

## ***MAINTAINING SOLE PARENT FAMILIES IN NEW ZEALAND: AN HISTORICAL REVIEW***

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### INTRODUCTION

August 7, 1998 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the extension of social security coverage to all sole mothers in New Zealand, whether widowed, deserted, separated, divorced or single.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) was an emergency benefit available on a discretionary basis only. Five years later, following the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Social Security, it was introduced as an income-tested statutory benefit and extended to sole fathers. The reforms in this period marked a shift in emphasis from private to public responsibility for the support of sole parents.

Social and economic change in the 1970s and 1980s, including a rise in non-widowed sole parenthood and high unemployment, was accompanied by rapid growth in the uptake of the DPB. Reliance on this benefit remains high, though the tendency to combine employment with benefit receipt has recently grown. The proportion of women aged 16-59 receiving the DPB rose from 2.5% in 1976 to 8.4% in 1991, and was still at about that level in 1996 (8.6%). Among non-widowed sole parents, the proportion receiving DPB grew from 60% in 1976 to 93% in 1991, falling back slightly to 86% in 1996. Children with a parent on DPB increased from 4% of all children under 18 in 1976, to 17% in 1991, and to 19% in 1996.

These trends have greatly increased government expenditure on the DPB, from 5% of benefit expenditure in 1974/75 to 15% in 1996/97. The fiscal impact of this benefit, and recent government concerns about benefit dependence and outcomes for children, have prompted its departmental advisers to consider new solutions to the problem of how to support sole parent families (Shipley et al. 1991, DSW 1996). Thus, it is timely to review past policy.

This article reviews the development of policy responses to sole parenthood in New Zealand, and describes the post-war social and demographic changes that increased the pressure on existing provisions. The origins of the DPB and the rationale for its introduction are examined, and claims about its effect on behaviour are discussed. The article also provides details of recent changes in sole parent policy which mark another shift in the balance of support for sole parents from the family, the state and the market.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, unless otherwise specified, "sole" mother, father or parent refers to all marital status categories; "single" refers to sole parents who were not previously living with a spouse or partner.

## EARLY HISTORY

### Two Cultural Traditions

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, two very different patterns of support for the young and their caregivers co-existed in New Zealand. Women of European (mainly British) origin, were highly vulnerable to poverty if they became sole mothers, because of their economic dependence upon men, their responsibility for children, and the low wages that their skills could command (Tennant 1989). In contrast, Māori women lived in a communal, tribal setting, and their economic welfare was less dependent on individual men than on the fortunes of the *whānau* (extended family), the *hapū* (sub-tribe), or *iwi* (tribe). For Māori, responsibility for children was shared within and between generations (Metge 1995:200).

### Prevalence of Sole Parenthood

Sole parenthood resulting from the death of a spouse was common: in the mid-1890s, 18-19% of non-Māori children had lost a parent through death before they turned 16 (Carmichael 1983). War contributed to widowed sole parenthood: over 16,500 New Zealand men lost their lives in the First World War (Uttley 1994:34). Wife desertion was also common, especially during periods of high unemployment, such as the economic recession of the 1880s and early 1890s, and the depression which began in the 1920s (Sutch 1969, Tennant 1989). The search for work took men to Australia or to remote places unsuitable for family life.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was widespread concern about drunkenness and domestic violence, and the belief that women's votes could influence policy to change men's behaviour partly explains the early achievement of women's suffrage in New Zealand in 1893 (Grimshaw 1972:25, 109; Dalziel 1977:122). Desertion and habitual drunkenness became grounds for divorce in 1898.<sup>2</sup> However, divorce remained rare, most separations were not formalised.

### Vulnerable Children

In 1894, it was claimed that more than 1,500 children under 15 became fatherless each year (RCSS 1972:42). Children whose parents could not support them, including children of single mothers, were often "boarded out", informally adopted or placed in orphanages.<sup>3</sup> The vulnerability of such children was highlighted in 1894, when Minnie Dean was convicted and hanged for the murder of children in her care. The case led to the Infant Life Protection Act of 1895, which required foster homes to be licensed. Legal

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<sup>2</sup> New Zealand's first divorce law was enacted in 1867, ten years after the English legislation on which it was based. The 1898 reform equalised grounds for divorce between women and men and extended them beyond those prevailing in English law (Phillip 1985:22).

