were not major agenda-setters.

'One-off' events which generated short bursts of coverage were: the leak of a Cabinet Office Document showing that ministers had ignored some civil service findings and advice about lone parents and had delivered speeches stating the opposite on several aspects of the issue; comments by Sara Keays about her position as a single parent (the absent father being ex-minister Cecil Parkinson); and a *Sunday Times* poll asking the public what they thought about various aspects of the single parent and the state issue.

Events which did *not* precipitate coverage are also important in examining the question of media agenda-setting. Pressure group reports and statements precipitated only four articles throughout the period examined, with occurrences in parliament and speeches or comments by members of the Labour Party generating only three and two articles respectively. What should be ascertained is whether this is because Labour Party members, M.P.s, and pressure groups were not interested in sparking newspaper articles on this issue, or whether the media was simply not covering these

groups' comments. Analysis of pressure group literature and *Hansard* suggests that the latter is the case.

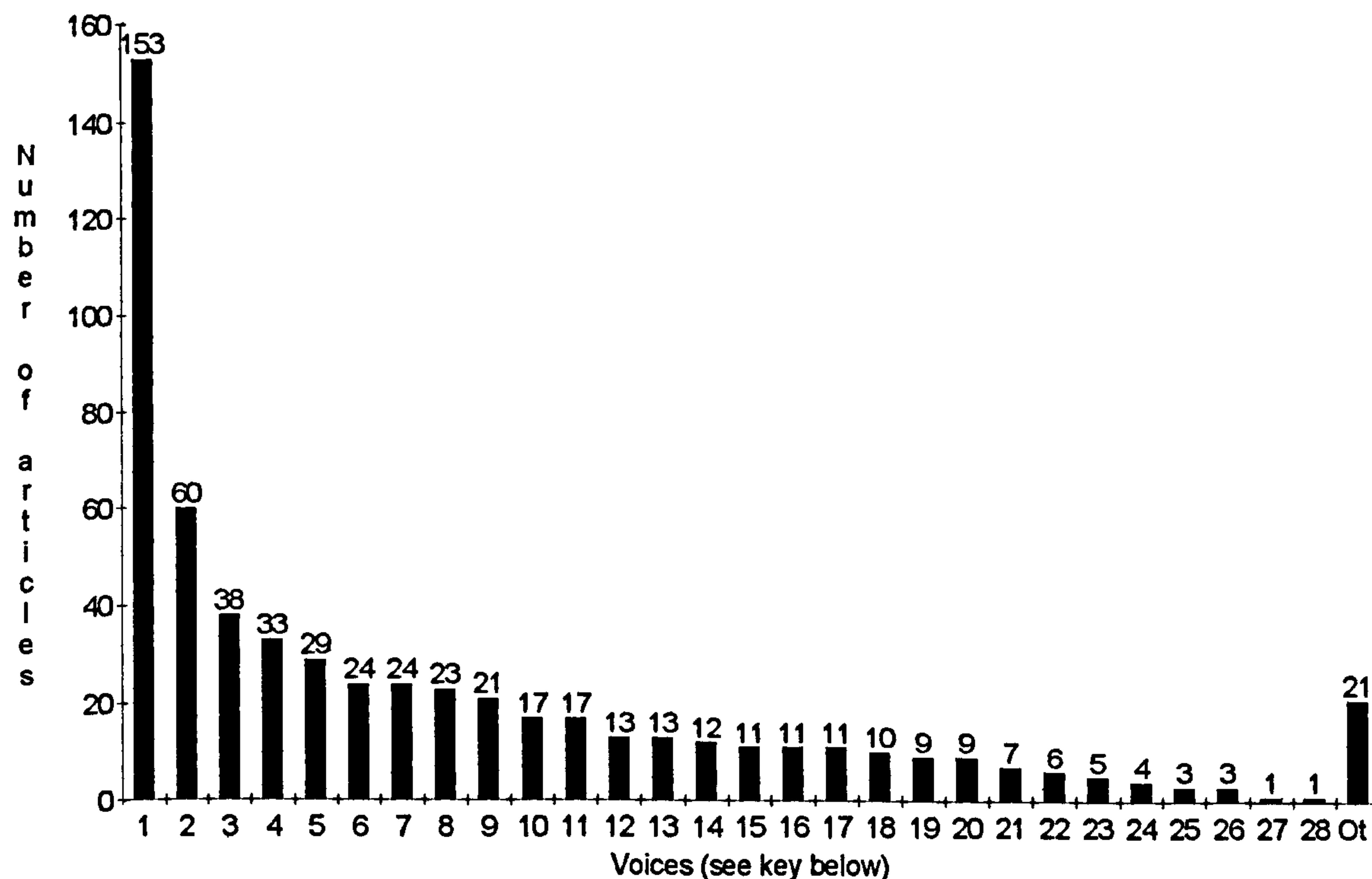
VOICES

Government ministers' comments set the agenda then, but whose voices were heard in the articles? Coverage of an event does not mean that the interpretation of those responsible for the event is covered. By looking at who 'had a say' in each article one can more accurately gauge whose point of view is being put forward in the media.

Figure 7.5. (below) shows, though, that as well as setting the agenda in terms of 'owning' the precipitating events, government ministers as a category were most often cited or quoted in newspaper articles. Of the 589 voices that appeared in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in lone-parent family and the state articles during 1993, 153 (26 per cent) were government ministers. Figure 7.6. (below) breaks this down further, showing that the most ubiquitous minister was Peter Lilley of Social Security, indicating the issue's framing as a social security issue. That the four ministers most cited in the press are usually described there as 'right-wingers' suggests that the issue was defined by this wing of the Conservative Party known for its fondness for cuts in state spending.

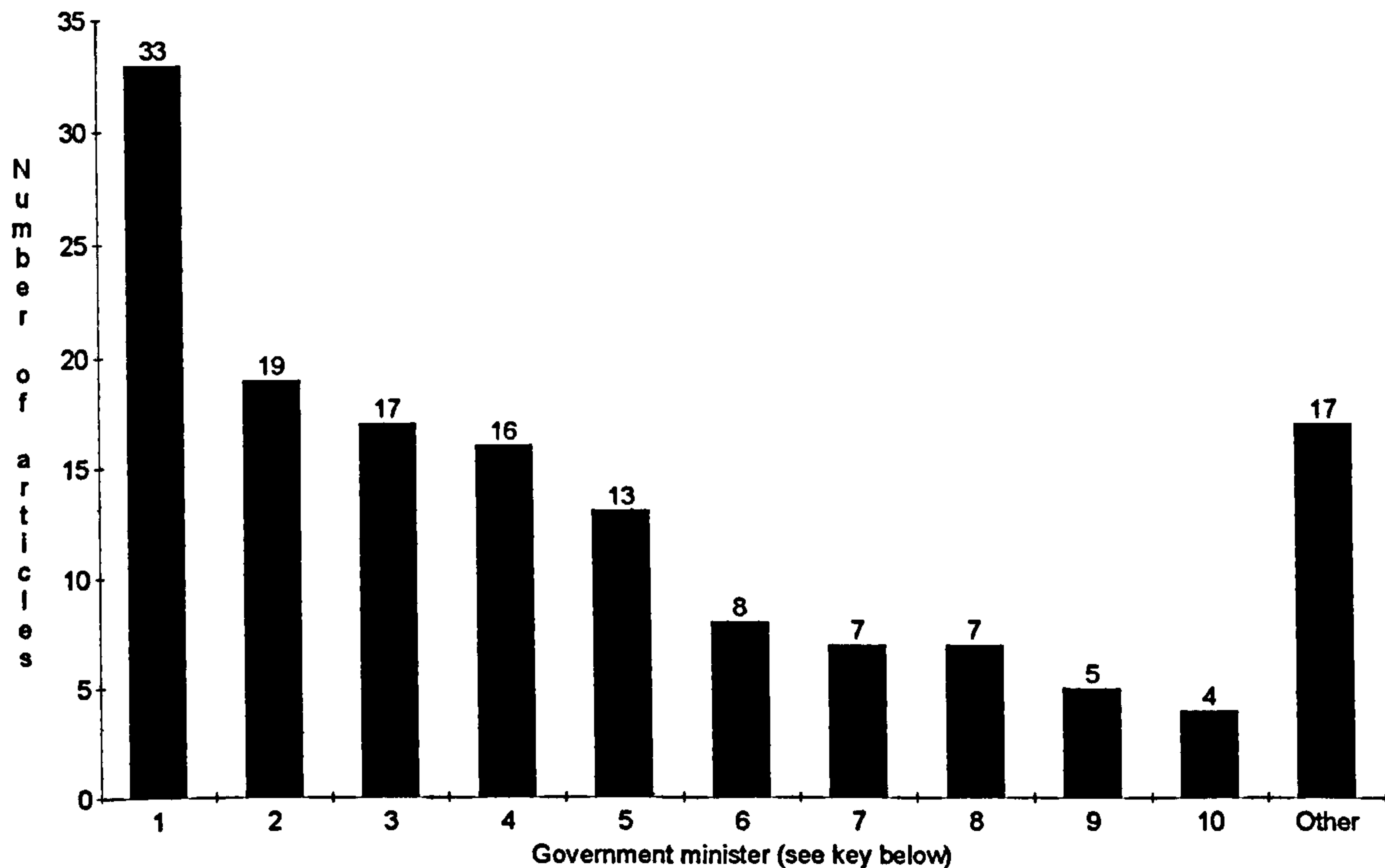
Perhaps a more unexpected finding in this area is the high number of times that academics and academic reports were given voice in newspaper articles. Although they appeared less than half the number of times that ministers did, they were cited or quoted 60 times, making-up the second most reported category. Their comments, or publications, tended to be used as expert comment. This category was made-up of a multiplicity of academics, though there are several whose work or comments were cited on more than one occasion (see figure 7.7. below). Those academics cited the greatest number of times - Norman Dennis, Charles Murray, and A.H. Halsey - were

all presented by the press as supporting certain aspects of the message of the right-wing government ministers who were featuring in newspaper articles.



- Key:**
- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Government Ministers | 15. Home Alone children |
| 2. Academics and academic reports | 16. Biblical figures |
| 3. Pressure Groups | 17. Children of real single mothers |
| 4. Legal professionals | 18. Newspapers |
| 5. Labour front-benchers | 19. 'Ordinary' people |
| 6. Tory back-benchers | 20. Local authority personnel |
| 7. Government officials | 21. Famous historical figures |
| 8. Statespeople | 22. T.v./radio programmes |
| 9. Cecil Parkinson/Sara Keays and families | 23. Real single mothers |
| 10. Foreign politicians | 24. Professionals |
| 11. Religious leaders | 25. Absent fathers |
| 12. Think-tanks | 26. Royalty |
| 13. Journalists | 27. Labour back-benchers |
| 14. Home Alone mothers | 28. Liberal Democrats |

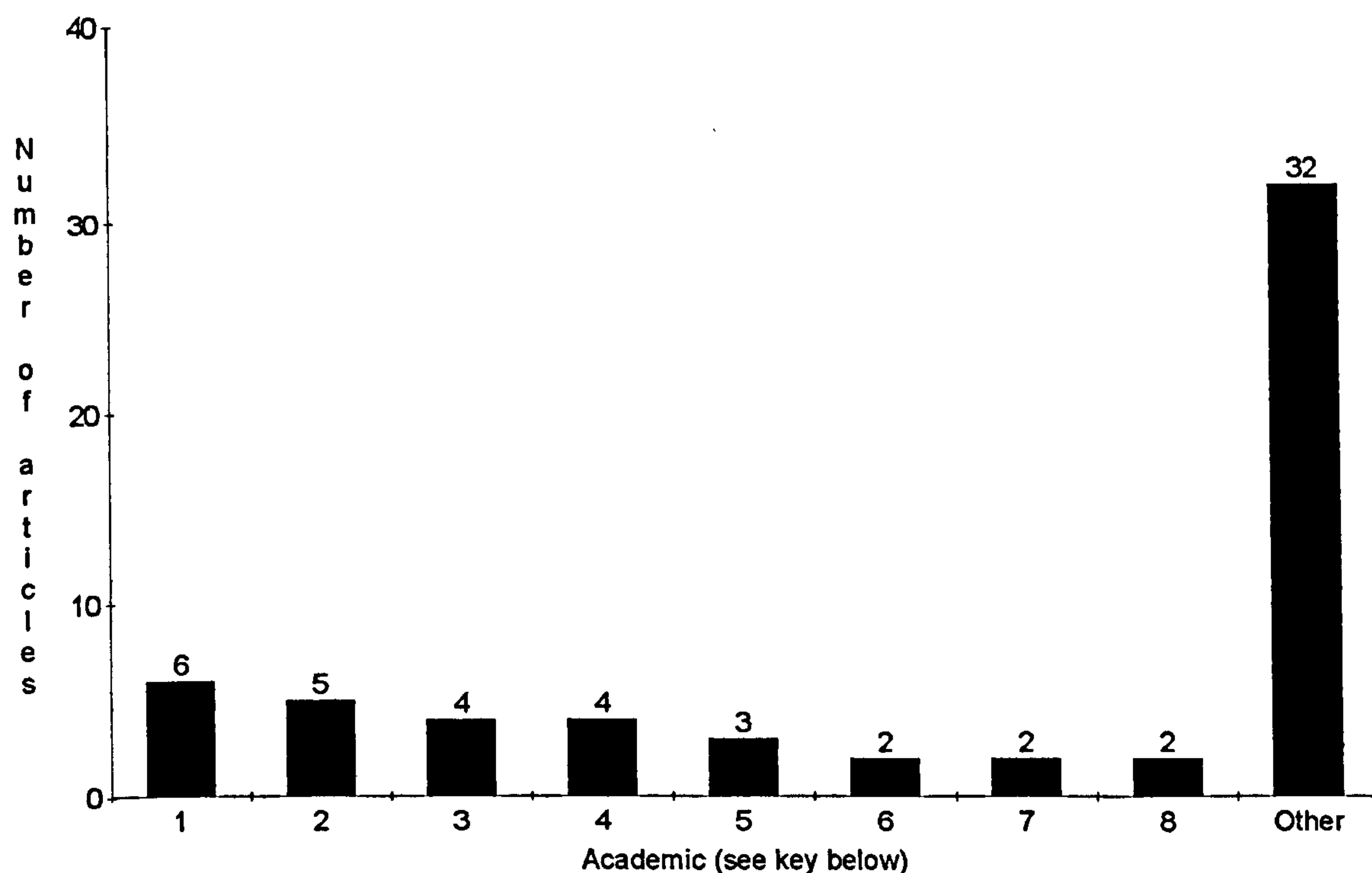
Figure 7.5.: The number of *The Times*' and *The Sunday Times*' articles on the theme of lone-parent families and the welfare state in which various 'voices' appear (July 1993 to December 1993)



- Key:**
1. Peter Lilley - Secretary of State for Social Security
 2. John Redwood - Secretary of State for Wales
 3. Michael Portillo - Chief Secretary to the Treasury
 4. Michael Howard - Home Secretary
 5. John Major - Prime Minister
 6. Kenneth Clarke - Chancellor of the Exchequer
 7. Tom Sackville - Junior Health Minister
 8. Sir George Young - Housing Minister
 9. Virginia Bottomley - Secretary of State for Health
 10. Micheal Heseltine - President of the Board of Trade and Industry

Figure 7.6.: The number of lone-parent family and the state articles appearing in *The Times* and *Sunday Times* in which individual government ministers were given voice (1993)

Pressure groups and executive members are cited or quoted 38 times (15.5 per cent of total mentions). Only four pressure groups are mentioned more than once however (see figure 7.8. below). The National Council for One Parent Families and its Director Sue Slipman appear in six articles out of the total 133 - this a very small proportion of articles particularly considering that one of the group's main concerns was the question of lone-parent families and state support, including changing government policy and fostering a favourable public image on this question. In Chapter 5



Key: 1. Norman Dennis
 2. Charles Murray
 3. A.H. Halsey
 4. National Child Development Study
 5. George Erdos
 6. Hugh Davies
 7. Heather Joshi
 8. Barbara Defoe Whitehead

Figure 7.7.: The number of lone-parent family and the state articles appearing in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in which individual academics were given voice (1993)

(particularly 5.2.), it was emphasised that the Council spent a lot of time in 1993 attempting to gain favourable media coverage for its client group. That its views were only covered six times in the six month period looked at here seems a poor result. On the other hand, the NCOPF gained more coverage than any other pressure group on this issue, suggesting that it is successful insofar as the press want to cover the views of this type of group which, it seems, they did not (on this issue at least).

Of the two other groups focused on in detail in Chapter 5, Families Need Fathers was mentioned only twice and Gingerbread not at all. Families Need Fathers was not

directly concerned with the broad question of lone-parent families and the state, so it is unsurprising that they are only given voice twice. That Gingerbread was not mentioned at all, however, when it was, as was discussed in Chapter 5, concerned with getting its views across in the media is more noteworthy. It appears that the group has failed in its aim of influencing the media agenda in the narrow sense of being specifically mentioned.

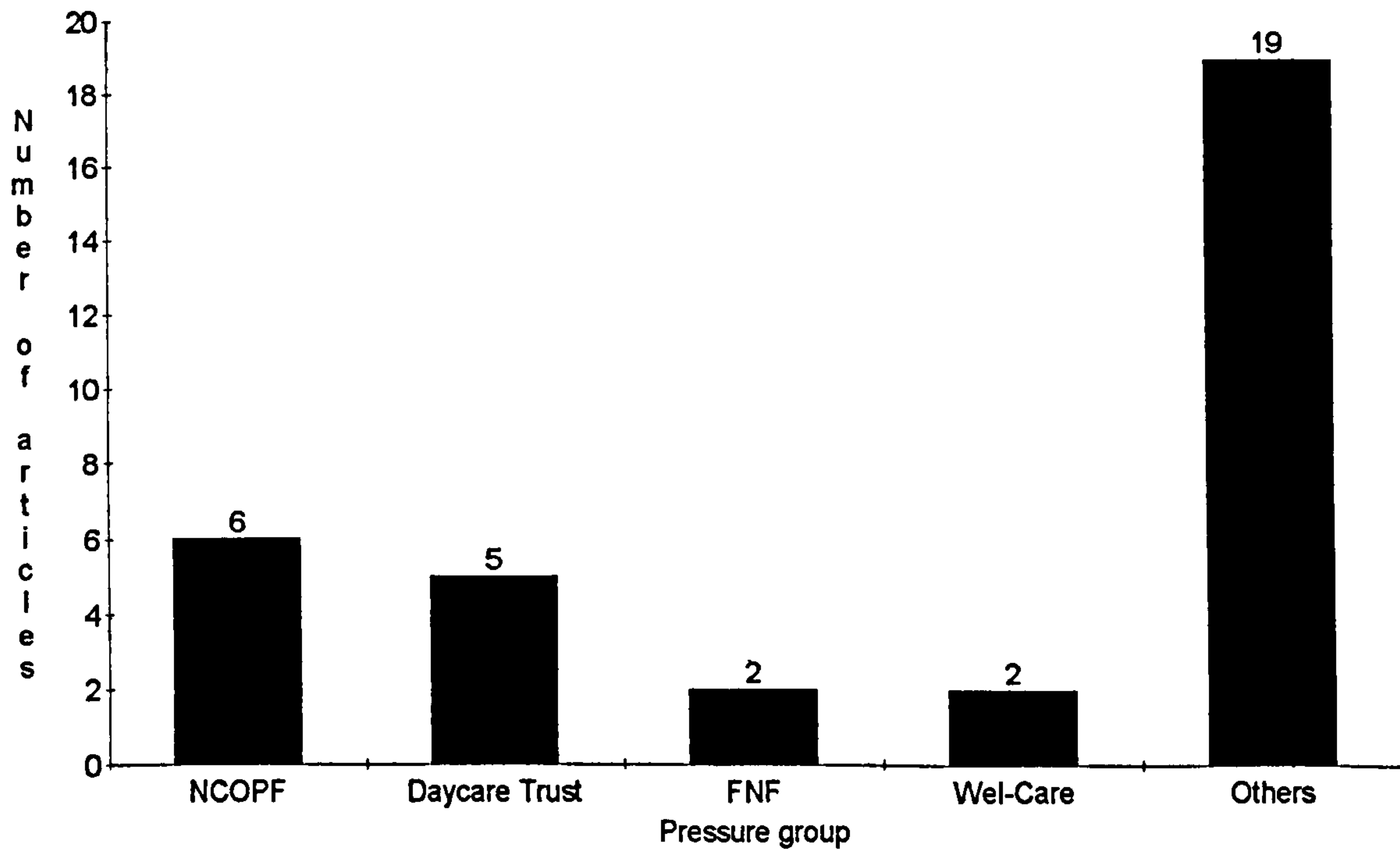


Figure 7.8.: The number of lone-parent family and the state articles in which individual pressure groups were given voice (1993)

To return to figure 7.5., other categories of people who were given voice relatively often include: legal professionals, Labour front-benchers, Conservative back-benchers, government officials, and what has been termed 'statespeople' (made-up of people such as Margaret Thatcher and Ted Heath who are no longer ministers but once held such positions - veteran politicians).

Legal professionals were mentioned most often in the coverage of the Home Alone cases. They did not tend to comment directly on the question of lone-parent families and the state though.

It is interesting that members of the Labour front-bench team were quoted or cited only slightly more than Conservative back-benchers. That the relatively unimportant back-benchers of the governing party were given voice only five times less than the front-bench Opposition team backs-up the finding that the governing party gets the most press coverage. As for Conservative back-bench M.P.s, it was noted in the discussion of precipitating events that their actions or speeches did not generate media coverage. It seems, however, that they are able to get their views covered, albeit in the context of another party's setting of the agenda. They could not *set* the agenda, but they were able to get their voices heard.

Unnamed government officials in various departments were cited or quoted quite often too. As they tended to back-up what government ministers were saying, this can be seen as yet more space being given to the views of the government.

It is perhaps unsurprising that of the category 'statespeople', Margaret Thatcher was cited or quoted in more than half of the cases (12 times). The ex-Prime Minister's view on lone-parent families and the state was reported only one less time than the Prime Minister of the time, John Major.

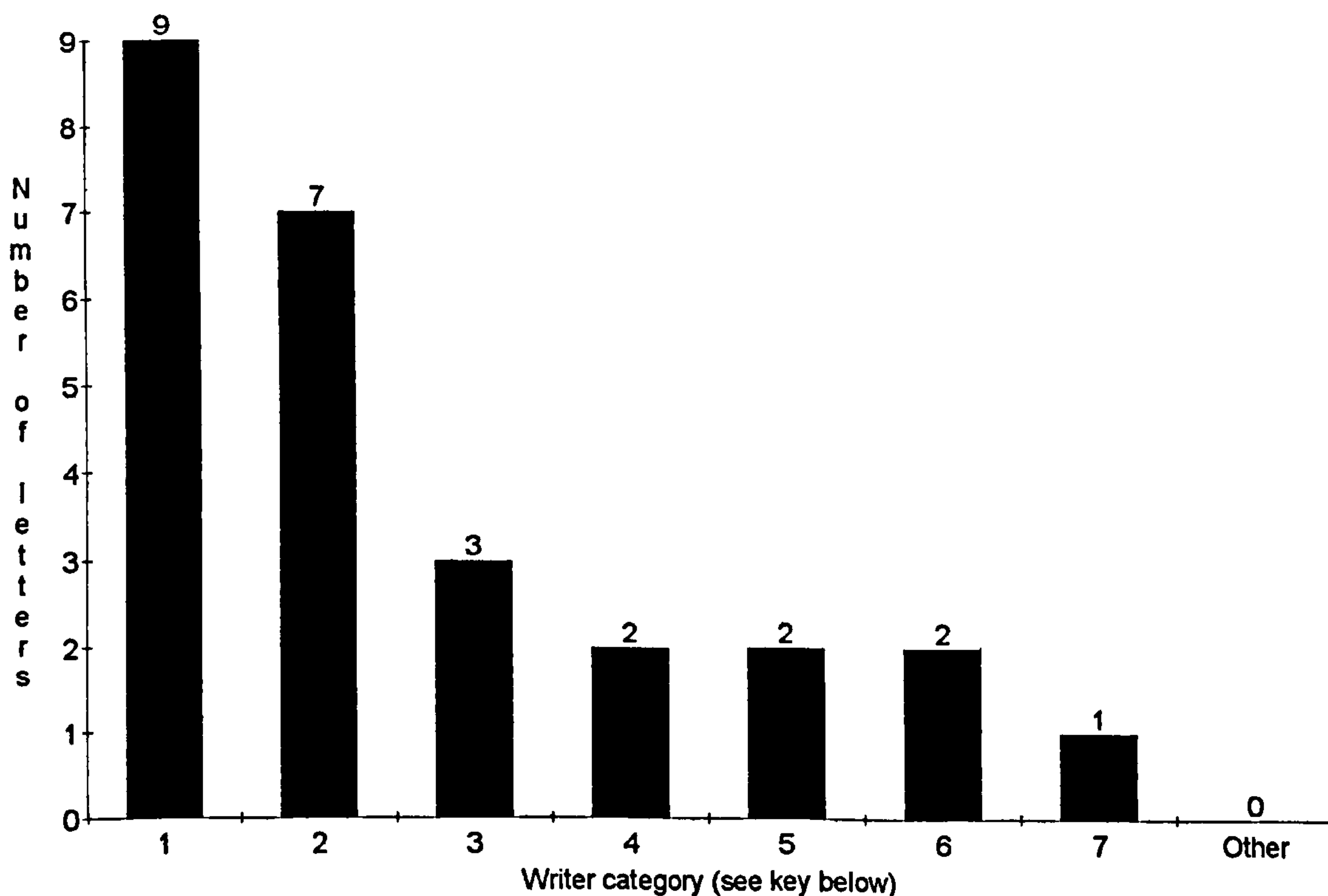
Categories noteworthy for the low number of times for which they were given voice include: the Liberal Democratic Party, Labour M.P.s, absent fathers, single mothers and their children. Liberal Democrats were cited only once in the six month period looked at. Liberal Democratic Party literature examined for this study makes no mention of lone-parent families, indicating that it was not a primary concern of the

Party, but POLIS data shows that Liberal Democrat M.P.s did speak out on the issue on a number of occasions in the Commons and in the Lords, so they were not completely unconcerned with what was, after all, one of the major political issues of 1993. This suggests that the press have *not* been interested in reporting the comments of this party. Similarly, Labour back-benchers, many of whom had an interest in this issue and spoke out on many occasions in the House, were cited only once.

Neither did absent fathers, single mothers, and children of absent fathers and single mothers feature heavily in coverage. It seems that it was very much an elite debate, with 'real-life' examples of the kind of people that were being talked about by government ministers, academics, and pressure groups given very little space. It was suggested in Chapter 5 that this was largely to do with the lack of single mothers and their children prepared to, or easily able to, come forward as particularised examples of what these elites were debating. The lack of absent fathers being cited or quoted indicates the focus of the debate on *lone mothers*, and their needs for state support, rather than on the other parent who was rarely mentioned in this particular media debate.

Finally, under this heading, it is useful to look at the writers of letters to *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* on the subject of lone-parent families and the state. If a group or individual believes that its/his/her views will not be covered in newspaper articles, it/him/her may write a letter to the newspaper outlining these views (although there is no guarantee that this letter will be published). Looking at all letters published can, therefore, tell one more about those interested in influencing the media agenda. It may also give one some idea of the salience of the issue on the public agenda, as a large number of articles written by members of the public with no declared 'special interest' in the issue indicates that there is public as well as government and media interest in the issue.

Indeed, figure 7.9. (below) shows that the largest category of letters published appear to have been written by members of the public with no 'special interest' in the issue (35 per cent), and pressure group representatives (27 per cent). They wrote nine and seven published letters respectively. 'Ownership' of letters has not been in government hands, with the proportion of letters written by the categories named below showing a completely different pattern and profile to figure 7.4.. Letters to newspapers seem to be a genuinely alternative way of getting one's view across in the media, albeit in a very limited way.