<sup>3</sup> The number of homes for destitute children peaked at 75 in 1935. Most of the children in these homes had at least one living parent; in 1949, only 4% were true orphans (Department of Statistics, New Zealand Official Yearbook 1990, p.217).

adoption was available from 1881, but did not become popular until the Second World War (Else 1991).<sup>4</sup> Infant mortality statistics showed higher death rates for e-nuptial children in the early twentieth century (Coney 1993:76). The Child Welfare Act 1925 introduced mandatory inquiries into the living circumstances of all children born outside marriage. In the 1930s, ex-nuptial births declined but illegal abortions increased (Taylor 1986:1038).<sup>5</sup>

## POLICY RESPONSES

### Maintenance and Public Relief

The first public policy response to sole parenthood came soon after New Zealand was established as a British colony in 1840. Like the New Poor Law in Britain, the Destitute Persons Ordinance 1846 emphasised family responsibility for the support of the sick, the unemployed, the aged, deserted wives and unmarried mothers. However, since there was no authority at that time for *collecting* maintenance (the law merely giving claimants the right to take legal action to secure it), this response had little practical effect (Tennant 1989). The limited public relief system that developed later in the nineteenth century was locally administered, funded by rates and government subsidies. Central government administration of "charitable aid" (the New Zealand euphemism for public relief) began in 1885 with the Hospital and Charitable Institutions Act, and the establishment of a small department to co-ordinate the delivery of relief through local charitable aid boards attached to hospitals. Cash relief was conditional on the pursuit of maintenance from husbands or putative fathers. This system remained in place until well into the twentieth century.

### Pensions for War Widows

War widows were the first to be seen as deserving of ongoing community support. The Military Pensions Act 1866 made provision for the widows of soldiers killed in the land wars between Māori tribes and the Crown in the 1840s and 1860s. Payable on a discretionary basis, these pensions were later extended to those who lost their husbands in the Boer War. The War Pensions Act 1915 introduced war widows pensions, which were paid without a means test from 1916 (Uttley 1994:33,34).

### Statutory Assistance for Widows and Deserted Wives

Widows with dependent children were the first sole parents to receive statutory income support, with the introduction of a means-tested tax-funded widows pension in 1911.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> New Zealand was the first Commonwealth country to legalise adoption, which was not introduced in England and Wales until 1926. According to one source, the aim of this legislation was to encourage people to take responsibility for orphans, deserted and neglected children, so that that they would cease to be a community responsibility and a charge on public funds (Judge Pethig, cited in Henaghan 1992:146).

<sup>5</sup> A 1936 Committee of Inquiry estimated that 4,000 illegal abortions were being induced each year.

<sup>6</sup> Effective 1 January 1912 and extended to wives of mental hospital patients later that year. Pensions for miners' widows were introduced in 1915. The Social Security Act 1938 extended widows benefits to

1936, deserted wives with children became eligible for widows benefit if they had taken maintenance proceedings against their husbands and were not divorced.<sup>7</sup> *De facto* wives were not eligible for widows benefits.<sup>8</sup> The Department of Social Security was responsible for the enforcement and collection of maintenance for deserted wives, which was paid into the Consolidated Account to offset the cost of the benefit.

### Private Maintenance

Private maintenance enforced by the judicial system remained the basis of support for separated and divorced sole mothers for most of the twentieth century. However, maintenance awards were determined on the basis of matrimonial fault and were not granted to women who were separated from their husbands without sufficient cause.

In an attempt to enforce maintenance liabilities, the Destitute Persons Act 1910 introduced the concept of attachment orders on wages; this was an international innovation (Hanan 1969:3). The underlying principle of this legislation was to relieve destitution rather than provide adequate long-term support. It was the Destitute Persons Act that underpinned the emergency benefits introduced by the Social Security Act 1938; these were paid on a discretionary basis to those who could prove hardship. However, some separated women in hardship were not eligible for emergency benefits because they were conditional upon obtaining a maintenance order. Such wives were in a precarious economic position if their husbands were unable or unwilling to support them after separation.

### Single Mothers

Single mothers were treated differently from sole mothers who were previously married. Under the legislation for relief of destitution, they could obtain affiliation orders for their child's maintenance, but could not claim maintenance for themselves. In 1938, employed unmarried pregnant women became eligible for an emergency sickness benefit for a limited period before and after giving birth, on the grounds that they were temporarily incapacitated for work. This short-term benefit, which is still available, is not conditional on the pursuit of maintenance. Thus, single mothers were initially assisted as workers, rather than mothers or dependent wives.

### The Family Wage and Family Assistance

Sole mothers obliged to seek employment were unlikely to earn enough to support their families. Under the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894, wages for women were typically set lower than those for men on the assumption that they were single with

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widows without children. Conditions of eligibility and rates of widows benefit differed for Māori until 1945 (Beaglehole 1993:26).

<sup>7</sup> Eligibility was later extended to deserted wives whose husband's whereabouts were known (1943) and to deserted wives with no dependent children (1945). From 1954, deserted wives on widows benefits could continue to receive the benefit if they divorced.

<sup>8</sup> *De facto* wives became eligible for widows benefits in 1987 (Social Security Amendment Act 1987, section 9).

no dependants (Brosnan et al. 1995:677). The assumption of female dependence was made explicit in 1908 when the Court of Arbitration introduced the concept of a "living wage", a basic wage rate for men that would enable them to support a wife and children (Castles 1985:89). In 1925, this wage rate was considered sufficient for a man to support a wife and two children. Families with more than two children were assisted through means-tested allowances introduced by the Family allowance Act 1926. This direct state support for the children of wage-earning families was another international innovation (Castles 1985:89). However, alien, "Asiatic" and illegitimate children were excluded, and the allowance was paid only to the father.

In 1936, the first Labour government adopted the norm of three children in legislation setting the basic male breadwinner wage (Sutch 1969:234).<sup>9</sup> In the same year, mothers became eligible to claim family allowances. Under the Social Security Act 1938, the rate of family allowance was doubled, and it was renamed Family Benefit. Despite the removal of the discriminatory clauses in the 1938 Act, it appears that mothers of children born outside marriage were denied family benefits until at least 1945.<sup>10</sup> Family benefit was extended to each child in a family in 1941 and paid without a means test from 1 April 1946. This benefit was paid at a flat rate of \$1 per week for each child, which was equivalent to 8.8% of the male nominal wage in 1944 and 25% of the single unemployment benefit in 1945 (Sutch 1969:304, RCSS 1972-532). Improvements in family assistance in the 1940s were partly motivated by a desire to increase the birth rate and support women's return to the home after the war.<sup>11</sup> The policy of supporting mothers out of the workforce is evident in the introduction of a supplementary benefit for widows with children in 1945, known as Mothers Allowance from 1946. For other sole mothers, who were expected to go out to work, the family benefit provided a reliable supplement to their income.

## POST-WAR SOCIAL, DEMOGRAPHIC AND LEGISLATIVE CHANGE

### Changes for Māori

In the two decades after the Second World War, population growth and the demand for labour in the cities encouraged younger Māori to migrate from their rural areas. This disrupted intergenerational patterns of support and increased the dependence of young Māori mothers on individual male wage-earners, making them as vulnerable to poverty from sole parenthood as many of their non-Māori counterparts.

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<sup>9</sup> Minimum wages continued to be set at a lower rate for women until the Equal Pay Act 1972 was fully implemented in 1977.

<sup>10</sup> In February 1945, the Society of the Protection of Women and Children reported the first known case of the family benefit being paid for an ex-nuptial child (Taylor 1986:1043). In the 1964 reform of the Social Security Act, "illegitimate" children were explicitly included among those eligible for Family Benefit.

<sup>11</sup> There were particular concerns, in New Zealand and elsewhere, that the decline in the birth rate had been most pronounced for the middle classes. There was a view that removing means tests for child benefits would encourage educated, middle-class couples to have children (Fisher 1943, cited in Sinclair 1944:176).