- Key:**
- 1. Members of the public declaring no 'special interest'
 - 2. Pressure group representatives
 - 3. Academics
 - 4. Single parents and their children
 - 5. Religious leaders
 - 6. Professionals
 - 7. Members of Parliament

Figure 7.9.: Writers of letters published in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* on the topic of lone-parent families and the state (1993)

THEMES

Figure 7.10. (below) shows that the most prolific theme on which articles were based was the concept that lone mothers are able to 'jump' housing queues in order to obtain public housing, before those who have been on a waiting list for some time (25 articles had this theme running through them). This hostile picture of lone mothers as privileged, or even as scroungers, was developed in other articles too. 12 articles presented lone motherhood as an easy option, in terms of benefits which came flooding in with no effort on the part of the lone mother.

Countering this image somewhat, however, was the large number of articles which argued for, or contained arguments in favour of, systemic changes which would make it easier for lone mothers to come off benefits if they so wished and be more financially independent. These articles largely focussed on the need for good and affordable childcare, subsidised and/or provided by the state (20 articles).

The very different nature of these two themes contained in the largest number of articles - lone motherhood as an easy, privileged option, and the need for a change in the system so that lone mothers had a choice of whether or not to be dependent on benefits - is indicative of the debate-like nature of media coverage. This whole issue was not presented in a one-sided way. Different views and different types of themes were covered, although the primary agenda-setters were government ministers. Perhaps this was why there was so much coverage of this issue. It was clearly controversial with many different voices speaking out and many different views apparent.

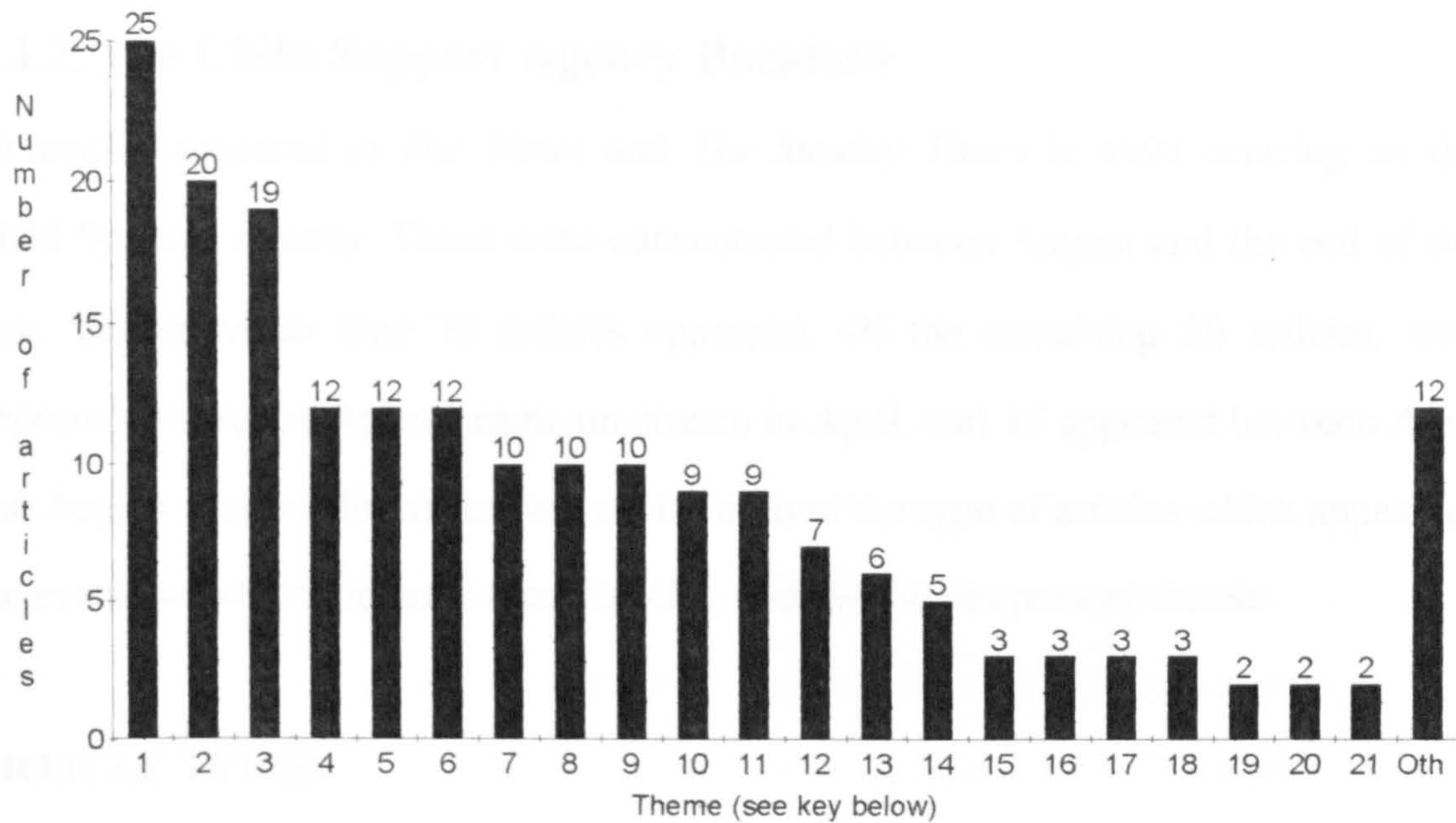
Overall, however, themes of articles tended to be unsympathetic towards lone-parent families. The link between crime and lone motherhood was developed in 12 articles, as was the argument that children need two parents to develop properly and normally.

The moral aspect of lone parenthood was developed in 10 articles with, relatedly, discussion of the fecklessness and irresponsibility of single mothers present in 9 articles.

Fathers' responsibilities, on the other hand, were discussed in only seven articles. As suggested above when looking at the scarcity of absent fathers in articles, this was very much a debate about lone mothers and their children with the other parent not featuring strongly at all. Interestingly, too, the poverty of single-parent families was a focus of only two articles. Although talk of single mothers being on benefits may implicitly suggest a characterisation of lone mothers' poverty, this being only explicitly raised on two occasions suggests an unsympathetic tone to the situation of lone-parent families that is more likely to characterise them as scroungers than as victims.

Chart 7.11. (below) shows that, overall, 58 per cent of the named themes coded for articles on lone-parent families and the state were hostile to lone-parent families and to their right to state support. 16 per cent were, on the other hand, supportive.

Looking at the other 'big issue' of 1993 may alert one to other observations that can be made about the above data as the two can be compared and contrasted. Indeed, such a comparison will be made in the conclusion below (section 7.4.). Firstly, though, a similar analysis to the one above is presented below for the issue of the Child Support Agency.



- Key:**
- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. Lone mothers jumping housing queues | 12. Fathers' responsibilities |
| 2. Childcare/systemic changes for lone mothers needed | 13. Teenage pregnancy |
| 3. Lone mothers and benefits | 14. Illegitimacy as focus |
| 4. Crime and lone motherhood link | 15. Reintroduce shame |
| 5. Lone motherhood as an easy option | 16. Budget measures |
| 6. Children need two parents | 17. Leaked Cabinet document |
| 7. Home Alone cases | 18. Low achiever link |
| 8. Statistical | 19. Poverty |
| 9. Religious/moral aspect | 20. Children Act |
| 10. Fecklessness/irresponsibility of single mothers | 21. Racial focus |
| 11. Back to Basics/family values | |

Figure 7.10.: The number of *The Times'* and *The Sunday Times'* articles on lone-parent families and the welfare state by theme (1993)

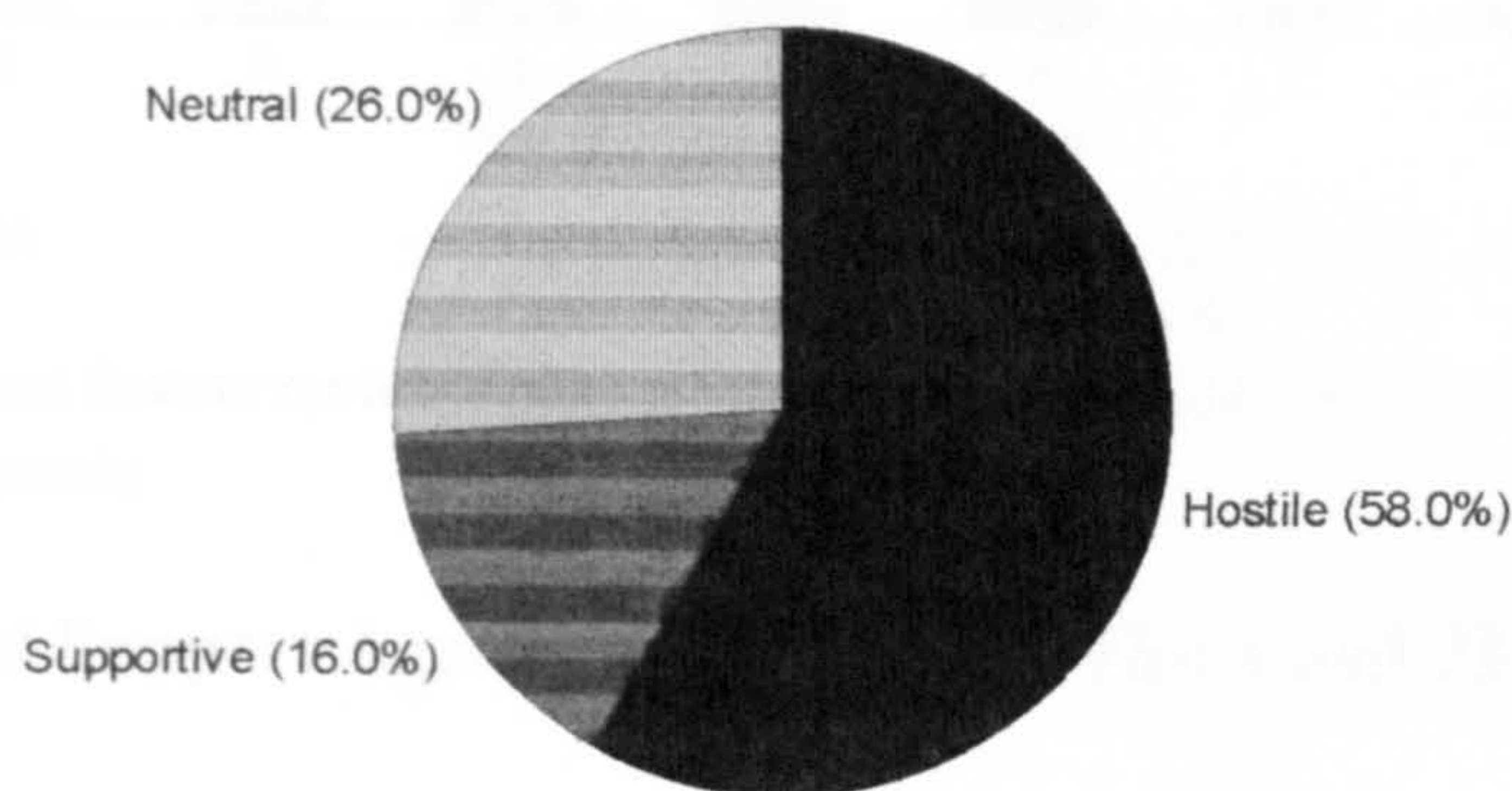
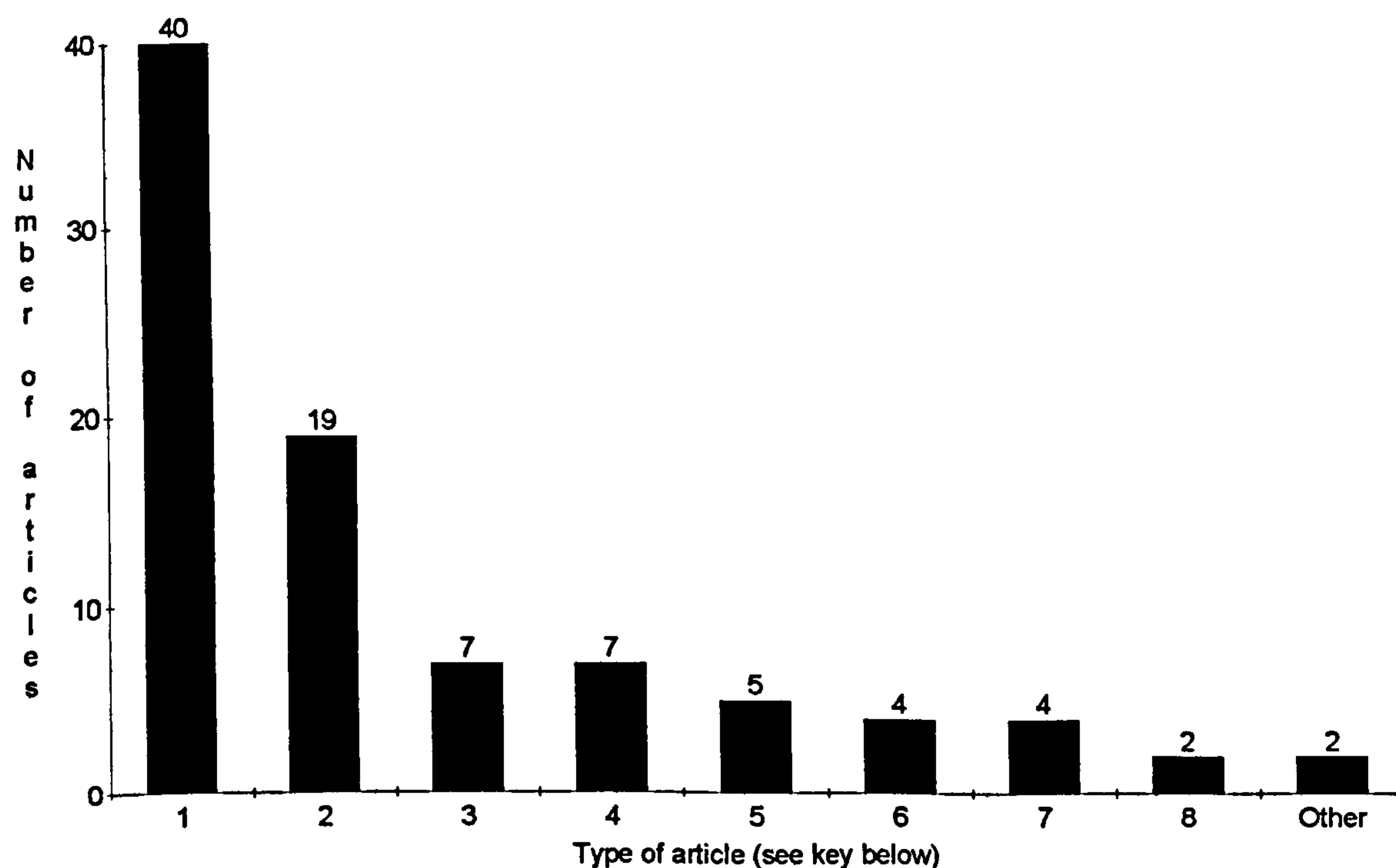


Figure 7.11.: The tone of coded themes present in lone-parent family and the state articles in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* (1993)

7.3.2. The Child Support Agency Backlash

90 articles appeared in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1993 centring on the Child Support Agency. These were concentrated between August and the end of the year, during which time 70 articles appeared. Of the remaining 20 articles, nine appeared before the Agency came on-stream in April, and 11 appeared between April and August. Below, discussion will centre around the type of articles which appeared, the events which precipitated these articles, and the themes present therein.

ARTICLE TYPES



- Key:**
- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. News article | 5. Front-page news story |
| 2. Letter | 6. Leading article |
| 3. Particularised feature on news page | 7. Legal article/law report |
| 4. Comment article | 8. Interview |

Figure 7.12.: Child Support Agency articles in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* by type (1993)

Figure 7.12. (above) shows that the largest number of articles (40 articles, making-up 44 per cent of the total number of articles on this theme) were non-front page news articles. As was mentioned above when discussing the issue of lone-parent families and the state, this is unsurprising as most items appearing in newspapers fall into this category. The profile of coverage of this issue by type of article does, however, clearly show that article types were very heavily skewed towards news rather than analysis articles. Also notable is that only five of the 45 news articles (11 per cent) appeared on the front-page of the paper, suggesting that this issue was high on the media agenda for only a limited amount of time. This is backed-up by the finding that there were only seven comment articles, and four leading articles (11 analysis articles in total) appearing during this time - 12 per cent of the total number of articles. This is a not insignificant percentage but it is not indicative of an issue that has been at the top of the media agenda for a prolonged time during its coverage period.

As with the issue of lone-parent families and the state, though, a large number of letters was published on the subject (26) suggesting that the child support issue was high on public and/or elite agendas.

PRECIPITATING EVENTS

When the Child Support Agency came on-stream on April 4th 1993 only around half of the national dailies even gave it a mention. *The Independent* and *The Guardian* gave the fullest coverage - the former devoted a full page to related articles in its 'Home' section and it was the subject of its leading article, while the latter devoted half a page to related articles in its 'Home' section and made it its lead story in its tabloid section. Neither *The Times* nor *The Telegraph* noted the event on the day or day after its coming on-stream, though this was commented on in a total of six articles during the week after this event in *The Times* and in its sister Sunday title. Of the tabloids, the (Scottish) *Daily Express* devoted a page of articles to it in its 'News'

section, and the *Daily Mail* noted it with one news item. The tabloids, though, were largely devoted to stories concerning the Grand National 'fiasco' (the annual race had been cancelled due to two consecutive starting line mistakes)¹⁹. As regards television, the Child Support Agency's birth did feature in the main national news bulletins but only briefly, and some way down the bulletin.

Overall, in the run-up to its operational starting date, during January, February and March of 1993, there was a little coverage of the Agency in *The Times* and *Sunday Times* (nine articles in total), though in the parliamentary and pressure group arenas the proposed operations of the Agency and the Act had come in for a lot of attention. The concern that lone mothers would lose a proportion of their Income Support if they refused to name the father of their child had come in for particular criticism from M.P.s in the House of Commons, with Gingerbread and the NCOPF also expressing concern in their literature. All were worried about tactics of intimidation and harassment being used to obtain the name of the father, particularly as often the family would not be better-off as a result, as maintenance would be deducted pound for pound from Income Support. Linked to this was the concern that some lone mothers feared that their ex-partner would resort to violence towards her and/or the children if he received a demand for maintenance money.

Families Need Fathers was more concerned about the operation of the Children Act at this stage, but was worried that the Agency would do little to help children, being instead a 'Treasury Support Agency'. It also objected to the term 'absent father' being used in Agency publications, protesting that it wrongly implied that the non-resident father is absent from his children's life.

These kinds of concerns continued during the first few months of the Agency's operation, with the 20 articles that appeared between January and August 1993

largely precipitated by members of the legal profession, pressure groups, and by ministers' responses to concerns expressed by these two complainants.

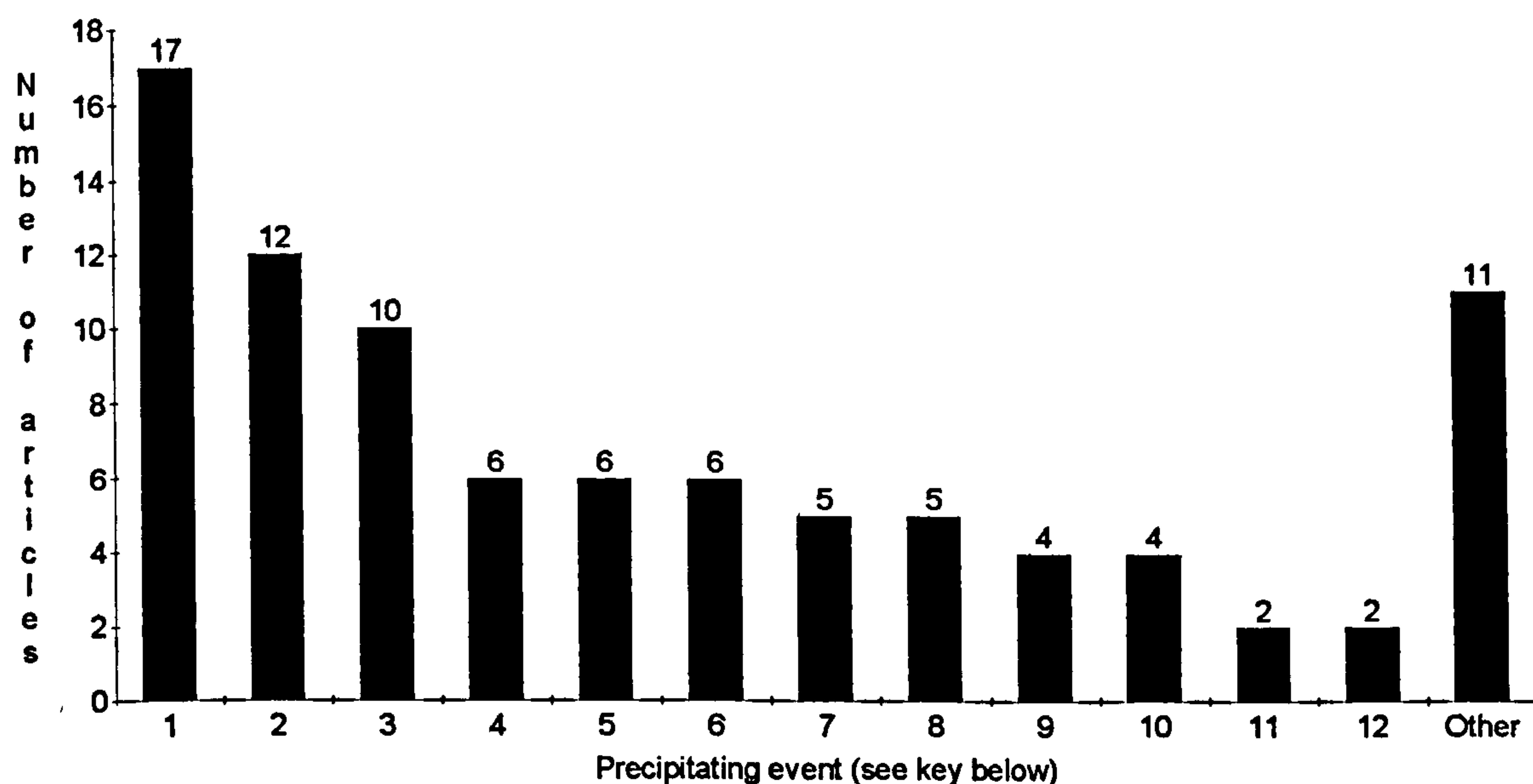
A turning-point can be retrospectively identified in the middle of August though, marking a watershed in the types of events that precipitated coverage. At this time, a story appeared telling of a married man who had been targeted by the Agency for a child that could not have been his. This was the first of around 30 articles (see figure 7.13. below) which appeared sparked by particular cases of Agency incompetency or injustice; by pressure groups' campaign against the Act for these reasons; by a court case of a man (Gray Crozier) appealing against the Agency because he believed it to be unjust; by the Commons Social Services Select Committee which was reported as unhappy with the way the Agency was operating; or just by general ongoing concern about the Agency.

Figure 7.13. (below) also shows that articles on this issue again fed off each other to a large extent, with 17 articles, the largest number in any category, directly precipitated by other articles. The Child Support Agency issue was covered by the press as an on-going saga, with the reader presumed to know, particularly after August, that the Agency was famous for its incompetencies and injustices.

Ministerial actions and comments sparked the second highest number of articles, but were only responsible for precipitating 13 per cent of articles in total. Whether they can thus be said to be prime agenda-setters on this issue is doubtful. Indeed, the profile of precipitating events for this issue shows that many different types of events generated coverage.

Precipitating events notable for their absence include comments by members of the Opposition front-bench. Although it will be seen below that the voices of Labour

front-benchers were heard, they were clearly not in control of setting the agenda even in a small way.



- Key:**
- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Previous article in <i>The Times/Sunday Times</i> | 7. Social Services Select Committee |
| 2. Ministerial action/comments | 8. General discontent about Agency |
| 3. Judges/lawyers/solicitors comments | 9. Court case |
| 4. CSA coming on-stream | 10. Agency injustice (particular cases) |
| 5. Agency incompetence (particular cases) | 11. Labour M.P.s' comments |
| 6. Pressure groups' campaign against the Act | 12. Ex-ministers' comments |

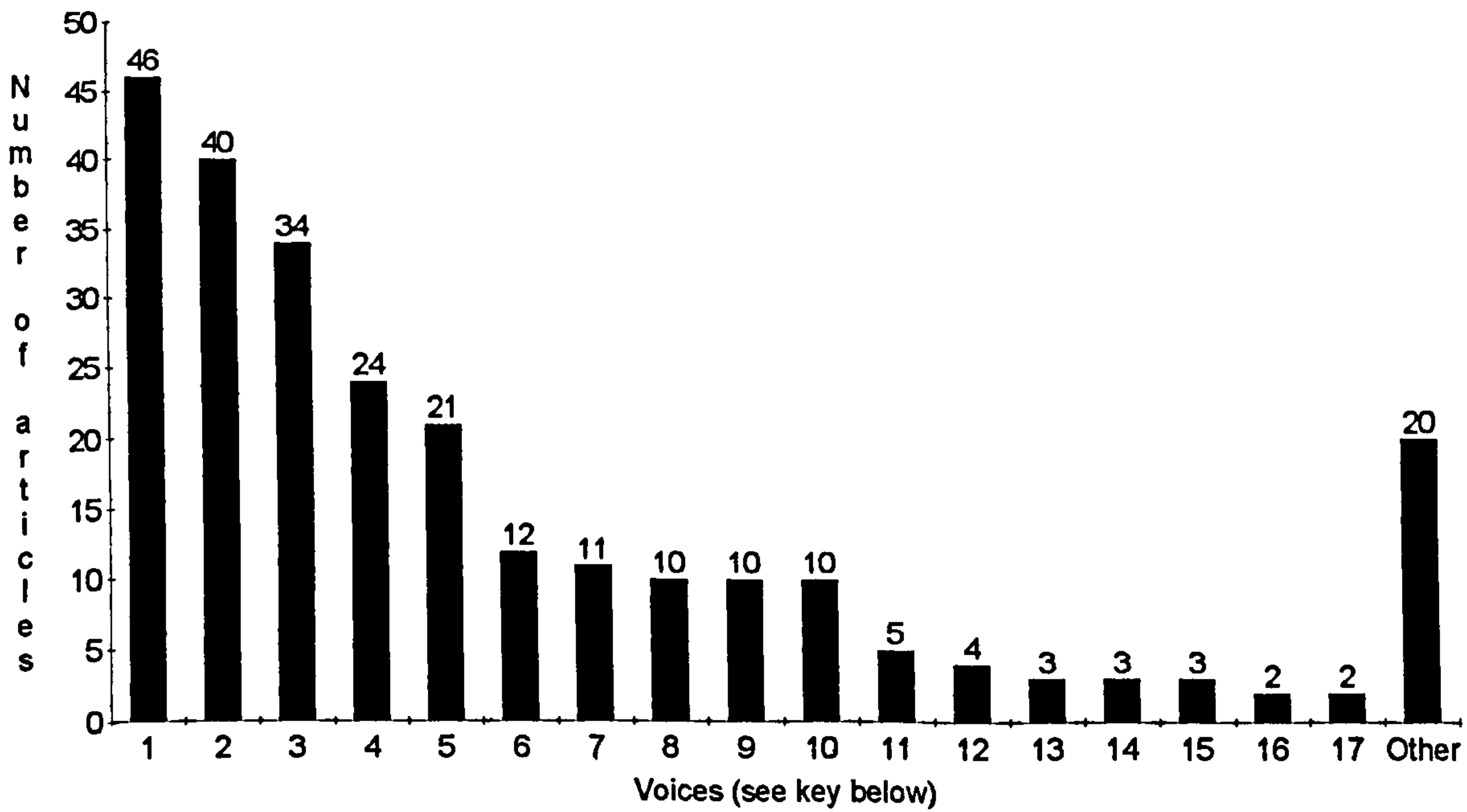
Figure 7.13.: The number of *The Times'* and *The Sunday Times'* articles on the Child Support Act generated by various precipitating events (1993)

VOICES

Whose voices were heard in these articles on the Child Support Agency? No one group of people seemed to be in control of setting the agenda, by looking at voices one can comment more accurately on whose point of view was being put across.