Few Māori registered their marriages before 1952, when official recognition of customary marriages was withdrawn (Missen 1969:20).<sup>12</sup> Urbanisation and eligibility criteria for social services (e.g. widows benefit, housing assistance) may have encouraged Māori to adopt European marriage customs in greater numbers in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the high proportion of Māori births classified as "illegitimate" in the 1960s suggests that customary marriage was still common. The Status of Children Act 1969 (see below) and the growing prevalence of cohabitation among non-Māori may have subsequently reduced pressure for Māori couples to register a marriage. Cohabitation remains more common among Māori than non-Māori.<sup>13</sup>

The Adoption Act 1955, which introduced closed adoption, overrode Māori beliefs and practices and outlawed customary adoptions (Durie-Hall and Metge 1992:59). In Māori society, a child born to a young, single woman was valued as a descendant of the *whānau* ancestors and absorbed into the extended family. Placing children with strangers was severely frowned upon as it meant they were lost to grandparents and whānau as well as birth parents (Metge 1995:213).<sup>14</sup> A major study of ex-nuptial children born in 1970 showed that only 10% of Māori birth mothers aged under 20 chose legal adoption, compared with 53% of their European counterparts and 69% of European teenage birth mothers with high educational achievement. Of all birth mothers who kept their child in a single parent situation (not cohabiting, but not necessarily living alone), 27% were Māori (D.P. O'Neill et al. 1976:265,454).<sup>15</sup>

### Births Outside Registered Marriage

The Second World War had a disruptive effect on patterns of family formation. Marriages were brought forward or delayed; there was a sharp, temporary, rise in divorce; and births outside marriage increased among non-Māori. In 1945, there were 12 births for every 1,000 women of childbearing age not currently married; by 1961, the rate had doubled to 24 per 1,000. During this period, the Government ordered a special committee of inquiry (the Mazengarb Committee) into moral delinquency among youth, which resulted in legislation prohibiting the sale of contraceptives to persons under 16.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Statutory recognition of Māori customary marriages was first conferred in the Marriage Act 1880. Under the Māori Purposes Act 1951 (effective 1 April 1952) all marriages became subject to the same law – that of the European/Pākehā majority. However, traditional Māori rights of inheritance were preserved. In English law, it was Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act 1753 that made informal marriages, and the children of such unions, illegitimate (Quin and O'Neill 1984:8,16).

<sup>13</sup> In 1996, 39% of Māori women aged 15-44 who were living with a partner were not legally married, compared with 21% of non-Māori women of that age (1996 Census, *National Summary*, Table 11, and *Māori*, Table 14).

<sup>14</sup> However, during the 1950s and 1960s, many Māori accepted unrelated children placed with them by the Department of Māori Affairs (Metge 1995:217).

<sup>15</sup> A smaller Auckland study of children born to single women in 1973 found that over half (53%) of birth mothers who kept their child were Māori or Pacific islands (Society for Research on Women 1979:2). In 1971, Māori women made up 8% of all women aged 15-49.

<sup>16</sup> This 1954 inquiry was precipitated by a "moral panic" over the activities of a group of Hutt Valley youth, and the Hulme-Parker trial of two teenage girls who had killed Parker's mother. The contraceptive prohibition was repealed in 1990.

Among all women, ex-nuptial birth rates rose from 31.2 per 1,000 not-married women in 1962, to a peak of 44.4 per 1,000 in 1971. The reasons for the increase in ex-nuptial fertility in the 1960s have been well researched, both in New Zealand and overseas. They include the large increase in the number of unmarried women in the younger reproductive age groups as the post-war baby boom generation reached adolescence; the increased mobility and autonomy of youth; a rise in pre-marital sex combined with relatively poor access to birth control;<sup>17</sup> and a decline in the practice of marrying because of pregnancy (Sears 1969, C.J. O'Neill 1979:141,142, Khawaja 1985:168, Lesthaeghe 1995).

### Marriage Precipitated by Pregnancy

Historically, marriage was a common response to pregnancy among single non-Māori women in New Zealand. From 1920 to 1940, over 60% of ex-nuptial conceptions ended as nuptial births (Pool 1986:65). In the 1960s, among all women, the proportion of ex-nuptial conceptions ending as nuptial births declined from 47% in 1962 to 42% in 1969 (D.P. O'Neill et al. 1976:66). However, in numerical terms, partly because of the impact of the baby boom generation, "shot-gun" marriages increased in the 1960s: one in four marriages involved a pregnant bride.<sup>18</sup> As unmarried women gained access to the contraceptive pill and other effective forms of birth control, many were able to avoid the unplanned pregnancies that led to forced marriages, which declined sharply in the early 1970s.<sup>19</sup> Between 1971 and 1976, known conceptions declined by an estimated 15% among women under 20, and by 24% for those aged 20-24 (Sceats 1985:68).<sup>20</sup> The sharp decline in precipitated marriage after 1971 was not matched by a corresponding rise in the number of single mothers, which had been growing steadily since the early 1960s (Figure 1).