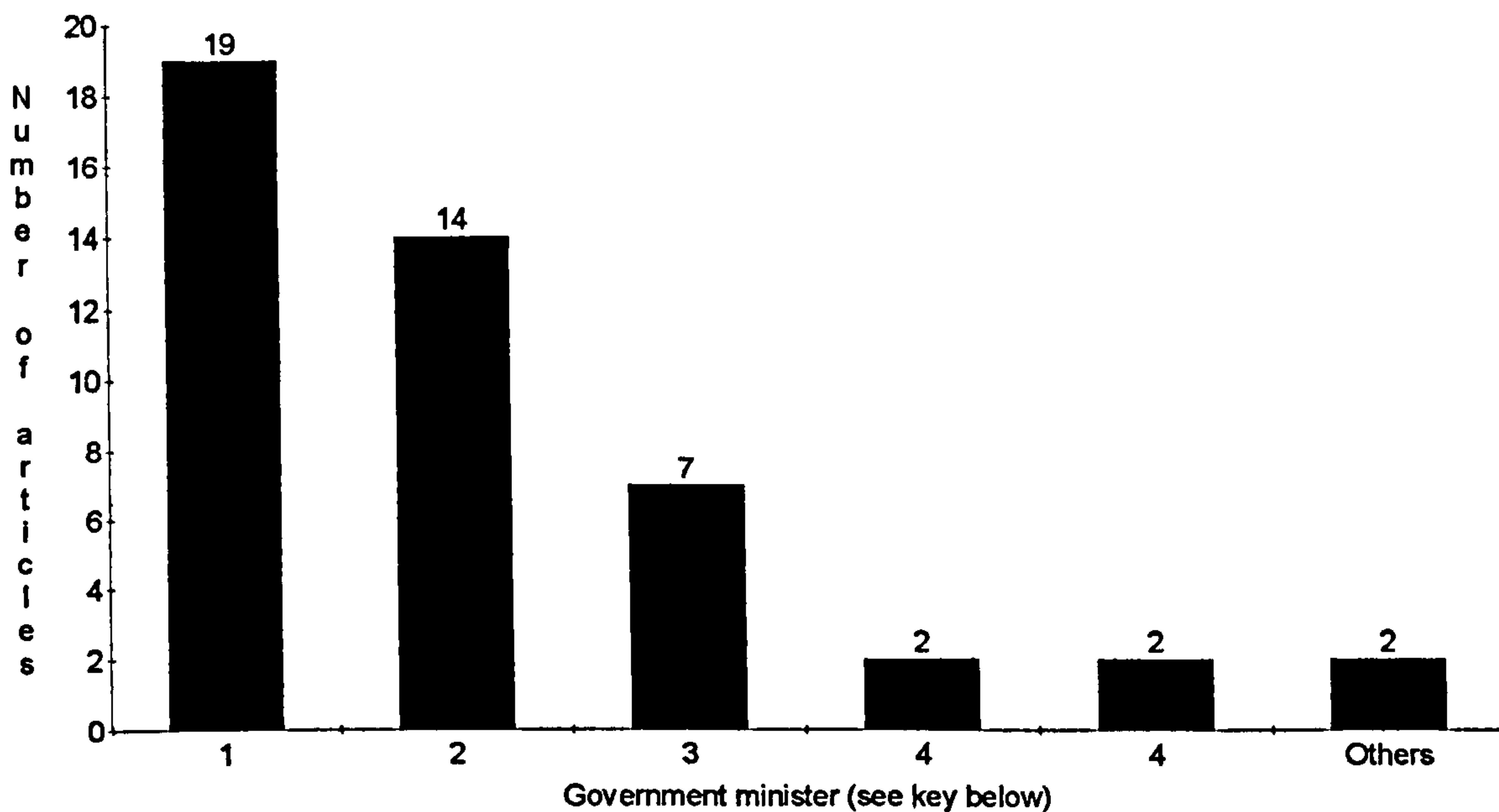
Figure 7.14., below, shows that government ministers were most often cited or quoted in newspaper articles. Of the 260 'voices' that appeared in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in Child Support Agency articles during 1993, 46 (18 per cent) were

government ministers. Figure 7.15. breaks this down further showing, unsurprisingly, that the junior minister in charge of the Child Support Agency, Alastair Burt, was cited most often. Indeed, in the majority of cases where government ministers were cited, this minister was a social security minister indicating the confinement of reported comment on the CSA to the department in which it is situated. Few ministers, it seems, wanted to become involved with the 'controversial' Agency (something that is backed-up by an examination of Hansard).



- Key:**
- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Government ministers | 10. Labour back-bench M.P.s |
| 2. Absent fathers | 11. Margaret Thatcher |
| 3. Legal professionals | 12. Tax-payers |
| 4. CSA officials (including Chief Exec.) | 13. Labour front-benchers |
| 5. Pressure groups | 14. Government publications |
| 6. Departmental officials | 15. Newspaper/television programmes |
| 7. Social Services Select Committee | 16. Think-tanks |
| 8. Single mothers | 17. Second wives |
| 9. Conservative back-bench M.P.s | |

Figure 7.14.: The number of *The Times*' and *The Sunday Times*' articles on the themes of the Child Support Agency in which various 'voices' appear (1993)



Key: 1. Alastair Burt - Junior Social Security Minister
 2. Peter Lilley - Secretary of State for Social Security
 3. John Major - Prime Minister
 4. Virginia Bottomley - Secretary of State for Health
 5. Lord Mackay - the Lord Chancellor

Figure 7.15.: The number of Child Support Agency articles appearing in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in which individual government ministers were given voice (1993)

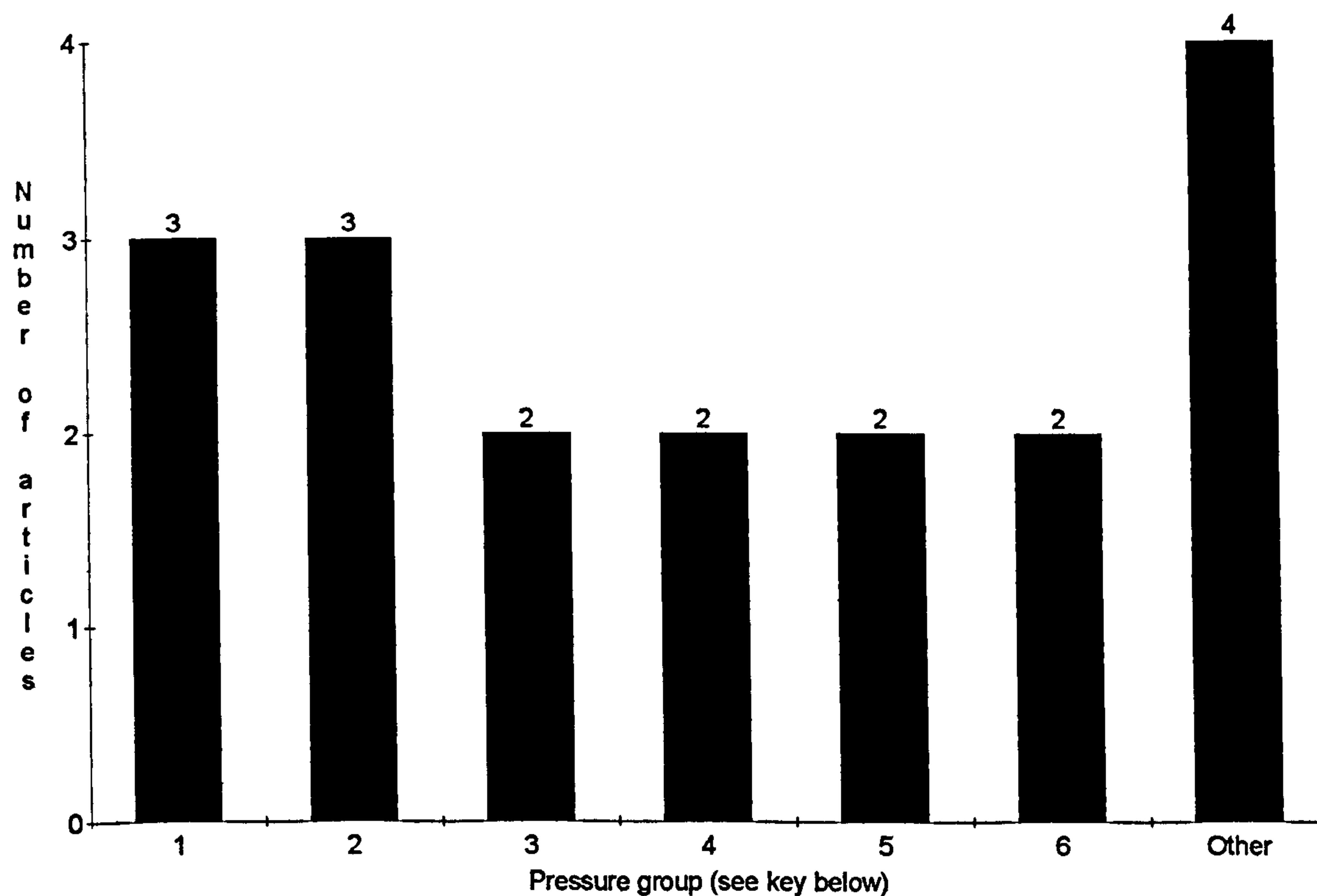
Figure 7.14. (above) shows that absent fathers made-up the second largest category of those cited or quoted in articles (15 per cent of articles). These fathers were not identified in these articles as being members of pressure groups such as Families Need Fathers and APART, but some of their names are familiar from readings of pressure group literature and it is suspected that many of them were encouraged to approach or to be approached by the press by such groups. Nevertheless, the methods used here have not found this definitely to be the case, so this cannot be said with certainty. This finding does, however, indicate that the views of those outside the government have been put forward. Those who were actually affected by the legislation concerned had their say, rather than those instrumental in formulating the legislation concerned.

Legal professionals, CSA officials including Chief Executive Ros Hepplewhite, and pressure groups, were also cited or quoted on a fairly high number of occasions. The issue took on a legal nature as lawyers and solicitors were reported as lobbying against it both before and after it came on-stream (they were cited or quoted 34 times). Their concerns will be discussed more fully under the 'themes' heading below, but one of the criticisms of the Agency put forward in the press was wrapped-up with legal technicalities. In later months, their comments were often used to legitimise absent fathers' complaints, providing 'expert' comments to accompany personal stories.

Agency officials were cited or quoted 24 times in the period examined. This was largely in response to alleged injustices and incompetencies - they were not responsible for sparking any articles but were, rather, on the defensive regarding the operation of their organisation. The Agency's Chief Executive, Ros Hepplewhite, was the only official to be named.

Pressure groups were cited or quoted 21 times (8 per cent of total voices) in the 90 articles on this issue. Figure 7.16. (below) shows which groups featured, with six pressure groups mentioned more than once but no individual pressure group having being cited or quoted more than three times. Families Need Fathers, APART, and the National Campaign for Fair Maintenance are all similar groups though - all part of the Network Against the Child Support Agency. As was mentioned above, however, it is suspected that many of the absent fathers featured in newspaper articles are members of these and other absent fathers' groups. Readings of FNF literature add weight to these suspicions as some absent fathers are saying what FNF newsletters have instructed those interested in Agency reform to say. Three mentions for FNF over the period looked at may not, then, signify unsuccessful media lobbying though matching

membership names with those named in articles would need to be done before this was known for sure (FNF has no such membership list available).



Key: 1. Families Need Fathers
 2. APART
 3. National Campaign for Fair Maintenance
 4. Child Poverty Action Group
 5. Solicitors' Family Law Association
 6. Family Law Bar Association

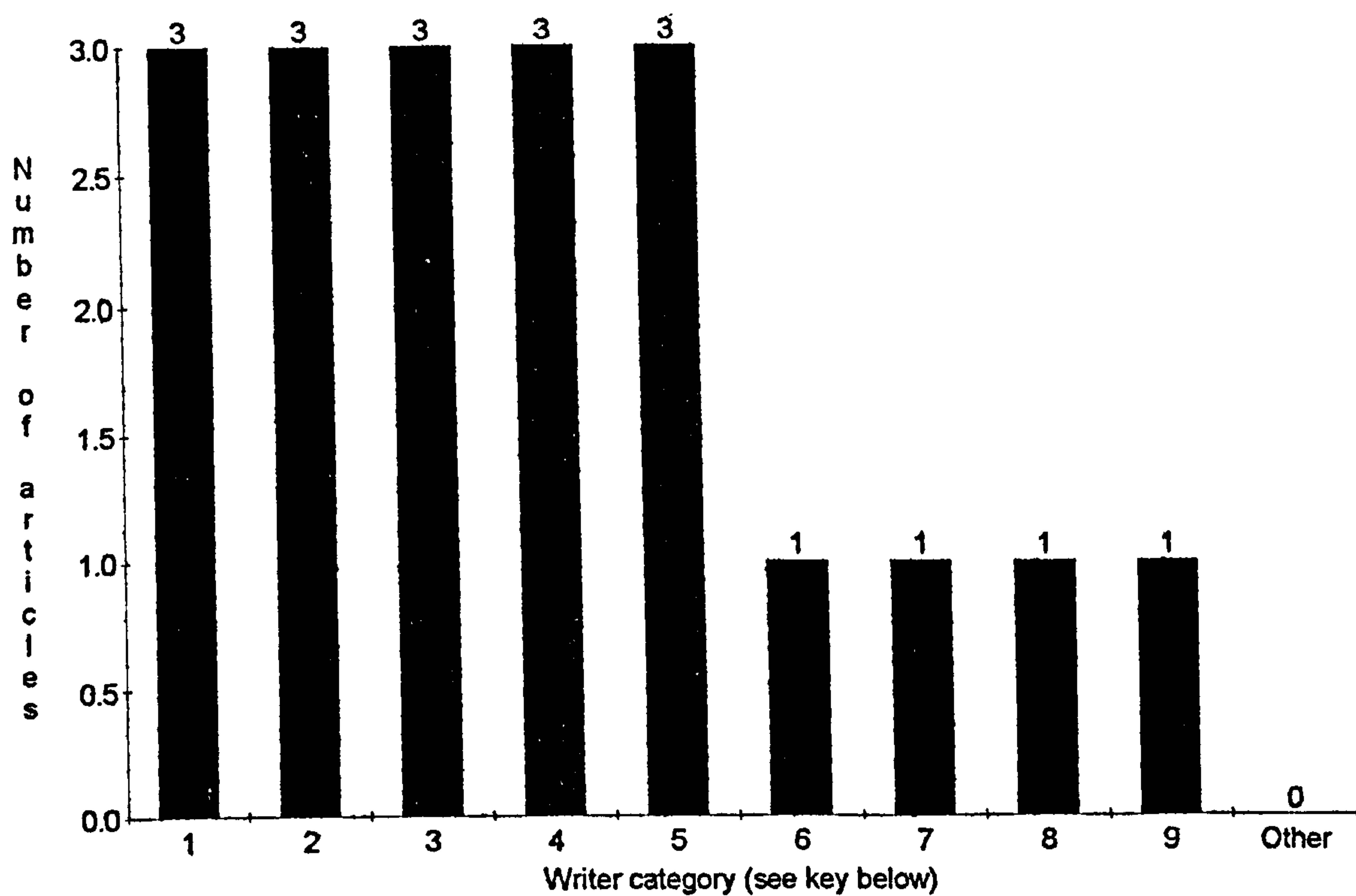
Figure 7.16.: The number of Child Support Agency articles in which individual pressure groups were given voice (1993)

Returning to figure 7.14., it is interesting to note that single mothers were cited or quoted only 10 times, to the 40 such citations accorded to absent fathers. The Child Support Agency has implications for both parties fairly equally, so this discrepancy in the number of times each party is given voice is telling. The discussion in Chapter 5, which suggests that this is a result of the superior mobilisation of absent fathers, should be referred to here (see pp. 127-129). Pressure groups such as the NCOPF certainly believe this to be the case, rejecting explanations based on deliberate bias on

the part of newspaper journalists and editors in listening to absent fathers and not to lone mothers.

Again looking at figure 7.14., for the child support issue it is apparent that Conservative back-bench M.P.s and Labour back-benchers were given voice equally. Both, though, were speaking out against the Child Support Agency so Tory back-benchers, in this instance, cannot be seen as akin to government ministers. It is interesting to note too that Labour back-benchers were cited or quoted more than three times as often as Labour front-benchers. This is in part due to Frank Field, with his position as Chairman of the Social Services Select Committee according him 'expert' status in the eyes of the media, being quoted or cited on several occasions. This does not, though, negate the observation that members of the Labour front-bench team were strangely absent from newspaper reports. As POLIS analysis shows that they were extremely concerned about the operation of the Child Support Agency towards the end of 1993 (Donald Dewar, Opposition spokesperson on social security, was particularly vocal) then it seems that Labour's concerns have gone largely unreported. Perhaps this was because absent fathers were providing a more interesting (and more virulent) critique of the Agency that could be illustrated by their real-life experiences.

Finally, under this heading, it is again useful to look at the writers of letters to *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*. Figure 7.17. (below) shows that published letters have been written by a variety of 'types' of individuals, with individual absent fathers and representatives from absent father pressure groups together getting six letters published. Interestingly, Alastair Burt has had a letter published, perhaps signifying the government's lack of control of the media agenda in that he felt the need to get his view across in this way.



- Key:**
1. Absent fathers
 2. Members of the public declaring no 'special interest'
 3. Solicitors
 4. Pressure group representatives
 5. Professionals
 6. Second wives
 7. Single mothers
 8. Labour M.P.s
 9. Government ministers

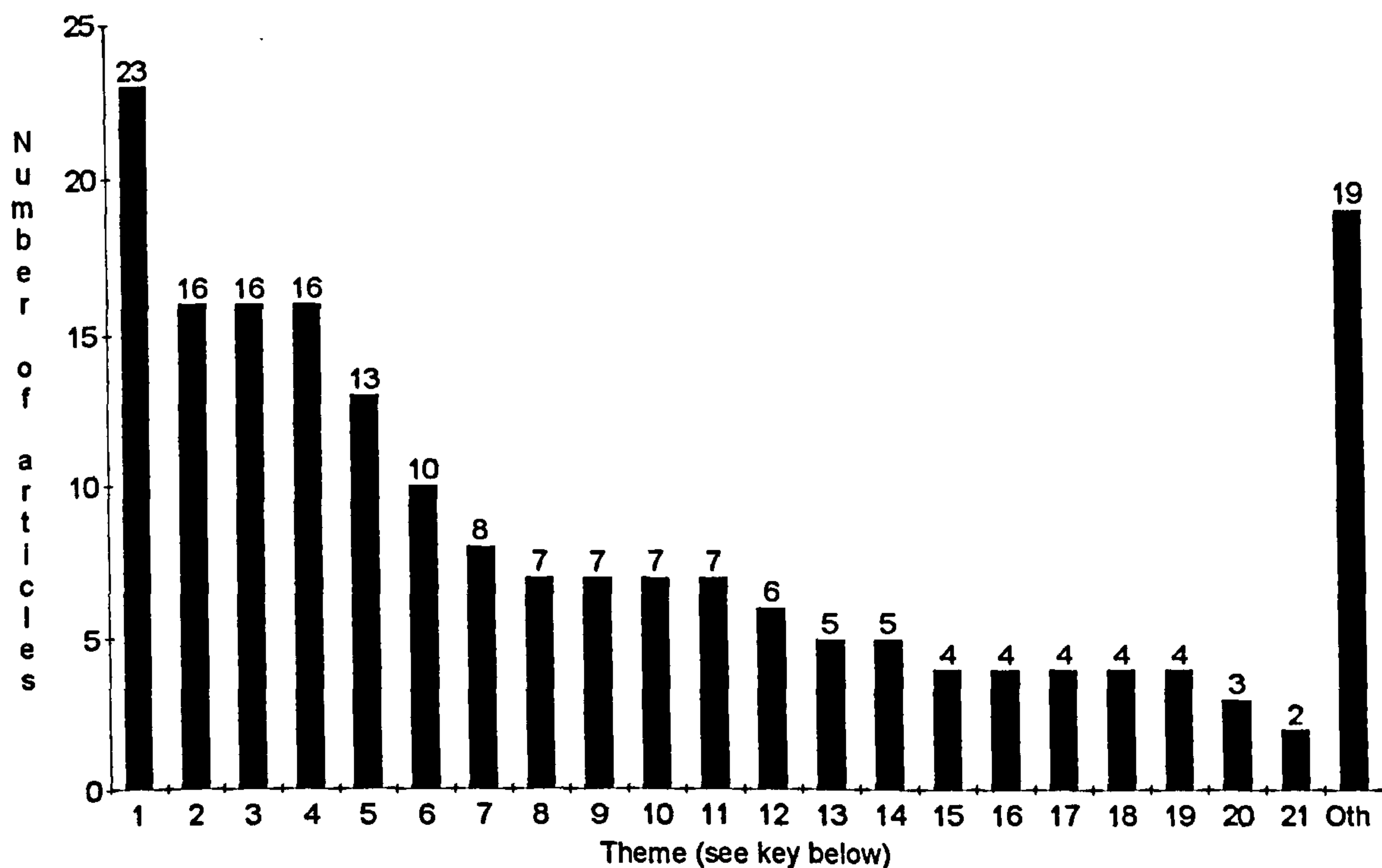
Figure 7.17.: Writers of letters published in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* on the topic of the Child Support Agency (1993)

THEMES

Figure 7.18. (below) shows that the most prolific theme on which articles were based was the idea that absent fathers were being made to pay too much by the CSA (23 articles had this theme running through them - over a quarter of the total number of articles on the Child Support Agency). This theme of the Act and the Agency as bad legislation, and of the Agency as a misguided organisation in that it was causing absent fathers to suffer, was developed in many more articles too. 16 articles contained the theme that the CSA was unfairly targeting so-called 'responsible' fathers

who had always paid for their children, rather than so-called 'runaway' fathers who had failed to contribute financially to their child's upbringing; 16 articles focussed on the formula used to calculate maintenance which, these articles claimed, did not take enough factors into account and was too rigid; 16 articles expressed concern that clean-break payments were being reneged as the Agency ignored such settlements; 13 articles expressed concern about second families; and 10 articles gave voice to the worry that the legislation was forcing fathers to see their children less often as they could not afford the travel expenses or other expenses associated with such visits. 94 out of the 171 (55 per cent) named themes recorded were, thus, expressing complaints about the Agency from the perspective of absent fathers as payers.

Themes which emphasised a view of the Agency from the perspective of single mothers were found less often in articles. Figure 7.18. (below) shows that eight articles expressed worries about lone mothers being forced to name fathers of their children to avoid financial penalisation; seven focussed on the poverty of lone-parent families and discussed whether or not the Agency would alleviate this situation; four made the point that the children of lone-parent families would be no better off financially as maintenance payments would be deducted pound for pound from lone mothers' benefits; and four contained the theme that media coverage was reflecting the whining of absent fathers who were much better off than the silent lone mothers who the Agency had been set-up, rightly, to help. In total, then, 23 out of the 171 named themes recorded (13 per cent) can be said to embrace views from the perspective of lone mothers.



- Key:**
1. Fathers being made to pay too much
 2. Unfairly targeting responsible fathers
 3. Formula too rigid
 4. Concern about clean-break payments being reneged
 5. Concern about poverty/rifts in second families
 6. Fathers forced (financially) to see children less often
 7. Worries about lone mothers being forced to name fathers
 8. Poverty of lone-parent families
 9. Act encourages paternal responsibility
 10. Agency forcing government onto the defensive
 11. Administrative incompetencies
 12. CSA as an undesirable intruder into people's private lives
 13. Agency causing acrimony between separated parents
 14. Statistical
 15. Children involved are no better off financially
 16. Child Support Act's incompatibility with Children Act
 17. Agency as saver of tax-payers' money
 18. 'Whining' absent fathers
 19. Judicial concerns about Appeals
 20. Agency should decide on custody arrangements
 21. CSA as Next Steps organisation

Figure 7.18.: The number of *The Times'* and *The Sunday Times'* articles on the Child Support Agency by theme (1993)

Figure 7.14. looked at alongside figure 7.18. also suggests that ministers' voices were heard in defence of the operation of the Agency. As figure 7.19. (below) shows, the

majority of themes present in articles were critical of the Agency (78 per cent), with only 11 of the named themes approving of the Agency or Act (10 per cent). It therefore seems to be the case that ministers were able to be heard in newspaper articles for this issue, and they may even have set the agenda on occasion with their comments, but they seem largely to have been responding to criticisms made by other parties.

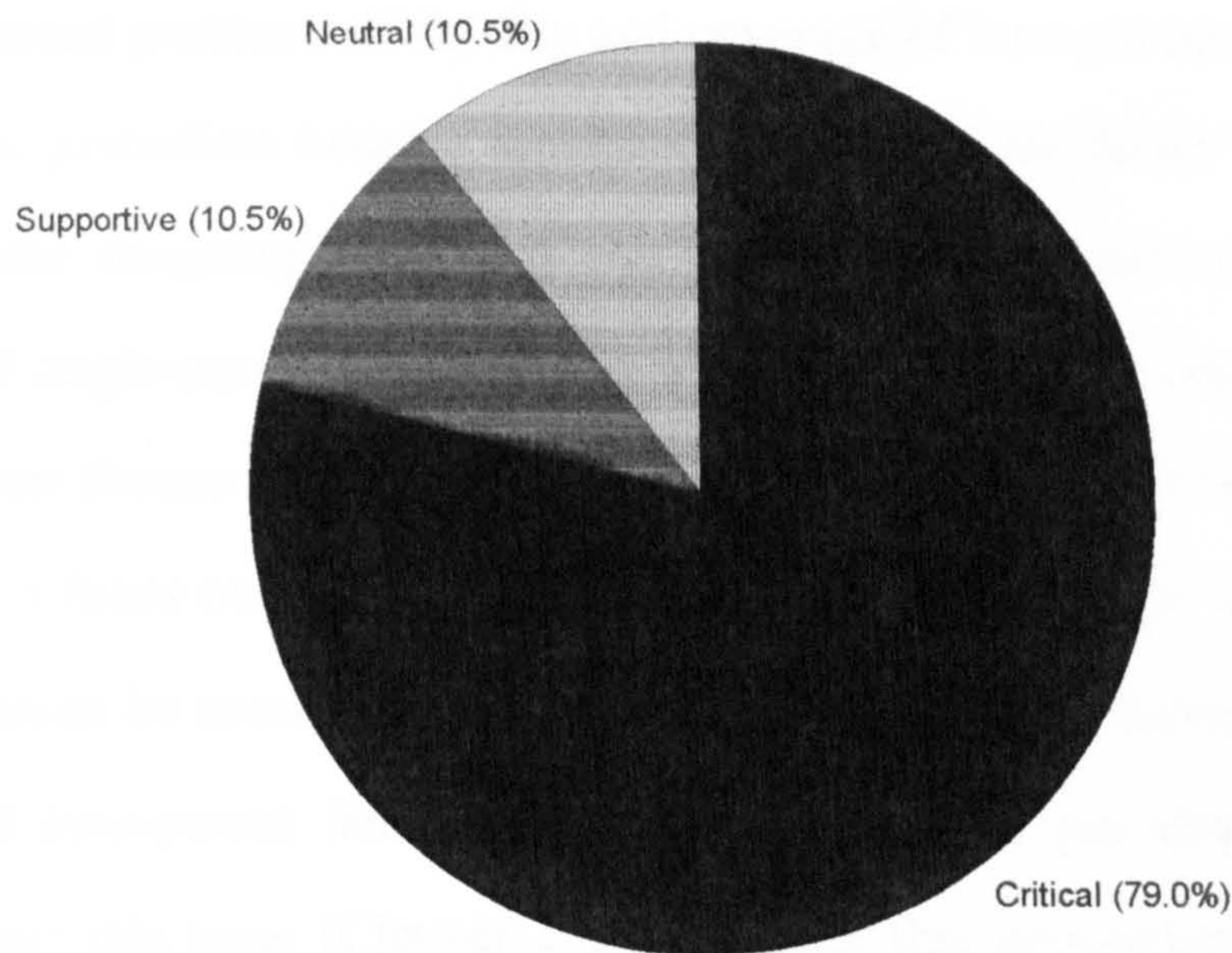


Figure 7.19.: The tone of named themes in articles on the Child Support Agency in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* (1993)

In short, this was less of a 'debate' between government ministers and other parties and more of a 'backlash' by these other parties. Hardly a good word is heard about the Agency during 1993²⁰, with most of the themes present expressing complaints about the Agency from the point of view of absent fathers. The government was put on the defensive over this issue as irate fathers seemingly had the power to set the media agenda.

7.4. CONCLUSION

Journalists cover certain types of events, largely revolving around governmental doings. In the past a speech by Keith Joseph, the publication and aftermath of a weighty Royal Commission report, and the reform of the child maintenance system all generated a series of articles. Lone-parent family related issues were at no time, however, uppermost on the media agenda. Then, in summer 1993, a not very well known government minister made a remark about single-parent families being one of the biggest social problems of the day and coverage of lone-parent families exploded. It seems that journalists became sensitized to 'lone parent family' stories, and such stories became on-going. Why was this? Did coverage, particularly unfavourable coverage, of single-parent families fit in with other themes of news coverage of the day? 1993 saw themes of the moral decay of society as popular framers of all sorts of articles. Did a focus on lone parents strike a chord with this type of coverage? These questions cannot be answered with any certainty. It is likely, though, that the prolific coverage of lone-parent families and the state can be put down to government concern about this issue (Chapter 2 showed that this population group has grown quite dramatically over the last fifteen years, and costs the state a lot of money in benefit expenditure) combined with the willingness of journalists to take it up with gusto for the reason that it chimed in with this breakdown of society theme that seemed to make a variety of topics newsworthy.

The issue of the Child Support Agency was, however, completely distinct. Although the two topics had implications for the same population group - single-parent families and absent parents - they were rarely cross-referenced even though they both raged in the media through the Autumn of 1993. The Agency became an issue, it seems, because it was an unpopular piece of legislation with some of its absent father clientele who mobilised and protested. They presented journalists with ready-packaged stories because they knew how, and were able to, manipulate the media in

this way (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of the tactics used by Families Need Fathers). Journalists therefore had at their fingertips a series of human interest stories that could be placed in the news section of the paper because these stories had a political slant - the unpopularity of a major new piece of legislation. As with the poll tax, stories of 'genuine discontent' with important policy reforms make good news. On this child support issue, ministers could still generate articles with their comments, but they had been forced by reports of Agency incompetencies and injustices to make these comments defensive.

It seems that government ministers are easily able to set the agenda. Journalists monitor ministers closely, and on a daily basis. A lot of what they say will automatically generate at least one newspaper article. Pressure groups, on the other hand, are not part of the journalist's daily track. Pressure groups must try hard to set the agenda, or even to get their views printed at all. Whereas it is the norm for the speeches and doings of government ministers to be covered, then, it seems it is the norm for the statements, publications and doings of pressure groups *not* to be covered. For the CSA issue, though, absent fathers broke through this by providing journalists with good stories. Single mothers failed in this for both the issues looked at here.

It is contended here, then, that coverage was more favourably disposed to absent fathers as a population group than to lone mothers, but that this was not due to any conscious bias on the part of journalists, but rather down to differences in the way in which these two groups mobilised and used journalists. Some absent fathers, whether as part of formal groupings or not cannot be said with any certainty, provided quotes and real-life cases. Particularisation seems to be the key to snatching ownership of an issue from government ministers, the natural state, to another grouping. Particularisation makes good news.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* were chosen for analysis because of the availability of computerised databases that stored their contents. It was originally hoped that a national daily broadsheet title could be compared with a national daily tabloid title over a long period. Which particular newspapers used was thought to be less important than the facilitation of comparison between two *types* of newspapers. This was not possible, however, with the resources available, and looking only at *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* over a two year period was an acceptable option. *The Times* is not the highest selling broadsheet, but it has a large readership and has a similar content to the other national broadsheet titles, being untypical in no major sense. *The Sunday Times* usefully supplements this analysis, being one of the leading Sunday titles Britain-wide. Indeed, analysis of these two newspapers did throw-up differences in style between the two, with *The Sunday Times* tending to be more sensational in coverage, akin to tabloid newspapers.

² For 1992, Textline, an on-line database, was used. For 1993, *The Times* on CD-ROM was used. This change in the database used half-way through the analysis period was due to a combination of Textline being very expensive to use, and the department in which the work was being carried out obtaining the off-line database at the end of 1992. The same search-string was used in each case so inconsistencies are expected to be minimal. Differences in the two databases are several-fold however: Textline does not include readers' letters, and it makes no mention of the page on which the item was printed so making it impossible to distinguish front-page stories from stories further back in the paper. In addition, for Textline *The Sunday Times* has to be searched separately from *The Times* whereas using the CD-ROM items in *The Sunday Times* were obtained alongside items from *The Times*.

³ For i) and ii) each article was coded in only one category. For iii) and iv) each article was coded as many times as was applicable.

⁴ This includes entries for *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Times Educational Supplement*, and *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*. During much of 1979 *The Times* was not produced due to industrial action. During this period *The Daily Telegraph* was instead indexed.

⁵ Newspaper articles from which quotes have been taken are referenced in Appendix 4.

⁶ Those used are: *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror* (when available, otherwise the Scottish sister paper *The Daily Record* was substituted), *The Sun*, *Today* and *The Daily Star*.

⁷ These are: the ITN lunchtime news, the BBC1 lunchtime news, the ITN teatime news, the BBC 6 'o' clock news, Channel 4 news, the BBC 9 'o' clock news, the ITN 10 'o' clock news, and *Newsnight*.

⁸ Such material has been gathered for the three core lone-parent family related pressure groups identified in Chapter 5 (Gingerbread, the National Council for One Parent Families, and Families Need Fathers). See Appendix 3 for further details.

⁹ Note that for 1979, relevant articles from *The Daily Telegraph* were counted on the days when *The Times* did not appear due to industrial action.

¹⁰ Note that these numbers were derived from two different methods (as was explained in 7.1.2.). Figures for 1974 to 1991 were obtained from *The Times Index* and are likely to be an under-estimation of the real number of relevant articles appearing in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in each of these years. Figures for 1992 and 1993, however, were obtained from databases as described in 7.1.2.. These figures are likely to be accurate. The overall trend in the number of articles over the period 1974 to 1991 is, then, more worthy of note than absolute numbers, and the overall trend over the period 1974 to 1993 should be looked at with these differences in data collection methods in mind.

¹¹ This refers to stories appearing before the Child Support Act was put on the statute books.

¹² Joseph had spoken on 'the cycle of deprivation' before. In June 1972 he made a speech presenting the hypothesis that deprivation and maladjustments were being transmitted down the generations by certain types of parents. For this reason, he said, poverty and deprivation were still in existence despite economic growth (see Clarke, 1983).

¹³ Mrs Thatcher declared her party to be 'the party of the family' in 1977.

¹⁴ Although it should be noted that *The Sunday Times* clearly emerged as being distinct from *The Times* during analysis. The former exhibits the characteristics normally attributed to tabloid newspapers - sensationalised coverage and a tendency to present polemic as fact.

¹⁵ The newspaper devoted most of one edition of its colour magazine to right-wing American sociologist Charles Murray in 1989, and one of its 'Focus' supplements to him in 1993. The newspaper often uses his theories in its analysis of social trends. He has become somewhat akin to a resident academic on the staff of the paper. Murray's (1990) central assertion, in the area focused upon here, is that high rates of illegitimacy, notably on Britain's sink estates, are creating an underclass whose males are prone to criminal activities.

¹⁶ All three have been described as left-wing sociologists in the media, although their theories and statements have been taken-up and used by right-wingers to add weight to their arguments. Dennis and Erdos's *Families Without Fatherhood* (1993) (published by the right-wing Institute of Economic Affairs) has been oft-cited in the press to back-up Murray's and similar arguments. Halsey's recent remarks have been similarly appropriated by the right-wing.

¹⁷ The success of the hit-film *Home Alone*, released in 1990, has no doubt made this a popular headline. The film tells the story of a boy left 'home alone' over Christmas.

¹⁸ Indeed, a journalist friend working on a Glasgow newspaper was told by his editor, in 1993, to cover 'anything to do with single parents'.

¹⁹ Perhaps the Agency coming on-stream would not have generated many stories in any circumstances, it is not 'exciting' news in itself, but the domination of another story in the press and on television that day emphasises that news stories cannot be seen in a vacuum. The length of television news programmes, and to a lesser extent of newspapers, is *not* dependent on how many newsworthy events are happening in the world that day. Instead, what becomes news is dependent on the length of news broadcasts and newspapers. Only a handful of stories will be front-page news and what may, all things being equal, be front-page news one day, may appear further back in the paper another day. This points to the importance of looking at newspapers and news broadcasts as a whole, rather than simply focussing on which stories have or have not been taken-up by the media. The study of such stories places them, misleadingly, in a vacuum and misses the importance of newspapers and television news being a coherent product. The methods used here do not always facilitate such an appreciation, but in examining *all* newspapers and news broadcasts on selected days it is hoped that the importance of *whole* media agendas has been taken into account.

²⁰ It is outside the scope of this study to make detailed comment on developments in 1994, but it seems that from Easter onwards the voices of lone mothers began to be heard, and the backlash became more of a debate, although coverage of the Agency was still not favourable during 1994.

8

ISSUE DEFINITION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

8.1. INTRODUCTION

How an issue is presented in the policy process is sometimes taken for granted. It may be widely accepted by those interested in social issues, for example, that lone mothers are a social problem because they cost the state money. A focus of study may centre around what should be done about this problem. How an issue is defined, though, is in itself of central importance. One should take a step back and examine why lone mothers have been labelled as 'problematic', or why this particular population group has been focussed on as costing the state money.

The processes of issue definition should themselves be examined. From the perspective of the actors in the policy process it is a considerable power to have one's definition of a problem/trend or other phenomenon as the definition that largely carries the issue through the policy process and, in particular, to have one's solutions translated into policy. In the words of Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 114): "who defines, decides".

Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 109) identify the processes of issue definition as:

"the processes by which an issue (problem, opportunity, or trend), having been recognised as such and placed on the public policy agenda, is perceived by various interested parties: further explored, articulated, and possibly quantified; and in some but not all cases, given an authoritative or at least provisionally acceptable definition in terms of its likely causes, components, and consequences."

Indeed, these processes can and should be examined *before* an issue's placement on the public policy agenda. The construction of definitions can usefully be traced back to the form in which they are presented on organisational agendas.

The processes of issue definition can be examined at any level, and the ultimate aim of placing a particular issue on the government agenda in order that policy can be developed to deal with it should not be viewed in a vacuum. Processes of issue construction have occurred before this has been achieved, and these processes can be studied to give a fuller picture of the initial stages of policy formulation.

These processes are likely to occur because the various interested parties do not agree about how a problem or situation should be seen and dealt with. Their varying definitions compete to become the accepted or dominant definition around which the crux debate, at whatever level, is then centred (this being the point at which many policy studies begin).

This and the following chapter focuses on the processes of issue definition. In this chapter the literature is reviewed and useful concepts discussed. The following chapter makes use of the insights gained to examine issue definition in the lone-parent family policy area.

Section 8.2. focuses on the assumptions behind a study of 'issue definition'. Believing that issues are defined assumes that they do not reflect reality but are instead constructed by interested actors. The constructionist literature will be mined and developed here.

Section 8.3. examines the concept of policy frames, developed largely in the policy analysis literature as a tool to be used to make better policy. Its potential as a tool to describe and understand how policy is made will be discussed here.

Finally, in section 8.4. the empirical literature on issue definition is examined. Are there certain ways of defining a problem that will aid its progress on government and media agendas? An attempt will be made to relate issue characteristics to its course.

As a final introductory comment, the terminology used here should be briefly commented upon. The term *issue definition* is preferred to the rather more commonly used *problem definition*. Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 108) point out that to speak in terms of a 'problem' is restrictive as it does not allow for the definition of 'trends' or 'opportunities'.

This preference is not without its problems however. A body of literature has developed, largely American, which takes a similar focus to the study of social phenomena as is taken here. This is known as *social problem literature*. The work presented here has developed largely from this tradition, and it is hoped that it can plug into this tradition. Referring to 'issue definition' is, then, somewhat incongruous. Nevertheless, it seems inconsistent with the underlying assumptions of constructionism, the basis on which the idea of issue definition lies, to presuppose that a phenomenon has been defined as a problem. The research presented here has, though, been very much influenced by the social problem literature, and should be seen as adding to that body of literature, regardless of terminology used. In short, 'social issue' is used here as a generic term, with a 'social problem' constituting one form of an issue.

8.2. THE ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND 'ISSUE DEFINITION': CONSTRUCTIONISM EXAMINED

8.2.1. Objectivism versus constructionism

To talk about an issue 'being defined' is a product of certain assumptions. The very term 'issue definition' suggests that issues are *constructed*, rather than simply being identified or discovered. It suggests that issues do not exist as objective entities 'out there', but that they must be *created* in the minds of those concerned. This has been referred to as the *constructionist* perspective (see Kitsuse and Schneider, 1989). This perspective has been widespread in the sociological literature on 'social problems' (for example Gusfield, 1981; Smith, 1988; Nelson, 1984; Baumann, 1989; Rossi, 1993, and many others).

Best's (1989a) work is particularly useful in distinguishing between objectivist definitions and the constructionist perspective. Objectivist definitions suggest that social issues and problems are 'out there' in 'the real world'. Approaching a study of social issues from this point of view, one would be armed with a fixed definition of what constitutes a social problem, or in what circumstances a trend or occurrence becomes an agenda item, and one would presume that once a situation fitted this definition it would become a cause for concern. Bassis et al (1982, p. 2), for example, define a social problem as:

"a social condition that has been found to be harmful to individual and/or societal well-being".

Best (1989a, pp. xv-xvii) emphasises that this type of objectivist definition ignores the subjective nature of social issues. The growth in unmarried mothers over the last

twenty-five years, for example, may be characterised as a social problem using the definition above (and has been characterised as such by government ministers). One could convincingly argue, using selected facts, figures, and judgements, that children who grow up in a family where the mother is unmarried suffer harmful effects. On the other hand, one could convincingly argue, using different facts, figures, and judgements, that women had benefited from having the choice of whether or not to marry the father of their children, and therefore that this trend is to be welcomed rather than conceptualised as problematic. One could, indeed, faced with this statistic that the number of unmarried mothers has increased, come up with a number of coherent arguments, each inconsistent with the next.

Indeed, Etzioni (1976, p. 1) makes the point that "the criteria for deciding what is a social problem are not as self-evident as they may at first seem". He asks, as has been broached in the above paragraph regarding unmarried mothers:

"would marijuana use or homosexuality cease to be social problems if we ceased to view them as problematic?" (Etzioni, 1976, p. 2.)

He puts forward the argument that the 'perpetrators' of certain actions (smoking marijuana, having a baby out of wedlock) may be 'labelled' as deviant and problematic, but that this is a subjective judgement on the part of the labellers, based on moral norms and conventions rather than being grounded in any objective reality (see Etzioni, 1976, pp. 15-20).

To return to the example given above of the growth in unmarried mothers though, that it has even been noticed and measured is, in itself, telling. There are no statistics, for example, on the numbers of people in Britain who have ginger hair, or who are over six foot tall. The reader may retort that there is good reason for this in that such facts have no relevance beyond being mildly interesting. One needs only to look back to the glorification of the Aryan race in Nazi Germany, however, to see that such

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Whereas, then, those favouring the objectivist approach are more concerned with the characteristics of the problem or other situation being researched, constructionists are interested in how actors participating in the policy process see and present the problem or issue. Whereas the objectivist sees *one* specified problem or situation or trend as the focus of the study, the constructionist often sees *several* problems, situations, or trends being described by interested actors under one issue banner.

As Best (1989a, pp. xviii-xix) points out, this latter approach is more useful in terms of theory development. By looking at the *process* of definition for a variety of issues, a theory of social issues/problems can be built-up focussing on similar questions. Case studies can build on case studies, with theories becoming more highly developed as more research is done on a cross-section of issues, featuring a variety of interested actors.

8.1.2. Contextual versus strict constructionism

Best (1989b) goes on further to distinguish between a contextual constructionist approach, and a strict constructionist approach. The former places the analysis of social problems in the context of how they have been constructed, but also considers how they *should* be constructed. Examples of studies which take this perspective are Blumer (1971), Rossi (1993), and Solesbury (1993). Here, part of the researcher's role is to point to differences between what various actors in the policy process claim to be 'the truth' about an issue, and what is, in fact, 'the truth'. The researcher sees him or herself as being 'above' the debate, and therefore able to make objective observations about the reality of the situation. As Kitsuse and Schneider (1989, p. xii) say of this stance (though they themselves do not subscribe to it):

"because sociologists have no vested interests beyond uncovering the truth, and are trained to find it, they can and do undermine and criticize other self-interested claims and activities."

The above quote contains an assumption, however, which needs to be questioned. Sociologists and other academics clearly *do* have vested interests. Like the actors in the political process, they are subject to organisational pressures, not least of which is to publish in order to rise up the career ladder. 'Exciting' findings are more likely to find their way into print than are rather duller findings, for example, and idiosyncrasies of funding (needed to facilitate publications) may dictate subject studied, approach taken, methods used, or even results found. The utilisation of 'scientific' research methods, which if not adhered to are likely to prohibit publication, may mean that some subjects, or aspects of subjects, are not studied. Further, deadlines, although on a different scale from those that journalists or even government ministers are accustomed to, are likely to dictate the scope of research.

Academics are, in addition, people with their own belief systems and assumptions, like any other group of people and the individuals within these groups. Their value systems and ideological preferences, related to their backgrounds, may lead them to examine some developments over others, either consciously or subconsciously. To assume that academics are somehow observing from above the processes by which issues are defined is, then, somewhat naive.

The strict constructionist perspective allows for a realisation that these factors can and do affect a researcher's output. This stance sees the role of the researcher as supreme definer as logically inconsistent with a constructionist theory of social issues (Kitsuse and Schneider, 1989, p. vii). If the researcher is acknowledging that issues are constructed, and there is no objective problem 'out there', then it is clearly illogical

to then present the problem '*as it should be presented*' (and thus presumably 'how it is'). Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) have called such a selective usage of the ideas behind constructionism *ontological gerrymandering*.

The strict constructionist researcher, on the other hand, does not compete with actors in the policy process in a quest to find 'the truth' in the shape of the 'correct' definition of a social issue. Rather, he or she studies how actors define issues, how they 'push' these definitions in the policy process, and how they interact with other actors and with other definitions along the way. The strict constructionist researcher observes and describes what he or she sees, but does not go on to present his or her favoured construction of the problem in the guise of 'the truth'. Examples of this approach include Spector and Kitsuse (1977), Nelson (1984), Smith (1988), Baumann (1989).

Almost certainly, the researcher will have strong views about which actor is 'right' and which is 'wrong', but such judgements (as they are merely what they are in most cases¹) do not form part of the analysis. They are instead allocated the status of personal opinions that should not cloud the research process more than can be avoided.

A strict constructionist approach is, in large part, followed here. The purist may still, however, accuse this work of ontological gerrymandering on two counts.

Firstly, in Chapter 2 some lone-parent family 'facts' were presented in the form of statistics, and a precis was given of what was termed important trends (identified through using official statistics). That this chapter stands on its own, apart from the following chapter where the issue definitions of various interested actors in the policy process are presented and examined, and that it comes at the beginning of the thesis described as 'a background chapter', suggests that these reproduced facts and figures

are being presented as 'the truth of the matter'. If a strict constructionist approach was truly adhered to, this subject matter would be subsumed in the following chapter, included as yet another definition of lone-parent family issues propounded by government agencies such as the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.

The decision to have such a 'key trends' background chapter can, however, be defended. Firstly, while recognising that the production of official statistics is subject to organisational biases and constraints (see Bilton, 1987, pp. 526-529 and many others), the writing of a doctoral thesis is also subject to organisational biases and constraints. Such work is traditionally presented in such a manner (that is: with a background chapter summing-up the nature of the subject to be studied) and this structure is conventionally thought to make for a balanced and 'logically constructed' manuscript.

Additionally, and more importantly, notwithstanding the recognition that social statistics are socially constructed, academics, pressure group staff, government ministers, and all other interested actors typically view official statistics as an important source of information on selected phenomena². These statistics are likely to feed into their pictures of reality and influence them, largely due to their widely perceived objectivity (as well as their easy availability). It is, thus, important to be aware of official statistics, and to see them on a different level from other actors' claims. In this way, official statistics can be seen to be 'above' the policy debate, although to posit them as a reflection of reality would be inconsistent with the constructionist approach.

Secondly, following the logic of the strict constructionist approach further, one could point to this piece of research, and indeed any piece of research, as itself influenced by personal and organisational constraints to such an extent as to be merely another 'view

of the world' to be seen on the same level as a particular pressure group's view of the world, or a particular newspaper's view of the world.

One major difference should be pointed to, however, as setting this and similar studies aside from 'views of the world' as presented by the media, pressure group, ministers, M.P.s, and so on. This, and much other although not all, academic work, is descriptive in nature. It does not have the purely political aims of feeding into the policy process, but is rather observing what is going on in the policy process. Thus, although such work is constrained by personal and organisational factors, it is not constrained by political factors. As such, it can be seen on a different level from the presentation of issues by these political actors.

By taking a contextual constructionist stance, however, in attempting to identify 'the correct' definition, one is politicising one's work by moving beyond the description of actors' definitions into the explanatory realm of identifying 'the best' definition on which policy should be based. By doing so, the academic must be giving weight to personal value systems, just as pressure group members or government ministers give weight to personal value systems. Such research then becomes akin to 'a world view' as put forward by claims-makers active in the policy process.

Beyond that, however, if one is to see any value in producing a piece of research, one must recognise that statements are inevitably going to be made within that piece of research which are disputable. If the making of non-factual interpretative statements (the main body of research reports) is considered to be an example of ontological gerrymandering in that the writer is asserting a view that cannot be verified, then one must accept that to produce such work involves such shifting of the boundaries. By making one's methodological approach clear, however, and recognising that the

researcher is not omniscient, one can avoid the arrogance with which some contextual constructionists present their findings.

Strict constructionism has been singled out for further criticisms for denying that there is such a thing as 'reality' (see Lichtenberg, 1991). Its reluctance to put forth a correct conceptualization of an issue has been confused with a completely relativist position that denies that objective facts exist and believes any way of presenting things is as good as another. This is not the case. The following section examines constructionism in more detail, dispelling the myth that constructionism and relativism are synonymous by discussing facts, values, and reality.

8.2.3. Constructionism and Objective Reality

A belief in the existence of a shared reality - a 'real world' - is by no means inconsistent with the belief that issues are constructed. All that constructionists are asserting is that there are different ways of seeing and describing the world.

Neither are constructionists asserting that any way of describing the world is as good or as valid as the next. One definition may be better than another in three ways. Firstly, facts exist. Any definition which is factually incorrect, or involves factually incorrect assumptions, is invalid. Secondly, a definition that contains internal inconsistencies is also invalid. Thirdly, a definition that has utilised a lot of information is likely to be better than one that uses only a little information in terms of giving a fuller picture of what is happening. The real world is a big place, full of complex happenings however. If competing definitions are all factually accurate, internally consistent, and make use of a lot of information (and most actors in the policy process will use a high level of information in a logical and factually correct way), then any hierarchical ordering must be based on a value judgment as to which one is *the* best.

THE ROLE OF FACTS AND VALUES IN THE CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 113) say that facts are based upon knowledge which can be proved to be right or wrong. It is a fact that London is the capital of England, it is a fact that if people go without food for several days they will die, and it is a fact that the sun rises in the East every morning and sets in the West every evening. No one could sensibly refute any of this, constructionists being no exception.

One could, however, point out that facts are selective. None of the factual observations made above about the sun, for example, could be said to be false. There are, however, a lot of other factual observations that could have been made but which were not. Why was it not pointed out that the sun is yellow, for example, or that it is very hot? Why was it pointed out that London is the capital of England, but not that Edinburgh is the capital of Scotland? The tale of the six blind men and the elephant can be alluded to here. This tells how each man is guided to a different part of the same elephant and told to describe what he is feeling. Each gives a different description of the animal based on the part with which he has become familiar. None of the descriptions is factually inaccurate (and therefore none can be said to 'be better' than the other) but each is selective. The constructionist approach recognises this selectivity of facts as important in producing different definitions of situations.

One could also interpret the selected facts differently. To use Lichtenberg's (1991) example, it is a fact that the Exxon Valdez spilled a lot of oil, but how it came to do so, the consequences of this, and the implications for public policy, are a matter for interpretation rather than factual observation. When describing anything other than phenomena very simply with reference to selected factual observations, such interpretations will be made (see Etzioni, 1976, pp. 58-59).

The process of interpretation involves using values to process selected facts in order to come to a conclusion. Whereas facts are based on verifiable beliefs, values are based on unverifiable beliefs. Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 112) define values in the policy-making and issue definition context as:

- "- the beliefs, ethics, standards and more specific norms
- which affect policy making processes at all levels (individual, group, organisational, and societal),
- through guiding and constraining the behaviour and actions of participants in policy making
- by influencing their perceptions of both desirable end-states (terminal values) and of acceptable means (instrumental values) for achieving those end-states."

Statements based on value judgements are often presented as 'facts' in order to give an issue scientific respectability. Consider this tactic being used in a recent book by Cummings and Davies (1994), for example. The opening page begins by saying:

"Some introductory facts: Approximately 40% of all children born in the late 1970s and early 1980s will experience the divorce of their parents and the often significant interparental hostility and discord that can accompany divorce. Many distressed couples who choose to stay together will continue to exhibit marital conflict and turmoil (Emery, 1982). Marriages are most discordant during the child-rearing years (Belsky and Pensky, 1988; Cox, 1985; Glenn, 1990); marital conflict and discord increase during infancy and early childhood (Isabella and Belsky, 1985), reaching a peak between early childhood and preadolescence (Anderson, Russell, and Schumm, 1983)." (Cummings and Davies, 1994, p. 1.)

These statements go beyond the realm of factual observations, into the realm of complex judgments. It may be that the studies cited above have found that "marital

conflict and discord increase during infancy and early childhood". What constitutes 'marital conflict' will, however, have been based on value judgements and assumptions. This immediately puts this statement in a different category from one that reads: "the sun is yellow". How this concept of marital discord (this is a concept, the sun is a simple object) has been measured also puts this statement in the realm of a value judgement rather than a fact. It would be, for example, theoretically possible to factually discover how many married couples in Britain who have grown-up children say that their marriage was less happy when the children were living at home than it was either before they were born or after they left home. Practically, however, the production of an undisputed answer (factual answer) is not possible. There would be recall problems, it would be practically impossible to trace every such couple and they would not all agree to talking to an interviewer, biases would occur as many interviewers would have to be used and the problem of inter-rater reliability would arise.

There are, in short, numerous practical problems that would occur in the quest for such a 'fact', to the extent that any presentation would not, in all likelihood, go undisputed. This is not to say, however, that such statements are not, frequently, widely accorded the status of facts. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between true, *simple facts* (eg. the Prime Minister is John Major, Glasgow is part of Strathclyde region, Christmas Day falls on a Monday this year) and *pseudo-facts*: more complex statements that are presented as facts but which are impossible to verify without using value judgements. Value judgments are involved in presenting the latter, but these judgements are not usually recognised as having taken place.

Describing an issue, therefore, involves selecting certain facts as important, and interpreting them in a way which involves subjective judgements. Different people will select different facts, and these facts will be interpreted in a variety of ways with the

result that a multitude of definitions of what is essentially the same phenomenon will emerge. The range and number of ways in which a phenomenon can be presented in a factually correct way is, therefore, potentially infinite.