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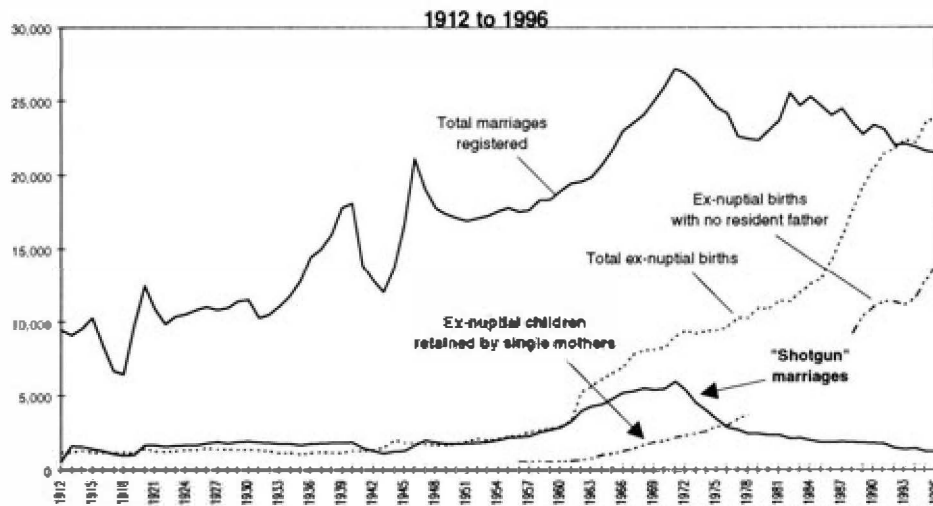
<sup>17</sup> Although the contraceptive pill was introduced in 1961, medical practitioners were initially reluctant to prescribe it to unmarried women (e.g. statement of Ethical Committee, NZ Medical Association, in *New Zealand Medical Journal* 65(409):619, September 1966). The Family Planning Association first discussed the issue formally at its 1970 AGM (Dr Margaret Sparrow, personal communication).

<sup>18</sup> Department of Statistics, *Vital Statistics* (various years).

<sup>19</sup> This decline occurred simultaneously in several countries, suggesting that birth control was a common factor (Bourgeois-Pichat 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Known conceptions are calculated by adding the number of births (live and still) to the number of abortions.

**Figure 1: Marriages, "Shotgun" Marriages, Ex-Nuptial Births and Births to Single Mothers 1912 to 1996**



Sources: Department of Statistics, *Vital Statistics* (various years), *New Zealand Official Yearbook* (various years), Department of Education, Child Welfare Division, Annual Reports; Department of Social Welfare, Annual Reports; Statistics New Zealand (unpublished tables).

Notes: Māori are not included in total birth statistics prior to 1962. "Shotgun" marriages are first nuptial births within seven months of marriage. Ex-nuptial births to single mothers are cases where a child was kept by its mother in a single-parent situation (i.e. not cohabiting, but not necessarily living alone). The data comes from published statistics on the living situation of traced ex-nuptial births. These statistics were collected and published up to 1982. The quality of the data after 1978 is poor as the proportion of ex-nuptial births that were traced declined. There is no data for the period 1983-1987 from which to estimate births to single mothers. From 1988, ex-nuptial births with no resident father are cases where there is no evidence on the birth registration form that the parents are cohabiting. Many (but not all) of these births will have occurred to single mothers. However, the numbers depend on the willingness of parents to disclose their living arrangements and this may be affected by income support and child maintenance policies.

Among those single women who did not avoid pregnancy, there was an increasing tendency to give birth outside marriage, rather than within it. A cohort analysis by C.J. O'Neill (1979:142) found that women born in 1947 who became pregnant while single and gave birth by age 24 were about as likely to give birth within marriage as outside it, while women born in 1952 were slightly more likely to have an ex-nuptial birth than to marry while pregnant.