In effect, however, the phenomenon will typically be defined in a small number of broadly similar ways. The societal setting in which the processes of issue definition occur, including the time at which they are happening, means that some facts and some interpretations are likely to be favoured over others. In Britain in the 1990s, for example, explanations for a gun-man running wild in a village and killing ten people would be more likely to centre round the question of gun control than around whether the forces of witchcraft were responsible.

Previous definitions of problems and other phenomena which have successfully travelled through the policy process and resulted in policy being based upon them, also have a role in influencing current definitions. Such policy may have solved this earlier 'problem', but may be perceived to have created new, related problems, influencing the redefinition of the issue. Or, policy may have failed to solve 'the problem', with the coming to light of a new solution then influential in redefining the problem. The language used in defining issues may be particularly dependent on the language used in the definition of similar issues in the past. The point is, definitions are not conceptualised in a vacuum. Societal factors such as these feed into definitions.

The societal setting is, then, the context in which the processes of issue definition take place. This makes for certain patterns and trends in issue construction, resulting in certain types of facts being selected as important, and certain types of interpretations favoured. Some issue definitions, whilst factually correct and internally consistent, are unlikely to be favoured (and are unacceptable) merely because they are at odds with

the dominant societal value system of the time. Such definitions, if made at all, are likely to be described as 'radical' and are unlikely to be placed on government or public agendas. Gusfield (1981) uses the term *homogenous consciousness* to describe the result of this rendering of certain ideas as unthinkable or, if put forward by claim-makers, ridiculous. Objective reality is the product of homogeneous consciousness.

The concepts of dominant societal values and homogenous consciousness are particularly difficult to describe in concrete terms because the descriptor is, almost inevitably, a holder of these values and part of this consciousness. In order to fully understand the limits of issue constructions, however, and to tell us about where power lies in the system where certain values are elevated to an almost factual status and others are seen as inappropriate, it is necessary to examine such patterns in issue characteristics.

This can be done by looking at a range of issues and describing elements common to all or most. This is a valuable exercise. By closely examining a series of definitions of issues across a certain policy area, or across policy areas, one can rise above such 'taken-for-grantedness' and make observations about the definitions as a product of that societal setting and the power structure within that setting. To go back to the parable of the blind men and the elephant, it may be useful for those interested in knowing what an elephant looks like to know that it has been described from its left-side, from sitting on top of its back, and from beside one of its tusks, but not from in front of its trunk, from behind, or from its right-side. Such an exercise involves a close examination of the perspective of the definers.

To do so, it is useful to use the concept of *policy frames*. The following section discusses this concept and examines how it can be used as a framework for the analysis of issue definitions by mapping out the way in which claims-makers view

phenomena. Commonalities observed across claims-makers can then tell us about the dominant societal value system.

8.3. POLICY FRAMES AND RELATED CONCEPTS: HOW MENTAL MAPS ARE USED TO DESCRIBE A PHENOMENON

'Policy frames' have been variously referred to as assumptive worlds (Young, 1977), paradigms (Kuhn, 1970), conceptual models (Allison, 1971), policy maps (Moscowitz, 1978), appreciative systems (Vickers, 1965), belief systems (Sabatier, 1986), and conceptual frameworks, and mental maps (generally). Following Baker (c. 1977), on whose Policy Frame Analysis this section primarily draws, the term policy frame is used here.

Policy frames are made-up of a peculiar mixture of facts, values, and interests held by an individual or an organisation. Such frames are used for ordering knowledge in order that interpretations of real world events can be made simply.

Baker (c. 1977, p. 1) describes the policy frame as "a self-contained model for seeing a policy problem". Similarly, Schon (1980, p. 263) describes it as "a perspective from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted upon". Solesbury (1993, p. 32) says it is useful for "ordering knowledge for action", and Rein and Schon (1991, p. 270) say that frames provide "conceptual coherence, a direction for action, a basis for persuasion, and a framework for collection and analysis of data - order, action, rhetoric, and analysis".

A claims-maker, on becoming aware of a situation which concerns him or her, will interpret it by placing it in the context of his/her policy frame. Such a process is not

usually well thought out, or even carried out consciously. It provides a simple, and largely automatic, way of making sense of a complex world and of individual phenomena within that world.

The literature on policy frames has focused on two uses for the concept. Firstly, policy frames have been used in the policy analysis literature as a way of aiding *improvement* in how policy is made (for example: Vickers, 1965; Allison, 1971; Baker, c. 1977; Young, 1977; Wildavsky, 1980). Secondly, policy frames have been used in the policy studies literature to facilitate *description* of how policy is made (for example Baker, c. 1977; Moscovitz, 1978). It is the second, less developed usage that is focussed on here.

Baker's (c. 1977) unpublished work was innovative in this respect. He developed what he called Policy Frame Analysis, primarily as an aid to policy-making but he also points to its use as an academic tool to aid understanding of how policy-making occurs in a particular policy area. He does not elaborate on this latter usage, but the Policy Frame Analysis that he presents in the paper provides a framework that can be used generally to describe processes of issue definition.

Baker (c. 1977) carries out Policy Frame Analysis (PFA) on a particular decision made by the government concerning the Chrysler motor company in the mid-1970s. PFA consists of him listing the policy frames "relevant to the Chrysler decision" (c. 1977, p. 4) and describing them in terms of 'the world lived in', 'how problems are seen', and 'the kind of action thought to be feasible' by those actors he identifies.

More specifically, Baker (c. 1977, p. 10) constructs rules which provide his outline definition of a policy frame:

- "1. Inputs: a definition of the real world, and the particular problems which we see as important.
2. Solutions: the kinds of actions that are open to us.
3. Rationality: what is acceptable as rationality within this framework.
4. Don't fit - items we agree should be part of the coherent model, but which currently can't be fitted in."

Baker uses these rules to construct policy frames for each of the actors, and groups of actors, he has identified (this process of identification, it should be noted, does not appear to have been done in a systematic way but is somewhat random).

He describes how William Ross, the then Secretary of State for Scotland (Labour), saw the problem in the context of the already high Scottish unemployment (the Linwood plant in Scotland would be closed if the Chrysler Corporation withdrew from the United Kingdom). The Labour Party was, at that time, strongly threatened by the Scottish Nationalist Party who would use the clamour as political ammunition. In addition, the North Sea oil issue was at its peak with claims abounding that it was Scotland's oil, and that the people in Scotland would want something in return. The closure of Linwood, on top of all of this, could lead to Ross losing his job. It is unsurprising, then, that he supported a strategy of subsidising Chrysler UK.

He also describes how the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), on the other hand, saw the issue in terms of productivity and efficiency, market share, and the excessive quantity of engine types produced in Britain. Future trends in the car industry were analysed, causes of low productivity were identified, and suitable solutions were derived from these findings in terms of rationalising criteria. The CPRS advocated cutting product range and closing down assembly plants.

Baker's central argument is that the CPRS's frame was 'irrelevant' as the organisation framed the car industry in an 'inappropriate' way. By utilising PFA he hopes that he can demonstrate that there were important elements missing from the CPRS report. For the reasons outlined above in 7.2. this placing himself above the process of issue definition and choosing inappropriate and appropriate definitions should be greeted with caution. This setting out of policy frames does, however, provide a useful conceptual tool for describing how policy is made.

Moscowitz (1978) has also used the concept of policy frames, or policy maps as he refers to them, in this way. His primary aim is to use this concept to classify and analyse how decisions are made in any policy area in order that a clearer view can be gained of the policy-making process.

Moscowitz (1978) takes the issue of neighbourhood preservation schemes in the U.S.A. and uses policy maps to examine the issue closely. He identifies significant participants in the policy process through archival research, secondary source research, and/or interviews. He follows this by constructing policy maps for each participant through interviews. By using a schedule of open-ended questions, he 'draws out the logic' of the respondents understanding of the issues and qualitatively analyses the resultant material, looking for what he calls 'patterns of understanding' for each respondent. He then maps out the view of each participant, describing goals valued, explanatory calculi accepted, and the policy positions decided upon.

Moscowitz (1978) presents an interesting idea not explicitly developed by other writers using policy frames, but which is implicit in the concept. He says:

"By focusing on the policy map, it may be possible to combine pluralism's insights about the intricacies of the political process with structural Marxism's recognition that the social and economic environment of a political system

consistently influences the outputs of that political structure. The environment may transmit particular cognitive patterns to the policy makers. The policy maps, in turn, may then influence the actors' policy choices".

This acknowledges the point made earlier that definitions are made in a societal context bounded by time. Certain definitions are, thus, more likely to emerge than others, and it is important that these characteristics are identified in order that the limits of pluralism can be sketched.

More recently, Rochefort and Cobb (1993, pp. 61-68) sketch out 'an anatomy of problem description'. Although the term 'policy frame' is not used, the authors see each problem definition as a description of a problem made-up of several elements. They use Peters (1986, pp. 45-56) and Hogwood and Gunn's (1984, pp. 108-127) work and add to it, to provide a 'road map' for problem description.

They identify the five dimensions of social problems: problem causation, the nature of the problem, characteristics of the problem population, end-means orientation of the problem definer, and the nature of the solution.

These dimensions are coupled with a mapping out of possible options. They say that problem causation may be posited on a personal/individual - impersonal axis, as intended or unintended/accidental, with blame to be allocated or blame to be avoided, and it can be simple (specifying single causal agents) or complex (taking account of a variety of influences).

The nature of the problem can be described in terms of the degree of severity (large numbers of people may be affected, or alternatively a small number of people may be affected very badly), its incidence (whether it is growing, stable or declining), its novelty, its proximity, and whether it is a crisis situation or not.

The problem population may be seen as worthy/deserving or unworthy/undeserving, familiar or strange, and sympathetic or threatening. The ends-means orientation of the problem definer may be instrumental or expressive (are the definers interested in putting pressure on the government to implement a certain policy, or are they interested in the activities of government itself?). Finally, the nature of the solution may be available or nonexistent, acceptable or objectionable, and affordable or unaffordable.

Sabatier (1986) provides a similar 'anatomy' of policy elites' belief systems. His work is located in the policy analysis tradition but his ideas may usefully be borrowed for less normative aims. Sabatier (1986, p. 43) categorises three sets of components: Deep (normative) Core aspects, Near (policy) Core aspects, and Secondary Aspects.

His 'Deep (normative) Core' aspects consist of what he calls 'fundamental normative and ontological axioms'. All policy frames are based on assumptions as to the nature of man, the relative priority of health, love, beauty and so on, the basic criteria of distributive justice, and the belief in the ability of society to solve problems. These assumptions are unlikely to change.

Secondly, he identifies 'Near (policy) Core' components. These refer to the fundamental policy positions concerning the strategies for achieving aims based on the 'Deep Core' components. Sabatier's model suggests that policy frames will contain views on the proper scope of government, the identification of social groups whose welfare is most threatened or most critical, the reorientation on basic policy conflicts such as belief in environmental protection versus economic development, basic choices concerning policy instruments such as coercion versus inducements versus persuasion, the desirability of participation of various segments in society, and the

perception of relative seriousness of the problem area. He says that elites will be unlikely to shift position on the nature of these core components, but such a shift does occur from time to time.

Thirdly, Sabatier (1986) identifies secondary aspects of belief systems. Such aspects, he says, are quite likely to change. These are the instrumental aspects of systems such as information about the seriousness of a problem, and feedback on existing policy concerning the problem.

Sabatier's analysis is particularly useful in that it points to the distinction between elements of belief systems which are extremely unlikely to change, and elements which are likely to be dependent on the success or failure of the definition of the issue in the policy process.

As well as being useful in considering power issues and the nature of reality as outlined above, considering issues by placing them in such frameworks is a useful way of identifying issue characteristics that may be only implicit in claims-makers pronouncements. Applying such systemised frameworks to a variety of issues may enable us to add to the empirical literature which has looked at the relation of issue characteristics to agenda-status. The gist of the findings of such studies is summed-up below. The factors found to be significant for studied issues and issue areas should be considered in looking at previously unexamined areas. In the conclusion to this chapter, the discussion below is integrated with the discussion on policy frames (above) in order to construct a suitable policy framework which can be used for a Policy Frame Analysis of the lone-parent family policy area.

8.4. ISSUE CHARACTERISTICS AND AGENDA-STATUS

This section discusses what Rochefort and Cobb (1993, p. 69) call the 'if, then' aspects of a problem's definition. In other words, *if* a problem is defined as having a certain characteristic or characteristics, it *then* goes on to achieve, for example, priority agenda-status. Rochefort and Cobb's (1993, pp. 64-68) writings on issue characteristics is summarised below, and the work of other writers has been added, using what is largely Rochefort and Cobb's framework. Finally, the characteristics of the claims-makers are considered.

Rochefort and Cobb (1993) name *severity* as being a crucial dimension. In aiding the attainment of agenda-status, they say that an issue should be characterised as affecting a large number of people, or a smaller number of people in a devastating manner. This encourages claims-makers who want 'something to be done' about a problem to emphasise its seriousness, possibly by exaggerating the numbers they believe to be affected by the problem for tactical reasons.

Related to this characteristic is a problem's *incidence* (Peters, 1986, p. 46; Rochefort and Cobb, 1993, pp. 64-65). A problem that is presented as growing is more likely to be swept into the policy process than one which is characterised as declining or stable. Who the problem affects may also be important. Children have typically been seen as a group that should be protected. Presenting a situation as being harmful to children may, then, spark action. Other population groups elicit less sympathy. This is largely time dependent with different population groups being 'folk devils' at different times (Cohen, 1972). Indeed, population groups are in themselves constructed as problematic and may be seen as responsible for any undesirable situation that is then reported as befalling them.

An issue's *novelty*³ may also affect its course. Emphasis on its newness by definers may be beneficial in gaining attention. This is particularly true as regards the attainment of media attention. As Downs (1973) showed, yesterday's news is old news and, as such, does not merit a place on the front page of the paper, or even a place in the paper at all. On the other hand, if issues are so new as to be undeveloped to the extent that solutions have not been suggested, or a cause has not been put forward, then they are unlikely to move beyond being briefly considered by the government, to the policy formulation stage. An issue which arises out of established policy, and is therefore well developed and familiar to policy-makers, will probably be more likely to successfully pass through the policy process. Such issues may result in incremental changes to existing policy, politically easier to effect than more radical changes, and therefore more desirable.

An issue's *proximity* is also named by Rochefort and Cobb (1993, pp. 65-66) as being significant. The greater the number of people that hear about the issue and think that it may affect them, the more likely it is that it will be considered by government and the media. Again, claims-makers can manipulate this to their advantage.

A problem characterised as having reached '*crisis-point*' may also find itself catapulted to agenda-status. The word '*crisis*' has been over-used however. The media love to characterise an issue in this way, and has done so so often that this characterisation by some claims-makers is unlikely to be taken seriously. If such a characterisation is taken seriously, however, and placed at the top of the government agenda, it may not result in policy being made. As the title of Hogwood's (1987) book *From Crisis to Complacency?* suggests, issues may reach the government agenda, often via the media agenda, defined in this way, but may slip off after a matter of months, or even weeks, as newspapers and television lose interest in this '*emergency situation*'.

The way in which a problem is presented as being able to be *solved* is also important. Costly and/or unworkable solutions may mean that the problem is not considered by government. On the other hand, if the government wants to implement a certain piece of legislation, often for ideological reasons, it may place a problem on its agenda to justify this policy. Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) *garbage can model* of decision-making is useful in illustrating this. Its presentation of issue components as inextricably intertwined, rather than being neat and self-contained, suggests that solutions can be a pre-cursor to problems in the process of issue construction - problems do not have to come first. Thus, in such an example, the availability of a new technology may bring a previously 'undiscovered' problem to the fore (see Peters, 1986, pp. 50-51).

Language has also been shown to be significant in facilitating or preventing agenda-access. For example, Nelson (1984, p. 61), in her study of the issue of child abuse in the United States, found that 'the physical abuse of children' only became an acceptable topic for the medical profession and the public to discuss when it was given what she describes as 'the more non-threatening name' of 'battered-child syndrome'. Similarly, Gusfield, in studying in America what is referred to in Britain as 'drink-driving', points out that the word 'drunken' in the context of 'drunken driving' makes the action sound more serious than 'driver under the influence of alcohol'. Terms used in describing a problem or situation can be very powerful and emotive. They can play down some aspects of the situation while focussing on others (Rein and Schon, 1991, p. 270). Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 120) point out that often the terminology used in the presentation of issues is akin to "a slogan or a call to arms".

It is not only the characteristics of an issue that are important in predicting its course however. The characteristics of those defining the issue must also be considered to understand the link between agenda-setting and definitions more fully.

Some groups, however they define a selected phenomenon, are unlikely to see their definition on the agenda. Such groups may have a radical image, be made-up of people who are widely perceived as undeserving, or they may not have sufficient resources to make their definition known. Such organisations could be described as powerless. They are extremely unlikely to be able to influence the content of the agenda.

At the other extreme, other groups or individuals will almost always be able to put their favoured issues, in their favoured forms, on relevant agendas. These issues may not move through the policy process, but they are likely to be considered at least. Which groups fall into this powerless category and which are powerful may vary over time, dependent on the party in power, the particular government, and on societal attitudes.

Other groups may be considered qualified to comment on certain types of issues but not on others. They can be said to have power in a particular realm, due to their professionalism, their high level of information, the representative or respected nature of those who make-up the group, or the established nature of their expertise in this area. To use Gusfield's (1981) term - they have *ownership* of a particular problem or problem area. Other claims-makers' definitions are likely to be anchored to the owner's conceptualization of the issue or issue area.

Again, which groups in society are powerless, which are powerful, and which have ownership of particular issues, varies over time in keeping with society's homogenous consciousness (discussed above). Gusfield (1981) describes how in the past churches owned the problem of drinking in the U.S.A.. As time went on, however, other claims-makers started competing for ownership of this problem and ownership passed to the universities, the medical profession, and to problem drinkers themselves.

Most recently the government has entered the field and claimed ownership of the problem. This is particularly significant as it is in keeping with the shift from the state as a mere processing machine, to the state as active in itself creating issues, which Gusfield (1981) says has occurred in recent times.

Rochefort and Cobb (1993, p. 69) advocate the formulation and testing of hypotheses about "the impacts of alternative definitional arguments" as the next theory-building step in problem definition research. It seems that the use of Policy Frame Analysis may be a useful way of proceeding with this. In the conclusion a suitable framework with which to carry out this analysis is put forward. This framework takes account of past findings while allowing for new significant factors to arise.

8.5. CONCLUSION: POLICY FRAME ANALYSIS - THE WAY FORWARD

A belief that world happenings are too complex to be described in a way which is agreeable to everybody is fundamental to a discussion of issue definition. Reality exists, objective facts exist, but issue formulation involves more than simple observation. It also involves interpretation. Phenomena must firstly be singled out for attention, and then described using value judgments as well as factual observations. Selection and description of phenomena rely on such value judgments, which vary according to the characteristics and points of view (the policy frames) of those selecting and describing.

All of the above may not be immediately apparent, however, to those considering the issues of the day as they appear on the front-page of the newspaper. Social problems are usually presented in the media as 'the way things are'. Factual details may be

questioned, solutions may be debated, but it is rarer to see the fundamental form of the issue itself questioned and debated. Once an issue has reached the media agenda, it is usually its finer details which are being discussed and not its fundamental definition.

The argument here, however, is that such definitions should be examined and not taken for granted. The processes by which such definitions 'emerge' should be examined by looking at competing conceptualizations put forward by interested actors. Such an examination would provide information as to which characteristics media definitions share with the definitions put forward by other political actors. By doing this observations can be made about which actors are more successful than others in having their concerns publicised in the media.

In order to do this, Baker's (c. 1977) Policy Frame Analysis can be used. His skeleton policy frame needs, however, to be tightened-up. The framework presented below, to be used in the following chapter to examine issues and actors in the lone-parent family policy area, is based on Baker's (c. 1977), Sabatier's (1986) and Rochefort and Cobb's (1993) work, and has been developed by borrowing from other of the literature reviewed above. It has three elements: *'up-front'*, *fundamental*, and *contextual*.

Firstly, the policy framework needs to be able to set out the *up-front* elements of the issue definition. These are the components of the issue as explicitly set-out by the claims-makers. This involves reporting what claims-makers have said in public about the problem:

- the problem or other phenomenon as simply stated
- simple facts cited to back-up the above statement
- more complex 'facts' presented as causal model
- solutions put forward

- predictions for the future if the situation is ignored.

In each of the above categories, the language and terminology used should be noted.

Secondly, one can go beyond what has been explicitly set out to examine the base on which such statements have been built in order to uncover the *fundamental* basis of the definition. This involves an attempt to 'read between the lines' and uncover what is implicit in actors' statements. These are equivalent to Sabatier's (1986, p. 43) 'Deep Core' characteristics involving fundamental normative and ontological beliefs:

- the 'nature of humankind' - fundamentally good or evil?
- beliefs about men and women (and fathers and mothers) - distinct roles and expectations?
- class beliefs - are poorer people different from richer people, are the working class different from the middle class, distinct roles and expectations?
- free market versus state regulation beliefs.

To uncover these components, one must become familiar with the claims-maker and examine their less publicly held statements about the issue in question and about other, related or non-related, issues with which they are concerned.

Thirdly, and finally, one must analyse definitions in the context in which they arise. One must map-out the characteristics of the claims-makers in order to map-out these *contextual* components:

- demographic aspects: age, sex, class, race, and any other lifestyle characteristics which are prominent in a body as a whole, or amongst the 'top brass'
- operational aspects: purpose of existence of organisation/institution of which claims-maker is a member; operating procedures, culture and norms of institution.

This framework is used in the following chapter to uncover the processes of issue definition for the issues of lone-parent families and the state, and the Child Support Agency.

FOOTNOTES

¹ An exception to this would be a discovery by the researcher that an actor's definition was based on factual inaccuracies, or contained internal inconsistencies (see discussion below for clarification of these terms).

² The availability of official statistics for some phenomena but not others is, in itself significant. The processes by which some situations are deemed as being important enough to merit the production of a host of descriptive and other statistics whilst others are not should, in themselves, be examined.

³ Such a characterisation is often difficult. Issues may appear to be new, but a look at old newspapers may show that they have been on public or government agendas before, either in that form, a similar form, or in a superficially different form. That an issue is *perceived* as being novel, however, may make a difference to its progress through the policy process.

9

ONE OF THE BIGGEST SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF OUR DAY?: ISSUE DEFINITION IN THE LONE-PARENT FAMILY POLICY AREA

9.1. INTRODUCTION

Media coverage of the Child Support Agency and of the lone-parent family welfare question during the second half of 1993 was examined in Chapter 7. The focus was on agenda-setting - *who* put these issues on the media agenda, and *how* this was done. In this chapter, these two issues will again be the focus. This time, however, the discussion centres on issue definition - *how these issues were conceptualised* by those actors interested in the issue. Policy Frame Analysis, as set-out in the conclusion to the previous chapter (section 8.5.), is used to outline the components of these issues from the perspective of interested actors. Up-front elements, the fundamental basis of the definitions, and the contextual components are all mapped-out for several interested actors. The methods used are set-out in Chapter 7 (see section 7.1.1.).

As well as being of interest in itself, this analysis is a useful supplement to the agenda-setting work. From the perspective of the political actor, having the ability to set press agendas with actions and events may be distinct from having one's definition of an issue relayed on the pages of the press (as has been suggested in Chapter 7, cf. the finding that government ministers set the agenda in the case of the Child Support Agency, but themes covered in the press were critical of this government body and of legislation). In order, then, to gain a full picture of the processes of either agenda-setting or issue definition, they should be looked at in tandem. This chapter builds on the links between media and governmental agendas, as described in Chapter 7, by

examining the processes by which various definitions propounded by interested actors interact to form a dominant press definition of an issue.

The issues of lone-parent families and the state, and of the Child Support Agency are discussed separately below. These analyses are then brought together in the conclusion in order to make some general points about the processes of issue definition, and the uses of Policy Frame Analysis.

The policy frames of government ministers as a group, the National Council for One Parent Families and Gingerbread, Labour front-benchers as a group, and 'the media' will be mapped-out for both issues. For the Child Support Agency issue, Families Need Fathers' frame is also mapped. There are, obviously, problems in utilising the concept of coherent policy frames. Different government ministers may be propounding different views at the same time, for example, or the same ministers may be propounding different views at different times. This is acknowledged, but it is argued that for each of the actors identified and discussed, one is able to map elements foremost in their frames, notwithstanding that some members of these groups may put forward slightly different views from time to time.

The media is the most problematic 'group' from this point of view. There are many types of news media, each with different purposes and organisational needs and characteristics, and within each type of news media there are many different specific units. Television news, for example, has an obligation to produce balanced reports, whereas newspapers do not. Within these categories there are also differences, with the ITN's *News at 10*, for example, favouring a more 'populist' agenda than the BBC's *9 'o' clock News* - the latter giving more weight to more serious stories such as foreign affairs items, or Westminster based items, with the former tending to give more weight to human interest stories. Similarly, the tabloid newspapers tend to have

a more populist agenda than the broadsheets, with different newspapers taking different editorial stances. To talk of 'a media' policy frame may, then, be to unacceptably simplify the matter. It is the case, however, that across all types and categories of media the same 'big news' stories tend to get covered. Furthermore, they tend to have been sparked by the same precipitating events and, notwithstanding the differing skews that varying editorial stances put on issues, the stories tend to be framed in very similar ways. As such, it is argued that one can speak of a 'media agenda' in a general way. As was outlined in 7.1.1., though, the analysis below is based on only a limited section of the mass media - largely *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, supplemented by a limited number of other daily newspapers and television news reports¹.

9.2. THE WELFARE STATE DEBATE

9.2.1. The Government

After visiting the St Mellons housing estate in Cardiff, the Welsh Secretary John Redwood told the Conservative Political Centre Summer School that possibly the biggest social problem of the day was:

"the trend in some places for women to have babies with no apparent intention of even trying marriage or a stable relationship with the father of her child"
(2.7.93).

This statement accords with the statements of other government ministers speaking publicly during the second half of 1993. The problem, for them, was the growing number of never-married mothers, particularly when such populations were concentrated in a distinct geographical area, such as the St. Mellons housing estate in Cardiff.

The government's concern about the growing number of never-married mothers (the figure that around 30 per cent of births were now to unmarried mothers was used to back-up this statement) centred around their cost to the public purse, and around the social non-desirability of this family form. As regards cost, ministers publicly explained that lone-parent families cost tax-payers £5 billion per year in welfare benefits, with the implication that the cost was much more because of the social problems that families headed by never-married mothers created.

On the social desirability of the family headed by the never-married mother, the view was propounded that many of the problems of modern-day society stemmed from the break down of family life generally. Further, said ministers, this break down was being encouraged by a welfare system that provided incentives for single women to have babies and to keep them, and for families to break up. Comprehensive income benefits, went their argument, and, particularly, the availability of public housing, made it possible for single women to take-on children, and for couples to break up without a second thought.

To solve the problem of never-married mothers, then, ministers proposed 'rolling back the frontiers of the state' so that couples would have to become responsible for their own actions as the state would not automatically become involved. More specifically, they proposed that the benefit system be reformed so that it would favour two-parent families, rather than favouring lone-parent families as ministers believed it currently did. This included the removal of priority for permanent housing for families with children, a measure which was particularly aimed at impacting on lone-parent families.

For ministers, if such action was not taken, the welfare spending bill would spiral out of control as the number of lone-parent families dependent on state benefits continued

to grow. Only by reforming the benefit system in order to discourage single women giving birth, they said, could this crisis be averted.

This conceptualization of never-married mothers as a problem had at its core the notion that most such mothers are content being dependent on state benefits, and that this is an option that many other single women will acknowledge as satisfactory. Couples whose marriage is in difficulty would also see splitting-up and reliance on state benefits for mothers and child as a reasonable option, according to ministers. They believed that if a choice exists between living a life of dependency on the state, and a life of earning a living, or living in a unit where one partner earns a living, then a significant number of people will choose the former, seeing it as an easier option. In short, for government ministers the problem was the existence of families headed by never-married women themselves, and of other state-dependent lone mothers, rather than the situation that these never-married mothers and other mothers found themselves in.