If a single pregnant woman did not marry and chose to keep her child beyond the post-partum period, she was expected to seek support from family members or voluntary organisations. About one in five ex-nuptial children born between 1955 and 1965 were kept by single mothers without partners.<sup>21</sup> The majority lived with their parents and were relatively invisible.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Child Welfare Division Annual Reports.

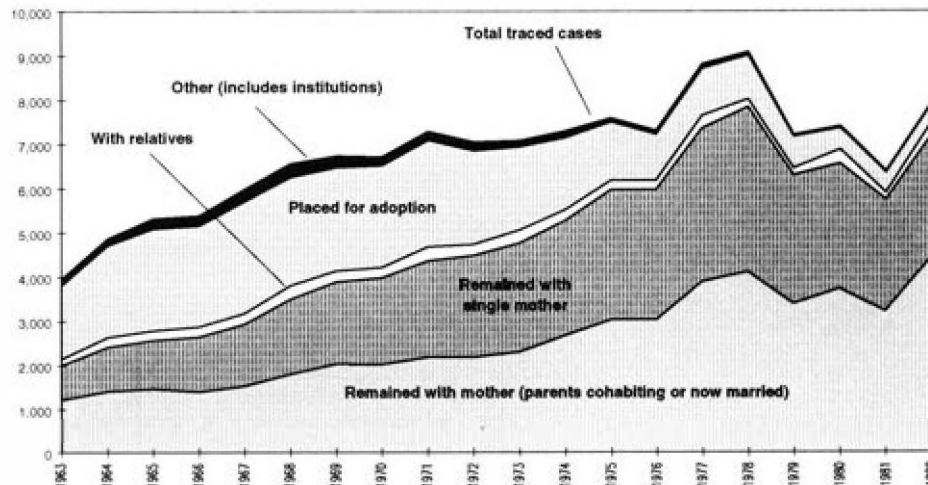
<sup>22</sup> A survey of all ex-nuptial children born in 1970 found that, of those birth mothers who kept their child in a single parent situation, 62% were living with their parents and another 13% lived with relatives. Only 10% were living on their own (D.P. O'Neill et al. 1976:329).



## Adoption

Adoption was the other alternative for single pregnant women who were unable or unwilling to marry the father of their child. Adoption became a more common outcome of an ex-nuptial birth after the introduction of closed adoption in 1955. Even at its peak in the 1960s, however, adoption was the outcome for fewer than half of ex-nuptial births.<sup>23</sup> Many other birth mothers kept their children in a cohabiting situation (Figure 2).<sup>24</sup>

**Figure 2: Living Situation of Ex-Nuptial Children  
Outcome of Inquiries made by Child Welfare or Social Welfare Officers 1963-1982**



Source: Child Welfare Division, Annual Reports; Department of Social Welfare Annual Reports.  
Note: Mandatory inquiries into the living circumstances of ex-nuptial children began in 1925 and ceased in 1982. The proportion of ex-nuptial births traced declined in the last few years of this practice.

Adoption became more problematic in the mid-1960s as the supply of ex-nuptial children born to young women from the large baby boom generation began to outstrip the supply of prospective adoptive parents, who were part of the small generation born in the 1930s (Sears 1969). There were periodic media reports about delays in placing children with adoptive parents. The number of babies not placed within one month of birth peaked at 680 in 1968 (Hadfield 1974:29,40). Stranger adoptions, mainly of babies under one year, declined sharply after 1968. Other countries also experienced a decline in adoption in the late 1960s and early 1970s, influenced by improved access to effective methods of birth control among the unmarried, along with changes in social attitudes and the increased availability of income support for single mothers (Hall 1984:xiv).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In 1965, of all ex-nuptial births traced by Child Welfare officers, 43% were placed for adoption, 27% remained with mothers who were cohabiting or had since married, and 20% remained with single mothers. The other 10% were either with relatives, in temporary foster care, or in institutions (DSW Annual Report 1965).

<sup>24</sup> In 1970, half of cohabiting mothers were unable to marry because of the prior undissolved marriages of one or both partners. Almost half of cohabiting mothers were Māori. (DP. O'Neill et al. 1976:303,305).

<sup>25</sup> In England and Wales, adoptions peaked in 1968; in Canada, 1970/71; in Australia, 1971/72 (Hall 1984, Sachdev 1984, Australian Bureau of Statistics 1979-80).