A further aspect of the government's frame comprised of the notion that children *should* be brought-up in a two-parent unit. Ministers believed that it is preferable that mothers and fathers bring-up children together, usually with the father as a main breadwinner and the mother as the main carer although these roles may be reversed. What is important is the family as a nuclear unit as such a set-up is a sound unit in which to bring-up children, both economically and morally, said ministers. Tom Sackville, for example, told a conference on health that children "need the sort of circumstances that marriage can provide" (7.7.93), in reference to the concept of the nuclear family as the best setting for children to be raised in, and John Redwood said "The natural state should be the two-adult family" (12.7.93). Similarly, Michael Howard said:

"the traditional two-parent family is best - best for parents, best for society and above all, best for the children" (5.10.93).

This ideological view that the nuclear family is best, however, seemed to be applied only to those sections of society for whom state support would be the result should this family form break down, or never exist in the first place. Ministers seem to have taken the view that it is acceptable to choose to have a baby alone if one can support oneself financially. Thus, the view that unmarried motherhood or, to a lesser extent, lone parenthood of any kind is wrong, seems to have given way to the ideology of choice in cases where the individual can afford to bring up children herself without recourse to state support.

As the government did not condemn never-married mothers in self-supporting financial situations, then, neither did it condemn lone mothers who had not chosen to be in that situation. Ministers' central guiding concept seems to have been that people should be responsible for their own actions, but where one was responsible for these actions but the situation one found oneself in nevertheless required a helping hand from the state, then help would be forthcoming. The government was happy to provide this safety net for responsible parents, but for those who had behaved irresponsibly state support would no longer be an automatic right. Widows would be a legitimate target for state help, but never-married mothers who had more than one child and who expected state help would not. For government ministers during the period looked at here it seems that lone motherhood is ideologically and morally wrong only in the context of *choosing* to bring up children alone on state benefit.

Contextually, of those ministers identified in Chapter 7 (see figure 7.6.) as being influential in setting the media agenda on this issue, 90 per cent are male, 100 per cent white, all were between 39 and 66 years of age in 1993, 90 per cent are university

educated with all of them having gone to Oxbridge, all are married, and 80 per cent have had children. Although the only female minister identified, Virginia Bottomley, did become pregnant as a teenager, she married the father of the child so was never actually a lone parent. None of the others appears to have experienced lone parenthood. Class-wise, by definition the government ministers involved are middle-class. Most, however, seem also to have had middle-class upbringings (biographical details taken from Bedford, 1994).

Operationally, it is the government's function to take control of public spending, and this is the context in which its concern with unmarried motherhood arose. It saw this group as a target for public expenditure cuts or, at least, as a group to be monitored so that state spending on it did not rise further. It must also, though, consider popular support for its actions. On salient issues, at least, it should appeal to the electorate. Indeed, it is likely that ministers' conceptualization of unmarried mothers as undeserving was thought, in advance of ministers speaking publicly on the issue, to be electorally popular. Spending cuts on societal 'spongers' have, in the past, tended to win public support. Spending cuts generally, though, do not tend to be popular and can be political dynamite. If the government can persuade the electorate that the cuts are justified, perhaps by emphasising the undeserving status of the affected population as it attempted to do in this case, then unpopularity can sometimes be avoided, particularly when the tax-payer is presented as the winner.

One of the elements that seems to have made the question of lone-parent families and the state a big media issue, however, was the presence of conflict. Actors were prepared to, and did, speak out against this view of lone-parent families as an undeserving target of government criticism. Two of the groups speaking out most vehemently against the government's picture of the situation were Gingerbread and

the NCOPF who, although neither featured heavily in media reports (see figure 7.8.), had the issue of lone-parent families and state support at the top of their agendas.

9.2.2. The Lone-Parent Family Pressure Groups

For the lone-parent family pressure groups, Gingerbread and the NCOPF, the problem was the same as it had been throughout the 1980s and before (before the government had become concerned about it). The problem was the poverty of many lone-parent families.

The groups believed strongly that most lone mothers are loathe to be dependent on benefits, but find themselves unable to extricate themselves from this position of dependency. They emphasised that returning to work is a huge problem for many lone parents wishing to get back into the employment market. The groups, therefore, accepted that lone-parent families cost the state a lot of money, but argued that this need not be the case and, indeed, it would be preferable if a large number of lone-parent families could come off benefits. They agreed with the government, then, in believing that the high number of lone-parent families on benefits was a problem. They just differed in why they thought it was a problem. The government looked at it from the perspective of the tax-payer, while the pressure groups looked at it from the perspective of the lone parent herself.

For the NCOPF and Gingerbread, the answer was also the restructuring of the welfare state. They called, though, not for the frontiers of the state to be rolled back, but for money to be poured into return-to-work programmes in the short-term, alongside the redesigning of benefit rules so that lone mothers did not find themselves better-off on Income Support than in work (thus avoiding the so-called 'poverty trap'). The groups presented this as a way of saving public money in the long-term, as lone parents

would soon become independent and would no longer be a 'burden' on the state. Investment in childcare and training programmes, in particular, would go some way to solving the problem of lone-parent family poverty.

Although Gingerbread and the NCOPF held these views long before government ministers began to make co-ordinated public statements on the issue, they were forced to react to what ministers were saying. Elements of their frame became defensive in nature over the second half of 1993 as a result. They picked-up on remarks made by ministers terming benefits available 'incentives' to lone parenthood, and stressed in response that being a lone mother was not easy, and was not something that most women would 'choose' to do. The view expressed by those running the NCOPF and Gingerbread was that given the option, most women would choose to take paid employment, at least part-time, as this would restore some of the self-esteem that full-time motherhood can erode. Moreover, they said that for many lone parents, lone parenthood was a last resort often entered into for the good of the children, and not a 'choice' in a real sense.

Interestingly, in a stance that was very similar to that taken by the government, the groups did not defend mothers who had chosen to have children alone while being fully aware that they did not have the resources to bring-up these children alone. Deviating from the government, however, they emphasised that such mothers were a very small minority of the total number of lone-parent families (they explained that most never-married mothers are in stable relationships when they become pregnant). Their belief was that lone mothers by choice were the exceptions - most had been victims of circumstances.

For the NCOPF and Gingerbread, predictions for the future were not couched in particularly dramatic language. They did stress, however, that if something was not

done about the poverty trap, and the resultant real lack of choice that many lone parents faced regarding whether or not to go out to work, then the welfare state bill would indeed continue to rise. The emphasis, though, was not on preventing the existence of lone-parent families, but on helping them to work.

The profile of those running the NCOPF and Gingerbread was different in several respects to that of government ministers. Sue Slipman, the Director, is herself a never-married mother, albeit one who can support herself without having to rely on state benefits. Most staff members are white and female, with the age profile considerably lower than the government's. Individual members are largely lone mothers, though there is also a substantial organisational membership. Further details are, however, unavailable.

Whitely and Winyard (1987, p. 32) found that most of Gingerbread's membership was composed of middle-class lone mothers. This is probably less true now than in the past, though. Many of Gingerbread's branches are now in deprived areas. Over recent years it has particularly encouraged black lone mother members. The executive of the organisation is made-up largely of women, many of whom are lone parents and, like the NCOPF, its age profile is younger than that of the government's.

Operationally, the groups' function has been to represent the interests of lone-parent families, demanding what they perceive to be best for this group within the constraints of what they believe to be practicably and tactically obtainable. The NCOPF has paid particular regard to these constraints, with its policy frame having changed since the mid-1980s, although the problem perceived has remained the same. Before around 1988, the group lobbied for real increases in the amount of state benefits for lone-parent families. After this, however, it realised that this was probably never going to happen with the public purse strings being tightly drawn. The Council also realised

that this may alleviate the poverty of some lone-parent families, but it would not go any way to solving the isolation and low self-esteem that many felt as dependents on the state and full-time mothers. It was then that the group changed its demands, and framed them in the public spending discourse that the government favoured.

Gingerbread has, perhaps, been less aware of what is practicably and tactically obtainable, as a result of its grass-roots nature (see 5.2.). Though its policy frame has been very similar to the NCOPF's, it has been more likely to pitch its demands at an ideal level.

Overall, however, these two groups have painted the lone-parent family picture from the perspective of lone-parent families themselves, but with regard to public spending issues in acknowledgement of the importance of such discourse in contemporary governing. The frame of the Labour Party front-bench team also fits this description, reflecting the importance given to the government's frame as a base on which views of other actors should be bounced.

9.2.3. The Labour Party Front-Bench Team

For the Labour front-bench team too, the problem has been the need to lift lone-parent families out of poverty. The position of the children of these families has been particularly emphasised, representing a different emphasis from that adopted by lone-parent family pressure groups.

Like the NCOPF and Gingerbread, spokespeople emphasised the non-desirability of widespread dependence on state benefits in terms of the non-desirability of this for lone parents. They too called for investment in childcare and training opportunities so that the many lone parents who they said wanted to be independent could be so. The

answer, they said, was a National Childcare Programme. In this scenario lone mothers could regain some of the self-respect and dignity that comes with paid work; their children would be better off both in terms of having a happier mother and financially and would, in addition, learn by example that adults should work for a living; and the tax-payer would benefit as less money would have to be spent on welfare for lone-parent families in the long-term.

In response to the government's frame, the team criticised the 'hidden agenda' which it believed the government was promoting. Team members suggested that the government wanted to see a return to all family units where the father went out to work, and the mother stayed at home with the children. They posited the government's 'onslaught' on lone-parent families, as they saw it, as a result of the government's ideological dislike of any family form that did not conform to this stereotype. In the eyes of the Opposition, though, any family form which provided love for the children therein was acceptable, and should be supported. Spokespeople did, though, emphasise that the majority of people *prefer* to live in the nuclear family form, but circumstances mean that this cannot always be the case. Like the lone-parent family pressure groups, then, their concern was not with stopping certain family forms coming into existence, but with stopping these family forms necessarily being dependent on the state for income and housing.

Setting this in context, the profile of those speaking out on the issue on the Labour front-bench was not dramatically different from those speaking out from the Conservative government. 75 per cent are male, all are white, all were university educated but only one at Oxbridge, half are married with children, a quarter unmarried, and a quarter divorced with children ('absent fathers'). Age-wise, relevant members of the team were between 42 and 56 years of age during 1993, giving a similar age profile to the Tory ministers discussed. Biographical details provided in

Dod's Parliamentary Companion (Bedford, 1994) suggest that several have had working-class upbringings, though all, of course, were in a high socio-economic grouping during the period studied.

Operationally, the function and tradition of the Opposition has been to oppose what the government says. It does not have to follow-up its rhetoric with actions in the short-term as does the government, so it is freer to take a less practical stance than the government. As with the government, though, its ultimate aim is to win popular support through votes, so it will always have an eye to the popularity of its views on salient issues. The views being propounded on this issue reflect a concern to appeal to lone-parent families (not least by portraying its words as defending the group against the attack on them by government ministers), whilst appealing to tax-payers by acknowledging the importance of the cost of measures to the public purse.

9.2.4. The Media

As was discussed in Chapter 7, the question of lone-parent families and state support was taken-up by the media in the second half of 1993, initially sparked by John Redwood's 'social problem' remarks. Largely, the press, and the television news too though analysis here is based largely on press reports, conceptualised 'the problem' that was being talked about in the political arena as centring around the increase in the number of lone-parent families (not just unmarried mothers) over the previous few years. In doing this, it was reflecting the frame of the government to a greater extent than the frame of the pressure groups looked at here, or of the Labour front-bench. Reports did not tend, though, to reflect what government ministers were saying, but rather distorted their remarks somewhat by picking-up on certain elements of their speeches and comments, but not others. Overall, this was most apparent in the press's interpretation of ministers' remarks as an attack on all lone-parent families, while the

group that ministers were criticising comprised state-dependent lone mothers by choice. This press focus on lone-parent families as a generic group being undesirable, allowed the Labour Party to capitalise on ministers' remarks as a wholesale attack on lone-parent families.

In an element emphasised by all of those discussed here, media coverage was framed foremostly around the cost of lone-parent families to the state. This cost, they said, was a problem which would get worse unless ameliorative action was taken. In common with the government rather than with the other actors discussed here, though, the socially undesirable nature of lone-parent families was stressed in much of the press coverage.

Press coverage of the elderly in relation to their cost to the state can be contrasted with that of lone-parent families in order to highlight the unfavourable nature of the picture, presented in the press, of this latter group. During June and July of 1993, ministerial statements focused on the elderly as an expensive social grouping as well as on lone-parent families (and specifically never-married mothers). Many reports in the press clearly stressed the deserving nature of the elderly as targets of state support, as against the undeserving nature of lone-parent families. In much of the press lone-parent families were presented as a legitimate target for cuts in a way the elderly would never be.

The media picked-up on the government's view that the nation's comprehensive benefit system made lone parenthood a relatively easy option in situations where it would be better for everybody if the people involved made a greater effort to be responsible for their own actions. This was behind the prolific coverage of the theme of 'incentives' to lone parenthood - an idea that had been expressed by government ministers but not as the foremost element of their frame that the press made this idea.

A large proportion of press reports centred on lone mothers jumping housing queues, receiving state income benefits without being obliged to go out to work, and on lone parenthood being an easy option generally (see figure 7.10. for figures for *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* newspapers during 1993).

The social problem aspect of the government's frame on unmarried mothers and lone-parent families was also exaggerated. The press picked up on the link between juvenile crime and lone motherhood, broached by Home Secretary Michael Howard in a speech at the Conservative Party Conference fringe (5.10.93) (again see figure 7.10. for *The Times'* and *The Sunday Times'* coverage of this theme in relevant articles during 1993).

Another theme clearly present in a number of reports was the superiority of the two-parent family as the environment in which to bring-up children. This appeared to transcend class barriers as the Princess of Wales, in particular, but also the Duchess of York were criticised for their decisions to separate from their husbands, resulting in their children being without live-in fathers. At the other end of the social scale, though, the stereotype of the never-married mother living on a council estate, often with several children by different fathers (and the children often involved in crime) was used to demonstrate that the government's criticism of lone-parent families was justified.

Overall, the solution put forward in media reports was the solution put forward by government ministers - the benefit system must be reformed so that it is not as easy for lone parents to fall back on state support. The tabloid newspapers, in particular, played off lone-parent families against two-parent families. They presented the idea of benefit reform to make it tougher for lone-parent families, as making it 'fairer' for two-parent families. This idea had been expressed by government ministers in speeches,

but it was emphasised by the press in a way that it had not been emphasised in these speeches.

For example, when Sir George Young announced in a Conservative Party Conference platform speech (7.10.93) that the housing system would be reformed, and mentioned in this speech that the reforms would make it fairer for two-parent families, headlines in the newspapers the following day included: "Fairer housing queues: single mums lose right to a house" (*The Sun*, 8.10.93), "Now we are on the right radical road" (*Daily Express*, 8.10.93), "Crackdown on mothers who jump house queue" (*Daily Express*, 8.10.93), and "Give two-parent families a chance" (*Daily Mail*, 8.10.93). These reports and comment articles were based on the view that tax-payers should not have to support those people who have brought their situations upon themselves by behaving irresponsibly. This involved the acceptance that most people wait until they are in a stable relationship to have children, so it is unfair that the state steps in to support those who have not done this. Similarly, the view was expressed that most people work hard to make their marriages work so it is unfair that some couples throw in the towel at the first opportunity and expect to rely on the donations of other, more responsible, tax-payers to get by.

Where media reports did deviate from the government's frame, however, was in the advocacy of a childcare policy that was expressed in many reports. It was explained that this would enable lone mothers to go out to work (see figure 7.10. for the prevalence of this theme in articles in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* during 1993). Whereas, though, the NCOPF, Gingerbread, and the Labour Party front-bench team argued for this in terms of satisfaction for the lone mother, the press tended to see it as a way of saving the tax-payer money. This issue was, nevertheless, high on the media agenda, with the court case of Heidi Colwell, the mother who left her infant daughter Home Alone while she went out to work at a travel agent's all day, used by

much of the press to demonstrate the misguided nature of a benefit system that confines many mothers to the home. While it was recognised that Colwell wanted to work, however, and that this was her excusable downfall, the view that many lone parents were loathe to work, preferring instead to sit at home all day watching the children, was also put forward. The claim that most lone parents wanted to work was commonly questioned, with the theme of lone motherhood as an easy option entwined with this (this characterisation was probably to be found more in the tabloids than in the broadsheets) (see figure 7.10. for the number of times this theme was present in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in the period looked at here).

Of all the actors examined here, the media was the most dramatic in its view of the future. The question of lone-parent families and state support was covered in terms of the continuation of the social decline of Britain, with more delinquent children being brought-up, and more and more women being encouraged and enabled by the system to become lone-parent families whilst two-parent families continued to be penalised. Along with the government it saw as important the stemming of the numbers of such families, but it also saw the importance of lone-parent families being able to go out to work in a way not emphasised as strongly by the government.

There are no readily available data on the demographic characteristics of those involved in writing and publishing newspaper stories. It is known, however, that most of the senior editorial staff on newspapers are male. Of the named journalists and columnists of the 1993 *Times'* and *Sunday Times'* articles examined for this study on the lone-parent family and the state question, though, 57 per cent were male, 39 per cent female, and the rest written by males and female journalists together.

Operationally, newspapers must sell copies. That is the purpose for their existence. Individual papers usually have a loyal readership, whose basic value system is known

by those working on the paper. Stories must appeal to this readership as well as to potential new readers. They must, therefore, be exciting, but they must also cater to the political and other tastes of the current readership. In addition, the daily agenda of each newspaper must not deviate too far from the agenda of the other newspapers and other media. The content of newspapers must also appeal to advertisers, largely by selling as many copies as possible but also in terms of not covering anything too controversial. This may put advertisers off irrespective of readership size.

9.2.5. Interim Conclusion

The main difference between the policy frames of the main actors, then, lay less in their belief in *what* the problem was than in their belief in *how serious* was the problem. Most actors agreed that the growth in families headed by (working-class) never-married mothers who lead a life of dependency on the state was a problem because of their cost to the tax-payer, as was the burgeoning cost of state benefits for lone-parent families as a whole. While the government focused in on the undeservedness of never-married mothers to state support, though, insinuating that such mothers were 'scroungers', the NCOPF, Gingerbread, and the Labour front-bench team emphasised that the vast majority of lone mothers were married or in a stable relationship when they became pregnant, but circumstances acted to leave them on their own. This lone mother as victim strand to the policy frame was not, however, picked-up on by the media. Reports muddied the distinction made by government ministers between state-dependent lone mothers by choice, and state-dependent lone mothers by circumstance. Although many reports took what government ministers were saying as their frame (see figures 7.4. and 7.5.), aspects of speeches tended to be picked-up on, exaggerated, and the essential message of ministers' speeches distorted.

9.3. THE CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY: FROM CONSENSUS TO BACKLASH

For the government, the lone-parent family pressure groups, the Labour front-bench, and the media, the problem in the late 1980s and into the 1990s in the area of child maintenance was that the court system was unsatisfactory. All agreed that only one in three absent fathers contributed towards his child's upkeep under this system was unacceptable, as was the discretion of judges to decide on maintenance orders, a system which often resulted in inconsistent, and often extremely low, settlements. While the government was concerned with the implications of this for the cost to the state in benefits to support these men's children, the other actors were more concerned about the implications of this widespread paternal non-payment and under-payment for the financial position of the mothers and children.

The solution proffered by the government, a solution which was broadly accepted by the other actors, was for the implementation of a Child Support Agency, operating in all parts of the United Kingdom, to calculate maintenance using a standardised formula. The setting-up of this Agency was couched not only in terms of saving taxpayers' money (ministers predicted it would cut the benefits bill by £530 million in its first year of operation alone), but also in terms of promoting paternal responsibility as a good in itself, and of maintenance payments providing a bridge enabling many mothers to return to work. Whereas these latter elements were approved of by all of the actors discussed here, though, there was discord on the Agency's function of saving the Treasury money (as was explained in 3.4. maintenance payments were to be deducted pound for pound from lone mothers' benefits). The obligatory nature of dealings with the Agency for those on benefit was also questioned by lone-parent family pressure groups and by Labour front-benchers. They called for dealings with the Agency to take place only if lone mothers chose this option. The enactment in

1991 of the Child Support Act was, then, greeted in principle but concerns were, nevertheless, expressed.

Once the Agency came on-stream in April 1993, however, other problems were voiced. Families Need Fathers and other absent father pressure groups (discussed in 5.4.2.), in particular, became concerned about the operation of the Agency. The media picked-up on these concerns, and thus the Agency became a political problem for the government, and it was forced to defend and to modify the body's operation (although ministers had always planned that the operations of the Agency would be 'under review' during its initial operating period). The problem of non-payment of child maintenance, recognised by most interested actors, became the problem of the Child Support Agency following the setting-up of this body to alleviate the original problem.

9.3.1. The Government

The Agency, then, became a problem for the government because of the public opposition it was provoking. Ministers admitted that it was not running as smoothly as it should be, conceding that administrative errors were being made, but defending this by saying that they had expected hiccups on its launch as the Agency was a major change which had not been piloted. They also voiced the view that they had expected such a huge social reform, which involved non-residential fathers paying a realistic amount towards their children's upbringing for the first time, to run-up against male backlash and problems of non-compliance.

Ministers did not, then, accept all of the criticisms being made against the Agency. In response to the criticism levied that responsible fathers were being targeted and runaway fathers left to get away with their actions (discussed below in 9.3.2.), they

asserted that 92 per cent of fathers who had left their families without trace had been found by the Agency by December 1993, two thirds of whom had been paying their partners nothing. Ministers also stated that 96 per cent of the cases dealt with had involved mothers and children on benefit (that is, mothers and children living in relative poverty), with most of the fathers involved having what ministers described as a 'reasonable income'.

Nevertheless, the government considered the running of the Agency problematical enough to announce a series of incremental reforms (outlined in 3.4.). During the period looked at here, reforms announced involved: new maintenance payments to be phased in over 18 months to allow absent fathers time to prepare for the change in their financial circumstances; three changes made to the formula in order to increase the minimum income retained by absent parents; the reduction by a quarter of the sum absent parents would be asked to pay for the care of their children once they reached 11, and a further reduction by a quarter at age 14; and the waiving of the £34 a year collection fee unless the Agency was itself directly involved in collecting maintenance payments.

Ministers maintained, however, that the principle behind the Agency was correct. Fathers should, they said, contribute financially towards their children whether or not they lived with them. Implicit in this was the desirability of the economic set-up of the nuclear family being replicated even after couples split-up. Hence, a state-controlled Agency was set-up to ensure less state involvement in the private sphere of the family - a somewhat paradoxical notion.

Demographically, of Government ministers who were particularly vocal on this issue, most are male, middle-aged, university educated, and married with children. Operationally, they were forced to defend the Agency on its own merits, and in terms

of government competency, due to its portrayal in the media as the product of an out-of-touch government.

9.3.2. Families Need Fathers

Families Need Fathers became concerned about the child maintenance issue after the Agency had come on-stream. Although group literature shows that the group was aware of the legislation from its conception to its enactment, the Children Act had been the focus of the group's concerns before mid-1993. Once the Agency had been running for several months, however, Families Need Fathers placed the body's operation at the top of its agenda. It had become aware that the Child Support Act was at odds with the Children Act which it had wholeheartedly welcomed and had worked to get implemented as soon as possible. It saw the new Child Support Act as a Treasury driven piece of legislation, rather than as a family law measure to complement the admirable Children Act in giving children priority in law. Fundamentally, FNF believed that the Agency gave top priority to the Treasury and not to children, and that it was from this weakness that all other weaknesses stemmed.

The group saw the formula as being problematical in not taking the circumstances of individual fathers sufficiently into account, though it maintained throughout the period looked at here that the principle of paternal responsibility behind the Agency was to be welcomed. The individual fathers that it believed were victims of the too rigid formula were 'responsible' fathers (and this description fitted all those members of the group who by joining a group named 'Families Need Fathers' had demonstrated that they took their roles as fathers seriously). These fathers, said group spokespeople, had always paid as much as they could afford to towards their children's upkeep, including spending money on seeing their children regularly and providing 'little extras' as needed. For Families Need Fathers, the Agency should have been there to track down

the irresponsible fathers who had not played such a part in their children's upbringing. Referring to this inequitable situation, the group called Agency payments 'a tax on children of divorce'. Group members voiced disquiet at the situation where a deserting father with a history of violence would not have to pay anything to the mother if she was afraid of him and would be subsidised by the state, while a responsible father would have to pay a great deal and would often have been faultless in the relationship break down (spokespeople cited the statistic that it is largely women who file for divorce to back-up this latter contention). There was an implicit class element present in this argument which portrayed 'responsible' fathers as middle-class respectable men who would not see their children go short, against 'feckless' working-class men who disappeared from their children's lives and who cared nothing for them.

Particular aspects of the formula upset the group: the failure of it to take account of 'clean-break' arrangements; the failure of it to include allowances for travel to see the children; insufficient allowance for second families; insufficient allowance for the father himself to maintain his quality of life; and a clause that meant that if fathers had their children for more than two nights a week, the amount of maintenance would be reduced.

The failure of the formula to take account of clean-break arrangements, argued the group, was unjust as those who had settled property and large sums of money on their families at the time of divorce would be treated in the same way as those who had not.

Failure to include allowances for travel to see children, spokespeople argued, was acting against the main principle behind the Agency as FNF had understood the government to be propounding - paternal responsibility. The group argued that this responsibility embodies more than financial responsibility, also including the

importance of fathers loving and caring for their children. Under the formula as it stood, said spokespeople, children would be 'deprived' of this paternal love as many fathers would no longer be able to afford to visit their children, or pay for their children to visit them, take them out for trips, or give them treats.

Related to this was concern about the rule setting-out that the amount of money to be paid by fathers would decrease if the children involved spent at least two nights with their father. FNF argued that this was a financial incentive for lone mothers to block access to the father for such regular stays, so contributing further to the group's 'deprivation of parental love' argument. Contradicting this somewhat, though, was the view expressed by members that the amount fathers pay should be related to the amount they are permitted to see their children. FNF spokespeople argued that the Agency should be able to grant full access to those fathers who contributed towards their children's upbringing.

The formula also made it difficult for second families, said the group. The stringency of the demands being made on fathers meant that the second family was left short of money. This, said spokespeople, put a strain on second families which would lead to many breaking up, perhaps after the man had been forced to give up work because he was no better off in employment. The result would be a yet greater increase in lone-parent families. In some cases, said the group, suicide of the man involved may even be the result, as the pressure exerted by the Agency was phenomenal for those with money worries.

For FNF, then, the solution was to change the nature of the formula. The group was never specific on exactly how this should be done, but members emphasised the importance of allowance of travel to work costs for the father, travel to see the children costs, a greater amount left for the father after maintenance had been

collected, acknowledgment of clean-break agreements, and an Appeals system which took account of men's individual circumstances such as the debt they were in, and the needs of second families.

For FNF, most men (including its members) did not need the state to tell them how much to pay towards their children. They could gauge their children's needs themselves and contribute as appropriate. Spokespeople pointed out that mothers would not necessarily spend the money given to them for the children on the children either, which made it all the more important that fathers themselves judged the appropriate contribution.

Contextually, Families Need Fathers emphasised the middle-class composition of the group, and the high proportion of its membership who had traditionally voted Conservative. This was obviously a tactical move to warn the government to take note of its complaints. No membership list or biographical details are available in order to ascertain whether this was, indeed, the case. Of the active membership identifiable through the group literature, though, a lot of middle-class professions were represented. Certainly, members are largely male, non-residential fathers, and it seems that many are middle-class.

Operationally, the group's function, like Gingerbread and the NCOPF, has been to get the best deal for its membership. Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that an Act which has resulted in many fathers being asked to pay substantially more than they had been doing previously towards their children has resulted in some dissent. Families Need Fathers' spokespeople were not the only pressure group articulating dissent from the perspective of their members. The NCOPF and Gingerbread also had this high on their agendas.

9.3.3. The Lone-Parent Family Pressure Groups

For the NCOPF and Gingerbread, the problems with the Agency as they saw it were two-fold. Some of the elements of the Agency's operation were unsatisfactory for the groups' client group but, also, the response of absent fathers to the Agency, and consequently the response of the government, were problematical.

Firstly, the groups believed that the financial penalisation of lone mothers if they refused to name the fathers of their children was undesirable, and that it was not acceptable that the poverty of lone-parent families was not being addressed.

Both the NCOPF and Gingerbread were concerned that tactics of intimidation were being used by officials to pressurise lone mothers into naming the father of their children against their will. Many mothers, said the Council, would prefer to be financially dependent on the state than be forced to rely on an ex-partner, perhaps because of worries about harassment and/or violence.

The groups were also unhappy that what they originally saw as the problem - the poverty of lone-parent families - was not being addressed by the Agency. Claims were being processed very slowly, they complained, so that those lone parents who really would be better off under the new rules were having to face delays in receiving the money because of both Agency incompetencies, and the caving-in of staff and policy-makers to some absent fathers who were determined to slow the process by non-compliance.

Both groups continued to be unhappy about the deduction of maintenance pound for pound from benefits too, claiming that some families would be thrust deeper into poverty as they would lose the right to passport benefits such as free milk, free school meals, and free prescriptions, whilst not receiving any extra maintenance money to

cover these costs. They would also lose the right to a guaranteed income unless the Agency was stricter about paternal payment, they said. The Council, in particular, also worried that cash maintenance settlements through the Agency may affect property and other settlements at the time of separation, so making the deleterious financial circumstances even worse for future generations of lone-parent families.

Secondly, though, the groups were concerned that the fuss that absent fathers were making about the Agency's impact on their lifestyles was undermining the position of lone-parent families still further. The groups watched the government and the media taking notice of these complaints of poverty and hardship on the part of absent fathers after only a few months of the Agency's existence. They compared these responses to the silence that had greeted their lobbying on behalf of lone-parent families for many years. The groups were also concerned that lone parents' views on the Agency should be taken into account, and the Agency's success or failure should not be judged, as they believed it was being, on the views of absent fathers and on the impact of the Agency on this population grouping (who, believed the NCOPF and Gingerbread, largely had more time and money with which to make their voices heard more easily than lone parents). The groups felt that this situation was under-valuing lone-parent families still further, particularly as they saw many of the complaints of absent fathers as unjustifiable whining by men who could clearly afford to pay more towards their children than they had previously been doing (though the groups did acknowledge the unfairness of clean-break deals being reneged, and conceded that absent fathers being genuinely unable to afford to visit their children was a big problem).

For the NCOPF and Gingerbread, then, the legislation seemed not to be solving the main problem of lone-parent family poverty. For this to happen, said the groups, maintenance payments should come on top of benefit payments, so making a real financial difference for lone mothers and their children. They recognised, however,

that such a measure was too costly and therefore impracticable. What they did call for, however, was that the CSA act as guarantor of payments so that lone mothers could be secure in the knowledge that maintenance was regular, and could thus bank on getting a job confident that signing off Income Support would not leave the family without a safety net income.

As with the lone-parent family and the state question, then, the groups had at the core of their frames the concern that lone parents should be faced with a realistic choice as to whether or not to take paid employment. For them, the Agency would be a success if it furnished lone-parent families with enough guaranteed money to make working worthwhile, although the groups would have called more vocally for the shape of the Agency to be different had they believed that more money would be found for what would be costly changes. For Gingerbread and the NCOPF though, the issue of child support had become yet another cross for lone-parent families to bear, as their needs and views on the new legislation were being ignored at the expense of their more vocal ex-partners.

9.3.4. The Labour Party Front-Bench Team

The Child Support Act passed through Parliament with all-party support for its underlying principle of greater paternal responsibility. The front-bench team initially welcomed the Agency, with some reservations about the precise nature of its operation as mentioned on page 256 (namely the practice of benefit docking for those lone parents who refused to name the fathers of their children without good cause, and the practice of deducting maintenance payments pound for pound from mothers' benefit payments). For the Labour front-bench, the Agency would have been preferable had these two elements been reformed so that it was truly a *Child Support Agency* and not a *Treasury Support Agency* as they liked to call the CSA.

Nevertheless, members regarded the principle of the redistribution of money from the absent father to the lone mother and children as a pleasing one.

As the Agency became established, however, in the later months of 1993, Labour front-benchers became concerned about the administrative incompetencies perpetrated by the body, and about what they felt had turned out to be the unjust nature of the formula.

On this latter point, they were particularly concerned that even more children would find themselves in poverty as second families broke-up as a result of the financial pressures exerted by a too-tough Agency formula. As with the lone-parent families and the state question, spokespeople focused on the well-being of the children involved, this time in second families as well as in lone-parent families. Again in common with the previously discussed issue, they acknowledged the importance of curbing public expenditure too. They stressed that the Agency did have a role to play in recouping some money from fathers for the Treasury coffers, just not as much as it was planned it should save at the expense, said front-benchers, of children's financial well-being.

The front-bench team was advised and seemingly influenced by two back-benchers: Frank Field who has a strong interest in child poverty (he was the Director of the Child Poverty Action Group before he became a Labour M.P., and during the period studied here was Chair of the Commons Select Committee on Social Services which investigated the Agency's workings), and by Malcolm Wicks who is similarly concerned with family issues (he was formerly Director of the Family Policy Studies Centre). Field and Wicks persuaded the front-bench team that the Agency's power to over-turn clean-break agreements was unjust, and its stress on going after

'responsible' fathers (the so-called 'high yield' targets) rather than 'runaway' fathers who would be unlikely to save the Treasury much money, was misguided.

Overall, however, the Labour front-bench team seemed unsure of how to deal with the CSA and the issue of child maintenance. It was aware that protests against the Agency were largely from middle-class fathers, with the views of less well-off lone mothers going unheard. Fundamental to the ethos of the Party has been the emphasis on redistribution of income, and thus its 'natural' instinct would have been to ignore the protests of absent fathers and seek out lone mothers' views. As will be seen below, however, and as was discussed in Chapter 7, the media picked-up on the complaints of absent fathers so that the media issue of the CSA centred around how the government had got it badly wrong this time - an argument that as the Labour Party was the Opposition Party, the Labour front-benchers were content to go along with. The dilemma for those involved was whether to capitalise on the media storm over absent parents and thus sympathise with the middle-class fathers, or whether to let this opportunity to publicly chastise the government pass by.

Front-benchers seem to have taken the opportunity to criticise the Agency, but were careful not to associate themselves too closely with absent fathers' complaints. They instead focused on the children of the second family rather than on the grievances of fathers themselves. In this, the conflict between the fundamental elements of actors' policy frames and the contextual operational aspects of the organisation or institution can be observed. Labour front-benchers had to choose whether to put their principles, or their role as critics of government first.

9.3.5. The Media

Figure 7.19. demonstrated that the majority of the articles about the Child Support Agency in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1993 were critical of the Agency (79 per cent). In most of the tabloid newspapers this figure was probably even higher. The media largely reflected the complaints of Families Need Fathers (which were similar to other absent fathers' groups and to individual absent fathers' complaints). Articles focused on fathers being made to pay too much under Agency rules, unfair targeting of responsible fathers and insufficient pursual of runaway (irresponsible) fathers, the formula being too rigid, concern about clean-break payments, concern about poverty and rifts in second families, and concern about fathers being forced to see their children less often (see figure 7.18.). Many used the experiences of real absent fathers to particularise all of these points, as was discussed in Chapter 7.

Predominantly, the view expressed in the press was that fathers should, of course, be financially responsible for their children when living apart from them, but that there is only so much responsibility that they can take - their finances are finite. The concept of deservedness and undeservedness was again used to frame discussion of runaway fathers versus responsible fathers. The view being taken in many articles was that only those fathers who had not thus far been paying towards their children should be targeted by the Agency, with those well-meaning fathers who had always paid being left alone. In other words, the undeserving runaway fathers should be punished, but those who had faced up to their responsibilities should be left alone.

Only the left-wing *Daily Mirror* adopted the editorial stance that the Agency should be scrapped, other newspapers called merely for reforms so that the formula would be less tough on absent fathers. The tabloids, in particular, picked-up on a spate of suicides that was being blamed on the Agency. The first in the series was the suicide of Graeme Clay whose body, readers were told (in the broadsheets as well as in the

tabloids) was found hanging next to pieces of paper covered with financial calculations. His death, other similar suicides, and tales of men describing how they had been on the brink of suicide because of the hardship they faced under the new legislation, were taken by the tabloids as an undeniable reason why the Agency should be reformed. These suicides were, said these dailies, the inevitable result of the Agency's too-tough formula - "Dad driven to suicide by child cash shock" headlined *The Daily Star* (7.12.93) on Clay's death, and "The letter that spelled death for one father" told the *Daily Mail* (7.12.93), with *The Times* headlining less sensationally "Child Agency blamed after man's suicide" (7.12.93). *The Express* commented in its editorial:

"Letting the feckless off scot free while penalising men who recognise their responsibilities is manifestly unjust." ("Clear Injustice", 7.12.93.)

The Daily Mirror asked: "What else must happen before the Government scraps the Child Support Agency?" (7.12.93), similarly criticising the Agency for "hounding fathers who already contribute to their children."

In the press, the controversy over the CSA was about absent fathers. Whereas before the Agency came on-stream, worries in the press had focused cursorily on the well-being of the lone mothers and the children, thereafter the focus (and this focus was very intense) was almost exclusively on the absent father. The press appeared largely to forget that the Agency concerned lone mothers and their children too (except in relation to how children would suffer because their fathers would no longer be able to take them out, or even see them).

Contextually, of those items that included a name of the author appearing in *The Times* or *The Sunday Times* on the Agency during 1993, 36.5 per cent were written by women, 56 per cent by men, and the remainder by men and women together. Regarding the form that coverage of the child maintenance issue took, one can only

speculate as to whether prominent human interest stories focusing on fathers finding the new legislation tough, was perceived to sell more newspapers. It was, perhaps, more to do with the supply of such stories, however, than perceived demand for them. As was outlined in Chapters 5 and 7, absent fathers, whether as part of organised groups or not, 'packaged' their stories by giving journalists access to real-life results of their complaints. For journalists, then, stories were falling almost ready made into their hands, and perhaps this was the foremost factor in prolific media coverage of the Agency from the point of view of vocal absent fathers.

9.3.6. Interim Conclusion

For this issue, the government's problem became the unpopularity of its own legislation as the media took-up the complaints of absent fathers and placed them high on its agenda during the Autumn of 1993. Whereas all interested actors had broadly welcomed the idea of a Child Support Agency in order to solve the problem of non-payment or under-payment of child maintenance by (largely) fathers, the Agency itself became a bigger problem than the non-payment had ever been (in terms of media publicity at least). While the original problem (primarily a problem for lone-parent families, as well as having implications for the tax-payer) was largely acknowledged in political circles without becoming a media issue, the new problem was splashed on the pages of the press as the new group to be affected (absent fathers) publicly complained.

9.4. CONCLUSION

Tables 9.1. to 9.20. (see pp. 274-284) set-out the main elements of each actor's policy frame side by side. An analysis of these tables can elucidate some of the processes behind the construction of media definitions of issues - such definitions can be described as dominant definitions because of their highly public nature.

On the question of lone-parent families and state support (see figures 9.1.- 9.10.), the media took government ministers' conceptualization of the problem and distorted it slightly. The press's definition of the government's definition of the issue, however, was perceived by other interested actors as the government's conceptualization of the problem. Thus, other actors reacted to what they saw, or what they chose to see, as an attack on lone parents. Such a stance was probably a lot less electorally popular than an attack on state-dependent never-married mothers. A close examination of the frames of actors, however, shows that none of those looked at here defended unmarried mothers who chose to become pregnant knowing that they could not afford to bring-up their children themselves. Whilst government ministers set the agenda on this issue, then, the media played a part in allowing other actors to portray the government's views as an attack on lone-parent families. This was something that may have opened up the government to criticism from many voters.

For all actors, on the question of lone-parent families and state support, the importance of cost to the public purse became an important element of their frames. This was the way in which the government was framing the debate, understandably so as the government is responsible for public expenditure, with the other actors taking this on board - in all cases, it seems, for operational reasons. The NCOPF and Gingerbread had no stake in keeping public expenditure down, but realised that they were unlikely to be listened to if they did not pitch their demands at realistic levels. The Labour Party responded to what had proved to be the electorally popular path of

saving tax-payers' money, particularly on social security spending, by acknowledging that it thought this aspect to be important, and the press responded to its readership in a similar way. In other words, operational aspects seemed to have been at least as important as fundamental aspects in dictating actors' stances. For all, there was the threat of a spiralling, unsustainable welfare bill if their (different) solutions were not implemented to solve their (different) problems.

On the child support question, the media clearly took-up the criticisms of vocal absent fathers who managed to swing the issue, through clever packaging of stories (see also Chapters 5 and 7) from being about public expenditure, to being about fathers' lives. The publicisation of the Agency's effects on individual fathers led to the Agency itself becoming a political problem for the government, as this government body was portrayed as ruining a large number of lives. The generalised good of saving tax-payers' money that underlay much coverage of the lone-parent families and the state issue was put aside, as the particularised consequences of this money-saving legislation were studied close-up.

As well as focusing on the effect of the Agency on some absent fathers, the media, particularly the tabloid newspapers, also made much of administrative incompetencies or 'Agency boobs'. It appears that these stories were sparked by those at the receiving end of these mistakes. What is interesting is that the Labour front-bench then began to be concerned about these incompetencies. It is suggested that it did so partly because such a concern did not involve the Party taking sides between lone mothers or absent fathers, as those at the receiving end of Agency mistakes were, largely, neither. For the whole issue of the Child Support Agency through the autumn of 1993 the Labour front-bench seems to have been confused as the fundamental aspects of its policy frame, particularly the good of financial redistribution, clashed with its operational function of opposing the government. The CSA issue was a salient issue on which the

right-wing press was criticising the government. It was too good an opportunity for the Labour front-bench to pass up, even though siding with middle-class fathers probably would not have been the path it would have taken in other circumstances.

Setting out the frames of actors in this way, then, can alert one to inconsistencies within frames, and to common aspects that run through the frames of different actors. Frames of the same actors on different issues can also be studied to elucidate issue definition processes.

Looking at the policy frames of these actors on the two issues studied here, it can be seen that, for the government, the lone parent and benefits question and the child maintenance question were both about essentially the same up-front element - saving the state money. The media did not join these issues - although they ran concurrently in the press and on television news through the autumn of 1993 - but for government ministers the two issues were very much related. For the lone-parent family pressure groups this was also the case. They were concerned with the enabling of lone mothers to return to work, and it was on this central core that they lobbied, be it in relation to government announcements about never-married mothers, or in relation to the Child Support Agency. For Families Need Fathers, the former issue was never of concern. The group entered the arena only when its members were being directly affected by the question. In this respect, the group's central complaint that the Agency was Treasury driven (they pointed to, amongst other things, children suffering) did not appear to extend to a concern about their children suffering under alterations to the benefit system to make things tougher for some lone-parent families.

For the Labour Party both problems were about essentially the same thing - child poverty. Whereas it could be said that front-benchers were on the side of lone-parent families for the first issue discussed, they were increasingly pushed towards taking the

side of absent fathers for the child support issue. They still, however, emphasised that the problem was, above all, child poverty. As has been discussed, however, their frame was not always internally consistent for this latter issue, and as such the two issues discussed here were not always joined by them.

Why, then, did the media discuss these issues separately? On the one hand, stories focused on the undeserving nature of many lone mothers to state support, but on the other hand stories focused on many absent fathers being asked to pay too much. The press did offer the implementation of a childcare programme as a solution but, apart from this, these two definitions seem to be at odds. It seems that press coverage, in particular, was loathe for either the tax-payer or the father to support the lone-parent family. It is suggested that for the question of lone-parent families and the state, the issue was covered in a way fairly typical of press coverage - the comments of government ministers largely set the agenda (see 7.3.1.). For the CSA issue, however, concerned fathers packaged a series of stories that were exciting and newsworthy - more so than ministers' comments - and thus they set the agenda (see 7.3.2.). Newspapers exist to make money, and to make money it helps if a large number of copies are sold. In the Child Support Agency issue, a political issue with an appealing human interest angle was present and, thus, it did not matter that the coverage of it was somewhat inconsistent with the coverage of the lone-parent family and the state issue.

Indeed, the Policy Frame Analyses carried out here have pointed to the importance of operational aspects in shaping groups' frames. They have clearly been more important than individual or collective demographic profiles of those involved in the organisation/institution, and have shaped the fundamental and up-front elements of the actors' frames, sometimes even acting to shape the whole policy frame, with little regard to fundamental principles.

These systematic analyses also show that frames are inter-dependent, with the media frame being important in mediating the messages of each actor between actors. It may be more important for actors to take note of the media's interpretation of each other's frames, than to take note of actors' frames as expressed by them. For all the actors looked at here, public opinion is important in one way or another, and as the media is the bridge between the political world and the men and women in the street, its conceptualization of actors' frames, as well as the overall definition of the issue that it popularises, are very important.

The Problem	
The govt.	Increase in state dependent lone mothers - esp. never-married ones.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Poverty of lone-parent families.
Labour front-bench	Poverty of lone-parent families - esp. children.
The media	Increase in lone-parent families - esp. those dependent on the state.

Table 9.1.: Lone-parent families and the state: the problem for interested actors

The Facts

The govt.	Over 30 per cent of births to unmarried mothers; £5 billion per year cost to public purse; link lone parenthood-crime and other social problems; benefit system too generous.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Most lone mothers want to work but can't afford to.
Labour front-bench	Most lone mothers want to work but can't afford to.
The media	Huge cost to public purse; lone-parent families socially undesirable: crime etc; benefit system as incentive; two-parent family superior.

Table 9.2.: Lone-parent families and the state: the facts for interested actors

The Solution

The govt.	Force people to be responsible for own actions - reform benefit system.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Restructure welfare system - abolish 'poverty trap'; state run 'return-to-work' programme incl. training/childcare.
Labour front-bench	National Childcare Programme; training opportunities.
The media	Reform benefit system - remove incentives; implement childcare policy.

Table 9.3.: Lone-parent families and the state: the solutions for interested actors

Predictions for the Future

The govt. Spiralling, unsustainable welfare bill.

The NCOPF & Gingerbread Spiralling, unsustainable welfare bill.

Labour front-bench Spiralling, unsustainable welfare bill.

The media Spiralling, unsustainable welfare bill; continuing social and moral decay.

Table 9.4.: Lone-parent families and the state: predictions for the future from interested actors

The Nature of Humankind

The govt. Inherently lazy - many people must be made to take responsibility for themselves, will not do so automatically.

The NCOPF & Gingerbread Most people want to be independent, want to be able to take responsibility for their own lives.

Labour front-bench Most people want to be independent, want to be able to take responsibility for their own lives.

The media Inherently lazy - many people must be made to take responsibility for themselves, will not do so automatically.

Table 9.5.: Lone-parent families and the state: fundamental beliefs of interested actors about the nature of humankind

Beliefs About Men/Women, Fathers/Mothers

The govt.	Nuclear family best - fathers/mothers complementary roles.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Nuclear family preferred by most mothers - circumstances do not always make this possible.
Labour front-bench	All family forms should be supported; majority prefer nuclear family form but not always possible.
The media	Two-parent family form is best; women from lower-classes in partic. promiscuous - may have several children by different fathers but not settle-down.

Table 9.6.: Lone-parent families and the state: fundamental beliefs of interested actors about men and women, fathers and mothers

Class Beliefs

The govt.	Those that can afford to can choose family form; those that can't should live in economically viable nuclear form.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Do not defend those lone mothers who give birth alone without financial resources.
Labour front-bench	Do not defend those lone mothers who give birth alone without financial resources.
The media	Unfavourable characterisation of Royal lone-parent families, and of council estate lone-parent families but latter come off worse.

Table 9.7.: Lone-parent families and the state: fundamental beliefs of interested actors about class aspects

Free Market v. State Regulation Beliefs

The govt.	Safety net provision.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	More state involvement in childcare and training provision leading to less state involvement in benefit provision.
Labour front-bench	More state involvement in childcare and training provision leading to less state involvement in benefit provision.
The media	Less state involvement in benefit provision; more state involvement in childcare.

Table 9.8.: Lone-parent families and the state: fundamental beliefs of interested actors about state intervention versus the free market

Demographic Aspects

The govt.	All white, middle-aged, married; predominantly male and university educated; large proportion Oxbridge.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Slipman never-married mother; executives predominantly white, female; young age profile; membership largely lone mothers.
Labour front-bench	All white, middle-aged, university educated (predominantly non-Oxbridge); two 'absent fathers'.
The media	More male than female named writers, but mixed.

Table 9.9.: Lone-parent families and the state: demographic characteristics of interested actors

Operational Aspects	
The govt.	Public spending responsibilities; must ultimately appeal to electorate.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Represent interests of lone parents within what is practicably obtainable.
Labour front-bench	Oppose government; must ultimately appeal to electorate.
The media	Must sell copies, appeal to advertisers.

Table 9.10.: Lone-parent families and the state: operational aspects of interested actors

The Problem	
The govt.	Criticism about the Agency, particularly from absent fathers.
FNF	CSA Treasury driven.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	CSA Treasury driven; lone mothers' views being ignored at expense of absent fathers'.
Labour front-bench	CSA Treasury driven; administrative incompetencies.
The media	Too tough Agency formula; administrative incompetencies.

Table 9.11.: The Child Support Agency: the problem for interested actors

The Facts	
The govt.	Most runaway fathers tracked by Agency; focus on providing maintenance for poorer mothers; conceded administrative incompetencies.
FNF	Responsible fathers suffering; children of first and second families suffering; reneging on clean-break agreements unjust; runaway fathers allowed to get away.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Lone mothers pressurised into naming fathers despite worries; poverty unlikely to be alleviated - may get worse for lone-parent families; Agency slow to process claims; media and govt. response to complaints of absent fathers.
Labour front-bench	Poverty unlikely to be alleviated - may get worse and more widespread as second families suffer; demands for payment sent to wrong men; focus on high-yield responsible fathers rather than tracking runaway fathers
The media	Demands for payment sent to wrong men; suicide epidemic among absent fathers; focus on high-yield responsible fathers rather than tracking runaway fathers; children of first families unable to see father; children of second families in poverty; second families breaking-up.

Table 9.12.: The Child Support Agency: the facts for interested actors

The Solution	
The govt.	Incremental reforms, making Agency fairer for absent fathers.
FNF	Substantial changes to formula to allow for more absent father expenditure; exclusion of those who had made clean-break agreements from Agency's remit.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Listen to lone parents' comments on the Agency; allow payment of maintenance on top of benefits; guarantee maintenance payments.
Labour front-bench	Alter balance of money going to Treasury and to lone mothers in favour of lone mothers; allow for clean-break arrangements and essential expenses in formula; focus on going after 'runaway' fathers.
The media	Reform the formula so less tough on absent fathers (or scrap Agency); focus on going after 'runaway' fathers.

Table 9.13.: The Child Support Agency: the solutions for interested actors

Predictions for the Future	
The govt.	No predictions given.
FNF	Epidemic of suicides; more lone-parent families formed as second families break up; generation of children deprived of parental love.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Continuation of lone-parent family poverty.
Labour front-bench	More children in poverty.
The media	Epidemic of suicides; more lone-parent families formed as second families break up.

Table 9.14.: The Child Support Agency: predictions for the future from interested actors

The Nature of Humankind

The govt.	Most non-residential fathers need to be forced to pay realistic amounts towards their children.
FNF	Most men do not need the state to tell them how much to pay towards their children; mothers may not necessarily spend money given appropriately.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Most lone mothers want to go out to work, at least part-time.
Labour front-bench	No coherent view here - frame confused as operational aspects compete with principles.
The media	Most fathers are as financially responsible towards their children as their finite resources allow.

Table 9.15.: The Child Support Agency: fundamental beliefs of interested actors about the nature of humankind

Beliefs About Men/Women, Fathers/Mothers

The govt.	Nuclear family as self-contained, efficient family unit should be replicated even after separation of parents.
FNF	Parenting should be shared even after separation.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Women should be able to chose whether to rely financially on fathers of the children they are bringing-up; fathers have more power than women in influencing shape of policy, partly because women too busy caring for children.
Labour front-bench	No coherent view here - frame confused as operational aspects compete with principles.
The media	Fathers should only contribute to children insofar as their standard of living is unaffected.

Table 9.16.: The Child Support Agency: fundamental beliefs of interested actors about men and women, fathers and mothers

Class Beliefs	
The govt.	Middle-class fathers have been guilty of under-payment of maintenance for too long.
FNF	Middle-class fathers penalised for being good fathers at expense of often violent and generally feckless working-class fathers.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Middle-class fathers being heard; poorer mothers being ignored.
Labour front-bench	Sympathy with redistribution of income from richer fathers to poorer mothers and children, but main concern lay with Agency's impact on such fathers.
The media	Middle-class fathers penalised for being good fathers at expense of feckless working-class fathers.

Table 9.17.: The Child Support Agency: fundamental beliefs of interested actors about class aspects

Free Market v. State Regulation Beliefs	
The govt.	Less state involvement in benefit provision through more state involvement in regulating maintenance.
FNF	State should be involved less in private family matters re. maintenance, but more re. custody.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	More state involvement in guaranteeing maintenance payments and making it possible for lone mothers to go back to work, leading to less state involvement in benefit provision in the long-term.
Labour front-bench	Properly thought-out state involvement to benefit all involved, including tax-payers.
The media	Runaway fathers should be forced to pay, responsible fathers left alone.

Table 9.18.: The Child Support Agency: fundamental beliefs of interested actors about state intervention versus the free market

Demographic Aspects

The govt.	All white, middle-aged; predominantly male, university educated, and married with children.
FNF	Predominantly middle-class non-residential fathers interested in maintaining contact with children.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Slipman never-married mother; executives predominantly white, female; young age profile; membership largely lone mothers.
Labour front-bench	All white, middle-aged, university educated (predominantly non-Oxbridge); two absent fathers.
The media	More male than female named writers, but mixed.

Table 9.19.: The Child Support Agency: demographic characteristics of interested actors

Operational Aspects

The govt.	Public spending responsibilities; must ultimately appeal to electorate; must defend policy.
FNF	Represent interests of non-residential fathers within what is practicably obtainable.
The NCOPF & Gingerbread	Represent interests of lone parents within what is practicably obtainable.
Labour front-bench	Oppose government; must ultimately appeal to electorate.
The media	Must sell copies, appeal to advertisers.

Table 9.20.: The Child Support Agency: operational aspects of interested actors

FOOTNOTES

¹ Newspaper articles from which quotes have been taken are referenced in Appendix 4.

10

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the processes of agenda-setting and issue definition in the lone-parent family policy area, focusing particularly on the roles of political actors in setting and shaping the media agenda during 1993. The use of the policy process framework in which to ground this study has facilitated the dual examination of the organisations and issues involved. In this concluding chapter, the results of these two examinations are brought together, in order to make overall comments on the roles of political actors in setting and shaping the media agenda for the two issues considered in detail here. The contribution of this study to agenda-setting, issue definition, and pressure group literature is also discussed, as is the general utility of the methods used.

10.1. THE ROLES OF POLITICAL ACTORS IN SETTING AND SHAPING THE MEDIA AGENDA

Firstly, then, what is the nature of the roles of the political actors considered here in setting and shaping the media agenda? Do the same actors systematically influence media agendas over a wide-range of issues? That is, do certain actors have this power whilst other actors do not? Only two issues were studied in detail here, though several other issues were discussed more briefly, so conclusions reached must be tentative.

It appears that some political actors, namely government ministers, are more able to set the media agenda than other actors. There is no ideological media bias towards ministers, however, it is merely that they are at the centre of the political world, and

as such are a convenient source from which to obtain political stories. If other actors make the picking-up of usable stories as convenient for journalists as do ministers, through their status as political leaders, then they too will be able to set and shape media agendas.

The importance of the provision of 'interesting' news stories is the most important factor. Newspapers exist to make money, and to make money they must sell a large number of copies. To do this they must appeal to their readership through interesting stories. This is the key. This systematic favouring of particular societal groups in setting and shaping media agendas above others, exists only on the level that certain societal groups are regarded as being at the centre of that particular news world. For the political news world the first port of call for interesting stories appears to be government ministers.

Pressure groups, on the other hand, do not appear to be part of the journalists' routine trail. For pressure groups (or members of pressure groups) to spark stories or to have their voices heard, they must do something 'special'. They must provide journalists with a reason for covering their views.

This seems also to be the case for the opposition party - in the period looked at here the Labour Party. Members' comments may be used in reaction to what government ministers have said, but their role has been reactive (for the issues looked at here at least). Government ministers, after all, are running the country. Other than near to election times, it is unlikely that what Opposition spokespeople have to say is going to have any short-term effect on the lives of the newspapers' readers. Therefore, they do not have the status of routine prime political source that government ministers have.

The discussion of the child support issue has shown that Families Need Fathers and other absent fathers' groups and individuals¹ were successful in appropriating the role of primary source from government ministers, although this did not diminish the role that these ministers had in sparking articles, and getting their voices heard. It was, rather, a case of them having to defend their policy against these fathers. Fathers complaining about the Agency approached the media with 'ready-made' stories, formatted in inherently interesting ways. They used government legislation, providing a political element to the story, and added a human interest element by providing real absent fathers who had stories to tell about how the legislation had impacted on their lives. Thus, the impact of government legislation was particularised resulting in stories 'created' by the absent fathers that transcended simple, and perhaps dry, legislative details, whilst being serious and political in nature. Journalists began to take these stories up and a stream of such stories followed, as discontent with the Agency on the part of some absent fathers became the dominant theme of coverage. The media thus became sensitized to such stories, as absent fathers became successful in delineating journalists' foremost concerns with what government ministers were saying, to what they had to say. For this issue they became a routine source.

These absent fathers were able to do this by mobilising in a co-ordinated way, informed by a knowledge of how stories find their way onto media agendas. They were able, thus, to successfully manipulate the media. If the lone mothers concerned about the operations of the Agency or, indeed, happy with the operations of the Agency but concerned that vocal absent fathers were painting a false picture it, had mobilised in a similar way, there is little doubt that they too could have framed news stories. Indeed, since the period looked at here, lone mothers have become more successful in mobilising in this co-ordinated way, aware of what makes 'good stories', and they seem to have become more successful in getting their views covered in the media. This strongly suggests that there is not a conspiracy on the part of journalists

to cover some groups but not others. It is, rather, a case of an awareness of what makes 'good news', and whoever can supply such news will be listened to.

The relevant question, then, becomes why absent fathers mobilised in this way but lone mothers did not? The examination of both lone parent and absent father pressure groups in Chapter 5 shows that all were aware of the importance of getting one's views covered in the media. Whereas the NCOPF's strategy did not focus on grass-roots involvement though Gingerbread's did (but on an individual rather than mass level), FNF's involved mobilising the membership in large numbers - a strategy that it is asserted here led to success in shaping and setting the media agenda for the child support issue. Part of the reason why the NCOPF did not emphasise grass-roots action was its belief that part of the lone-parent family problem was the powerlessness of this group. It, along with Gingerbread, realised though, largely because of the success of absent fathers' groups, that this problem must be transcended in order that lone parents' voices would be heard. It was stressed, however, that the particular situation of most lone mothers did not make such mobilisation easy. It was pointed out that the responsibility of lone mothers to their children is a 24 hour a day job, and not 9 to 5. Further, absent fathers are likely to have more income than lone-parent families who have been identified as one of the poorest groups in society, and thus may find it easier to spend money on contacting the media, or organising or travelling to marches. These factors relating to ability to mobilise are significant in a consideration of the ability of different groups to set agendas.

It seems, then, that in the cases looked at here, the ability of pressure groups to set the media agenda lies less in how big the organisation is, or how much money comes in *per se*, but that it lies foremostly in the tactics and techniques used to attract journalists. Groups must understand what makes good news stories and must pander to that. This is related to certain resources being present at group and at individual

membership level - primarily the ability and willingness of the membership to mobilise and be publicly identified as victims of certain problems, and the ability of the executive to co-ordinate such actions. The function of the group as a pressure rather than as a support group should be considered in relation to both of these points. If members of a group are in need of much practical support it is less likely that the executive has time free to pursue its pressure function, and less likely that the individual members of the client group have the resources to mobilise.

While government ministers are the 'natural' agenda-setters, then, other actors can usurp this role for certain issues if they employ certain tactics. This may be easier for some groups to do than for others, and it is in this that differential coverage of groups lies, rather than in any systematic, and perhaps sinister and conspiratorial, bias on the part of journalists.

What about the role of government ministers? Does the contention that government ministers are the natural agenda-setters mean that everything that they say will be reported? Is agenda-setting for them automatic? On the evidence of the data presented in this study, the answer is no - again tactics are important.

Media coverage of the lone-parent family and the state question began in July 1993. It was then that government ministers began speaking out in a co-ordinated manner on the subject. Whereas the remarks of one minister may have been ignored, or reported in a low key manner, a whole series of statements by a variety of ministers is more likely to be reported, and in a high profile manner. There is little doubt that the government wanted its comments to be made public, and the media obliged. Also important, though, is the presence of conflict. Dissent, controversy, and contention appear to make 'good news'. The media presented government ministers as saying that 'lone parent families are a social problem'. This is, by its nature, an incendiary remark.

It is little wonder that a host of other actors jumped to defend the group, so pushing the issue up the media agenda.

To understand these processes further it is helpful to look at other cases that have been reported recently where ministers have been presented as making judgmental remarks about population groupings. Such groups include 'New Age' travellers, football hooligans, and joy-riders and juvenile delinquents. Lone-parent families are probably more prevalent than any of these. Readers of the newspaper are more likely to know lone-parent families, or to be part of a lone-parent family, or have been so in the past. Such comments, then, become all the more relevant to the readership of the paper. Criticism of this group becomes particularly salient, then, because it is centred on a group with which readers are familiar, and they are therefore more likely to be interested in stories concerning them.

Potentially, then, government ministers have little trouble in setting and shaping the media agenda. This is not, however, automatic. Issue characteristics also have an effect.

Overall, a characterisation of the media's policy frame which is important in understanding the roles of political actors in setting and shaping it, is its relative lack of constant fundamental values. The media agenda can, thus, be made-up of disparate items and can feature inconsistent arguments and views. Its operational context, namely its profit-making nature, means that it is free to be pragmatic about the issues it covers and how it covers them, and is unlikely to be faced with the criticism that it is reneging on its principles, a criticism that may damagingly face government and opposition members. Whereas, then, other political actors will probably hold fairly consistent views over a range of issues based on the fundamental and contextual elements of their policy frames, the media can take each issue in isolation and deal

with it in its preferred way. That two issues that for other political actors were very similar - the question of lone-parent families and state support, and the question of child support - were not joined in the media should be seen in this context. A result is that different political actors are free to set and shape the media agenda on different issues, as the fundamental principles underlying media frames are not well developed.

The results of this study suggest, then, that the most important factor in a consideration of the roles of political actors in setting and shaping the media agenda is their ability to manipulate the media by providing 'good' stories. It is, however, easier for some actors to do this than for others, with both the resources of those involved, and the status of the actor regarding whether or not it is a routine port of call for journalists, being important.

10.2. ORGANISATIONAL AND PROCESSUAL PERSPECTIVES: A SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION?

Methodologically, this study has looked at the roles of political actors both from the point of view of their organisation (particularly in the case of pressure groups, but an awareness of the sociology of news literature has also provided some information on the production of news from an organisational perspective), and from the point of view of processes, and of concrete results of these processes. Several bodies of literature have been utilised - pressure group literature, agenda-setting literature, and issue definition literature. Has such an approach added anything of substance to this literature?

Firstly, the utility of Policy Frame Analysis as a descriptive analytical tool should be emphasised. By focusing on organisations - looking at both their views and their

functioning - it can elucidate a lot about both the processes through which agendas interact in order to influence media agendas, and about the inter-dependent nature of elements in a complete political system. The focus has been on the media as a dependent variable, but the appliance of PFA to the issues focused on here has shown that the media itself has been very important in setting the agendas of other political actors.

Government ministers, for example, may set the media agenda with their comments, but their comments may be interpreted and used selectively by journalists in the process. Thus, ministers' speeches are reported, but somewhat distortedly rather than precisely. For the public and for other political actors, however, this reporting may become what the government has said. Politically, other actors can take advantage of this, being able to criticise ministers on what they have said and/or on what the media have said they have said (and this does not just apply to government ministers but to all political actors). The media's role as a mediator cannot, then, be ignored as part of the processes of agenda-setting and issue definition, though the complexity of this role can only be touched upon here.

PFA, then, has shown that political agendas operate very much in the context of other political agendas. Although the media agenda was the agenda of central interest, using PFA allowed for a more complete picture of interactions between agendas to be seen. It allowed the study of the media agenda as a dependent variable, carried out in Chapter 7, to be augmented. Through PFA a more complete picture was painted of agenda inter-dependence. This framework allows for a systematic examination of a variety of policy frames, elucidating not only influences on the media agenda, but also the nature of other political agendas. It allows observations on similarities between frames, and on deviations, so allowing speculation about causation. It allows observations on inconsistencies within frames on the same and on different issues, and

points to commonalities between all frames so indicating the societal essence of issues - the 'indisputable' elements of an issue over a given time period. In itself, PFA integrates processual and organisational foci.

Grounding this PFA in the constructionist literature gives a role to objective reality in the shaping of issue definitions, whilst also emphasising the view that social problems are not given, but are a product of peculiar perspectives. This is acknowledged by the policy process literature but has not tended to be discussed in depth, giving rise to confusion regarding these writers' positions on relativism. Much of the process literature (specifically the policy analysis section) seems to have underlying it the assumption that there is a 'best' definition of any problem. This position is rejected here. Using PFA to pick-out a 'best' definition is believed to be impossible without adding the policy frame of the author to the analysis. In the context of this study, PFA has shown that different perceptions of phenomena are based on different 'views of the world' which are influenced, not least, by operational aspects (organisational factors).

PFA also allows for a focus on non-issues - sometimes shown to be methodologically problematic in the agenda-setting literature. PFA allows one to observe which elements of each actor's frame have been picked-up by the agenda of study, and which have not, so avoiding the pitfall of studying non-issues from the perspective of the researcher who believes that he or she can comment on policy-making processes from a superior position. Using PFA to alert one to non-issues does not involve the researcher in any value judgements.

In addition, looking at the preceding chapters as a whole, the importance of looking at agenda-setting and issue definition together becomes apparent. Specifically referring to the results found here, a study of agenda-setting only, may have exaggerated the

power of government ministers in setting and shaping media agendas. Looking at agenda-setting in combination with issue definition, however, shows that ministers may be more likely to spark coverage, and are efficient in getting their voices heard. This study has shown, though, that there is more to power in setting and shaping media agendas to one's satisfaction than that though. Power on a simple agenda-setting level may back-fire. Views may be distorted, or presented in an unfavourable frame. Both processes must, therefore, be examined side by side.

Looking at the media as a dependent variable in the context of the policy studies literature has also been shown to be valuable. A traditional policy process study would have focused on the government agenda, and probably noted that the complaints of absent fathers about the Child Support Agency led to reforms being announced. It would have noted that absent fathers successfully placed their definition of the issue on the government agenda. This study has focused on this process from a different perspective, and has looked at how it was largely through these fathers placing the issue on the *media* agenda (as well as the parliamentary agenda) that the issue came to be placed on the government agenda and action was taken. These fathers' groups were not 'insiders' and so a focus on the government agenda may have left one puzzled as to how they were successful. A focus on the groups and on the media agenda, however, has pointed to the importance of clever media manipulation thorough mobilisation and particularisation.

The government agenda can, thus, be understood from a different perspective, overcoming some of the difficulties of gaining access to the closed world of Whitehall (though such a focus is not, of course, a replacement for policy process literature which focuses on the government agenda).

In a different manner to that propounded by Maloney et al (1994), then, this approach gets away from the emphasis on the insider/outsider distinction that has been central to much pressure group literature. It focuses instead on the importance of good media relations, both as important in setting the media agenda, and as helpful in setting the government agenda in the longer term. In the 1990s, the mass media play a part in all of our lives. Its role as a bridge between the public and the political worlds is extremely important, and as such it is important that pressure groups can influence the media agenda on their way to shaping policy. It has been suggested here that the child support issue showed that outsider groups such as Families Need Fathers managed to precipitate government reforms on the Child Support Agency, while the insider group the NCOPF failed. In this case the important variable was not insider status, but was media strategy. More studies should focus on this in order to show whether the child support issue was exceptional, or whether informed use of the media is now crucial for pressure groups, as the groups studied here appear to think.

Primarily, however, the methodological originality of this study has centred on its dual organisational/processual focus (brought together by Policy Frame Analysis). This has allowed a picture to be painted of media agenda-setting from two angles, with the result that the roles of political actors can be better understood.

10.3. A FINAL WORD ON METHODS

Just as it is argued here that the mass media has become a more important part of our lives as we approach the twenty-first century, so has computer technology. This study would probably not have been possible without the existence of computerised databases from which relevant data could be picked-up efficiently, quickly, and easily. Studies of the media agenda, in particular, have been aided considerably by the existence of databases which store *all* stories from these newspapers, and allow the text of such stories to be searched by inputting words or phrases. This systemises studies of media content and aids comprehensiveness in a way using paper indexing systems never could. More and more such computerised databases are becoming available - the Parliamentary On-line Information System does not have the text of everything that has gone on in Parliament, but does have summaries and keyword indexes. *Hansard* is available on CD-Rom - text can again be searched for words and terms.

The ease with which such textual data can be collected must have implications for what studies such as this can achieve. The scope of studies can be expanded, and results can be seen as more valid as more comprehensive datasets are obtained. The advances of computer technology mean new methods are possible which can greatly add to our understanding of social phenomena. The availability of a variety of data in such accessible form may herald both an increase in the quantity and quality of policy process literature.

10.4. CONCLUSION

This thesis has found and identified the following:

- government ministers have been more able to set the media agenda than other political actors;
- there is, however, no ideological bias on the part of newspapers towards ministers, it is merely that ministers are at the centre of the political world and as such are a convenient source from which journalists can obtain suitable political stories with the minimum of effort;
- other actors who are able to supply suitable and, in particular, exciting stories to journalists, are likely to be able to set and shape the media agenda;
- in order for actors to do this it is helpful if they have a co-ordinated strategy with which they deal with the media, with the ability to particularise political stories to include a human interest element particularly helpful to their cause;
- for the pressure groups looked at here, the ability to mobilise membership has been particularly important in achieving pleasing results, with absent fathers more able to do this than lone mothers due to a greater availability of time, money, and other relevant resources;
- overall, the operational context of making money in which the media operates, is fundamental to understanding the nature of coverage, with political actors having to consider this above all else in their dealings with the media;

- methodologically, Policy Frame Analysis is a useful analytical tool which allows for the bringing together of organisational and processual foci in order to elucidate processes of agenda-setting and issue definition;

- the recent availability of a wide-range of computerised databases, on which searches for relevant textual segments can be performed quickly and easily, have made systematic and comprehensive content analyses of a variety of textual data more possible, with implications for the quality and quantity of agenda-setting and issue definition studies.

FOOTNOTES

¹ It has been explained that it is suspected that most of these individuals were members of groups that were co-ordinating their actions.

APPENDIX 1

The search strategy as fed into the on-line database Textline, and into *The Times* on CD-Rom is reproduced below. '*' is the truncation symbol on this database.

1. single-parent

single parent

single parents

single parenthood

single-parents

single-parenthood

single parenting

single-parenting

2. lone-parent

lone parent

lone-parents

lone parents

lone parenthood

lone-parenthood

lone parenting

lone-parenting

3. one parent

one-parent

4. widow* AND child

5. widowed mum

widowed dad

widowed AND mother (SAME PARAGRAPH)

widowed AND mothers

widowed AND father

widowed AND fathers

6. single mother

single-mother

single mothers

single-mothers

single motherhood

single-motherhood

single mothering

single mothering

7. single mum

single mums

single-mum

single-mums

8. single father

single-father

single fathers

single-fathers

single fatherhood

single-fatherhood

single fathering

single-fathering

9. single dad

single dads

single-dad

single-dads

10. unmarried mother

unmarried-mother

unmarried mothers

unmarried-mothers

unmarried motherhood

unmarried-motherhood

unmarried mothering

unmarried-mothering

11. unmarried mum

unmarried-mum

unmarried mums

unmarried-mums

12. unmarried dad

unmarried-dad

unmarried dads

unmarried-dads

13. unmarried father

unmarried-father

unmarried fathers

unmarried-fathers

unmarried fatherhood

unmarried-fatherhood

14. lone mother

lone-mother

lone mothers

lone-mothers

lone motherhood

lone-motherhood

15. lone father

lone-father

lone fathers

lone-fathers

lone fatherhood

lone-fatherhood

16. child benefit increase

17. CSA

child support agency

child support agency's

18. child support bill

child support bill's

19. child support act

child support act's

20. child maintenance

21. families need fathers

22. nuclear AND famil* AND declin*

23. famil* AND disintegrat*

24. family breakdown

family break-down

family-breakdown

family-break-down

families breakdown

families break-down

family break down

families break down

25. family breakup

family break-up

family-breakup

family-break-up

families breakup

families break-up

family break up

families break up

26. teenage mother

teenage-mother

teenage mothers

teenage-mothers

teenage motherhood

teenage-motherhood

teenage mothering

teenage-mothering

27. teenage mum

teenage-mum

teenage mums

teenage-mums

28. teenage father

teenage-father

teenage-fathers

teenage fathers

teenage fatherhood

teenage-fatherhood

teenage fathering

teenage-fathering

29. teenage parent

teenage-parent

teenage parents

teenage-parents

teenage parenthood

teenage-parenthood

30. unmarried parent

unmarried-parent

unmarried parents

unmarried-parents

unmarried parenthood

unmarried-parenthood

31. single pregnant woman

single pregnant women

32. custody child (SAME PARAGRAPH)

custody children (SAME PARAGRAPH)

33. illegitim*

34. teenage pregnancy

teenage-pregnancy

teenage pregnancies

teenage-pregnancies

teenager pregnant (SAME PARAGRAPH)

teenagers pregnant (SAME PARAGRAPH)

35. underage AND pregnan*

under-age AND pregnan*

36. broken home

broken homes

broken-home

broken-homes

37. broken family

broken families

broken-family

broken-families

38. divorc* AND child*

divorc* AND daughter* .

divorc* AND son*

39. father* AND abandon* AND child*

father* AND abandon* AND son*

father* AND abandon* AND daughter*

40. mother* AND abandon* AND child*

mother* AND abandon* AND son*

mother* AND abandon* AND daughter*

41. schoolgirl mother

school-girl mother

schoolgirl-mother

schoolgirl mothers

school-girl mothers

schoolgirl-mothers
schoolgirl motherhood
school-girl motherhood

42. schoolgirl mum

school-girl mum
schoolgirl-mum
schoolgirl mums
school-girl mums
schoolgirl-mums

43. schoolboy father

school-boy father
schoolboy-father
schoolboy fathers
school-boy fathers
schoolboy-fathers
schoolboy fatherhood
schoolboy-fatherhood

44. schoolboy dad

schoolboy-dad
school-boy dad
schoolboy dads
schoolboy-dads
schoolboy dads

45. gingerbread

46. scottish council AND parents

47. absentee father

absentee fathers

absentee fatherhood

absentee-father

absentee-fathers

absentee-fatherhood

48. absent father

absent fathers

absent fatherhood

absent-father

absent-fathers

absent-fatherhood

49. absent mother

absent mothers

absent motherhood

absent-mother

absent-mothers

absent-motherhood

50. absentee mother

absentee mothers

absentee motherhood

absentee-mother

absentee-mothers

absentee motherhood

51. family values

family-values

52. liable relative

liable relatives

53. matrimonial AND family proceedings

54. children act

children act's

55. children bill

children bill's

56. separat* AND child*

separat* AND son*

separat* AND daughter*

57. runaway father

runaway-father

runaway-fathers

runaway fathers

58. runaway mother

runaway-mother

runaway-mothers

runaway mothers

APPENDIX 2

The search strategy as fed into the POLIS on-line database is reproduced below. Note that '*' is the truncation symbol on this database, 'DES' searches the text of the description of the indexed segment, and 'SIT' searches the subject index terms that have been assigned to segments (akin to keywords in several other bibliographic databases). A complete list of subject index terms is found in the POLIS manual (Meridian, 1989). Terms relevant to this study were taken from there.

- 1 =FIND DES=(lone* AND father*)
- 2 = FIND SIT=lone parents
- 3 =FIND SIT=lone parent families
- 4 =FIND DES=(lone* AND parent*)
- 5 =FIND DES=(lone* AND mother*)
- 6 =FIND DES=(lone* AND father*)
- 7 =FIND DES=(lone* AND mum*)
- 8 =FIND DES=(lone* AND dad*)
- 9 =FIND SIT=unmarried mothers
- 10 =FIND DES=(unmarried AND mother*)
- 11 =FIND DES=(unmarried AND mum*)
- 12 =FIND DES=(unmarried AND father*)
- 13 =FIND DES=(unmarried AND dad*)
- 14 =FIND DES=(unmarried AND parent*)
- 15 =FIND DES=lone-parent*
- 16 =FIND DES=lone-mother*
- 17 =FIND DES=lone-father*
- 18 =FIND DES=lone-mum*

- 19 =FIND DES=lone-dad*
- 20 =FIND SIT=one parent families
- 21 =FIND SIT=one parent benefit
- 22 =FIND DES=(one AND parent)
- 23 =FIND DES=one-parent
- 24 =FIND SIT=widows
- 25 =FIND DES=widow*
- 26 =FIND SIT=illegitimate children
- 27 =FIND DES=(illegitimate AND child*)
- 28 =FIND DES=(illegitimate AND pregnan*)
- 29 =FIND DES=(illegitimate AND bab*)
- 30 =FIND SIT=child benefit increase
- 31 =FIND DES=(child AND benefit AND increase*)
- 32 =FIND SIT=divorce courts
- 33 =FIND SIT=divorce settlements
- 34 =FIND SIT=divorce law
- 35 =FIND SIT=divorce
- 36 =FIND DES=divorc*
- 37 =FIND SIT=custody
- 38 =FIND DES=(custody AND child*)
- 39 =FIND SIT=family courts
- 40 =FIND DES=(family AND court*)
- 41 =FIND SIT=matrimonial proceedings
- 42 =FIND DES=(matrimonial AND family AND proceedings)
- 43 =FIND SIT=maintenance
- 44 =FIND DES=(child* AND maintenance)
- 45 =FIND SIT= separated people
- 46 =FIND DES=(separat* AND child*)

- 47 =FIND DES=(separat* AND son*)
- 48 =FIND DES=(separat* AND daughter*)
- 49 =FIND DES=(single AND parent*)
- 50 =FIND DES=(single AND father*)
- 51 =FIND DES=(single AND mother*)
- 52 =FIND DES=(single AND mum*)
- 53 =FIND DES=(single AND dad*)
- 54 =FIND DES=single-parent*
- 55 =FIND DES=single-father*
- 56 =FIND DES=single-mother*
- 57 =FIND DES=single-mum*
- 58 =FIND DES=single-dad*
- 59 =FIND DES=(nuclear AND famil* AND declin*)
- 60 =FIND DES=(famil* AND disintegrat*)
- 61 =FIND DES=(single AND pregnan* AND wom*n)
- 62 =FIND DES=(teenage* AND pregnan*)
- 63 =FIND DES=(underage AND pregnan*)
- 64 =FIND DES=(under-age AND pregnan*)
- 65 =FIND DES=(under AND 16 AND pregnan*)
- 66 =FIND DES=(under AND sixteen AND pregnan*)
- 67 =FIND DES=(under AND "16" AND pregnan*)
- 68 =FIND DES=(broken AND home*)
- 69 =FIND DES=broken-home*
- 70 =FIND DES=(father* AND abandon* AND child*)
- 71 =FIND DES=(father* AND abandon* AND daughter*)
- 72 =FIND DES=(father* AND abandon* AND son*)
- 73 =FIND DES=(mother* AND abandon* AND child*)
- 74 =FIND DES=(mother* AND abandon* AND son*)

75 =FIND DES=(mother* AND abandon* AND daughter*)
76 =FIND DES=(schoolgirl AND mother*)
77 = FIND DES=(schoolgirl AND mum*)
78 =FIND DES=(schoolboy AND father*)
79 =FIND DES=(schoolboy AND dad*)
80 =FIND DES=(family AND values)
81 =FIND DES=(liable AND relative*)
82 =FIND SIT=children act
83 =FIND SIT=children bill
84 =FIND DES=(children AND act*)
85 =FIND DES=(children AND bill*)
86 =FIND SIT=child support act
87 =FIND SIT=child support bill
88 =FIND DES=(children AND act*)
89 =FIND DES=(children AND bill*)
90 =FIND SIT=child support act
91 =FIND SIT=child support bill
92 =FIND SIT=child support agency
93 =FIND DES=(child AND support)
94 =FIND SIT=families need fathers
95 =FIND DES=(families AND need AND fathers)
96 =FIND SIT=gingerbread
97 =FIND DES=gingerbread
98 =FIND SIT=national council for one parent families
99 =FIND DES=(national AND council AND one AND parent AND families)
100 =FIND DES=(runaway AND father*)
101 =FIND SIT=runaway fathers
102 =FIND DES=(runaway AND mother*)

103 =FIND SIT=runaway mothers

APPENDIX 3

Below appears a list of the pressure group literature which has been used but not cited in this study (those references from which quotes have been reproduced appear in the bibliography).

Pressure Group Literature

Newsletters/magazines from:

the Conservative Family Campaign (*Family Matters*, 1992 and 1993)

Families Need Fathers (*Access*, 1989-1994)

Gingerbread (*Ginger*, 1992 and 1993)

the National Council for One Parent Families (*One Parent Times*, 1992-1994).

Annual reports from:

National Council for One Parent Families (1991-1994)

Gingerbread (1991-1994).

Also: pamphlet(s) from the Woman's National Commission, Cruse, National Association for Widows. National Council for One Parent Families, Families Need Fathers, Gingerbread, Institute of Public Policy Research.

APPENDIX 4

A list of the newspaper articles from which direct quotes have been reproduced in this study appears below.

Newspaper Articles

(1993) "Are our children out of control?", *The Sunday Times*, 21st February.

(1993) "The Brutality of Britain", *The Sunday Times*, 21st February.

(1993) "Lone parents to be thrust deeper into hardship", *The Independent*, 5th April.

(1993) "Lone parents are social problem, says Redwood", *The Sunday Times*, 3rd July.

(1993) "Fairer housing queues: single mums lose right to a house", *The Sun*, 8th October.

(1993) "Now we are on the right radical road", *The Daily Express*, 8th October.

(1993) "Crackdown on mothers who jump homes queue", *The Daily Express*, 8th October.

(1993) "Give two-parent families a chance", *The Daily Mail*, 8th October.

(1993) "Facts and fatherhood", *The Times*, 10th November.

(1993) "For and against: the experts' verdict", *The Daily Telegraph*, 10th November.

(1993) "Child Agency blamed after man's suicide", *The Times*, 7th December.

(1993) "Dad driven to suicide by child cash shock", *The Daily Star*, 7th December.

(1993) "The letter that spelled death for one father", *The Daily Mail*, 7th December.

(1993) "Clear injustice", *The Daily Express*, 7th December.

(1993) "What else must happen before the Government scraps the Child Support Agency?", *The Daily Mirror*, 7th December.

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