In New Zealand, these trends were reinforced by the Status of Children Act 1969, which ended discrimination between children born within and outside registered marriage and removed the term "illegitimate" from the statute books. This legislation reflected a desire to reduce some of the stigma associated with ex-nuptial birth that New Zealand inherited from English family law and brought the judicial system into line with the much more liberal concepts of Māori (Cameron 1967, 1969, Quin and O'Neill 1984).

### Marriage Breakdown

A number of social and demographic changes in the post-war period contributed to the increased marital disruption that began in the 1960s. There was a trend towards a younger age at marriage: between 1950 and 1971, the average age at first marriage declined from 24.2 to 21.7 years for women, and from 27.2 to an unprecedented low of 24.2 years for men.<sup>26</sup> Marriages entered into at a young age have a higher probability of breakdown, as do those involving bridal pregnancy (Carmichael 1982, Ermisch 1991). Marriages are most prone to divorce in the early years; the early entry of the baby boomers into the married population changed its composition, increasing the proportion of new marriages more vulnerable to breakdown.

There was an increase in married women's labour force participation, which doubled between 1956 and 1971 (from 12.9% to 26.1%). Rising employment opportunities for married women led to a growing tendency to establish a marriage on the basis of two incomes (Vosburgh 1973:211).<sup>27</sup> Carmichael has argued that, while this increased women's financial independence, it also added stress to the transition to parenthood, as adjustments were made to a single income. While the contraction of childbearing facilitated by improved fertility control enabled an early return to work, it also increased the focus on the couple and the quality of the marital relationship assumed a new importance. Higher involvement of married women in the workplace helped both sexes to meet alternative partners. The diminished influence of organisation religion and the effect of economic prosperity on changing values are other factors identified in New Zealand research (Carmichael 1985:89,90).

Changing attitudes to marriage and divorce were reflected in the Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1963, a major reform which marked the beginning of a move away from fault-based grounds for divorce (Phillips 1981:46). Under this Act, separation agreements qualified as grounds for divorce, legitimising divorce by mutual consent. The Matrimonial Property Act 1963 allowed recognition of non-financial contributions to a marriage for the first time (Hanan 1967). The Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1968 considerably shortened the time it took to obtain a divorce, reducing the waiting period

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<sup>26</sup> The decline in men's age at first marriage was partly the result of a "marriage squeeze" created by birth patterns during and after the war. The ratio of single men in the typical marriage ages of 20-29 to single women aged 16-24 had declined by the mid-1960s, and women began to marry men closer to their own age (Vosburgh 1973:214).

<sup>27</sup> This Wellington survey found that the likelihood of women being employed immediately after marriage increased for each marriage cohort: 1932-37: 20%; 1942-47: 47%; 1952-57: 69.3%; 1962-67: 78.8%.

attached to several grounds from three to two years, and reducing the period of living apart from seven to four years. The passage of this legislation was immediately followed by a 36% rise in the divorce rate (from 3.5 per 1,000 in 1968 to 4.8 per 1,000 in 1969), and a 53% rise in the number of new petitions for divorce. These figures give some indication of the extent of marriage breakdown in the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

### Existing Provisions Under Strain

By the late 1960s, social and demographic changes had increased the number of non-widowed sole mothers. The number of legally separated and divorced women increased by 49% between 1966 and 1971 (from 19,401 to 28,850). By 1971, there were about 19,000 sole parent households with children under 15.<sup>29</sup> Between 1963 and 1967, the annual number of single women keeping a newborn child in a sole parent situation rose by 80% (from 782 to 1,405). While not all of these women were seeking social security benefits, the numbers who did so began to grow. In a speech commemorating one hundred years of family law in New Zealand, the Minister of Justice (Ralph Hanan) expressed his personal view that social security provisions for the maintenance of single parents and divorced and separated wives were "in an underdeveloped state" (Hanan 1967:8).

### FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC MAINTENANCE

The position of sole mothers who had not been widowed or deserted was eased with the passage of the Domestic Proceedings Act 1968, which replaced the Destitute Persons Act 1910. The new act, which came into effect on 1 January 1970, stressed *need* as the basis for a maintenance claim, rather than the reason for that need. The availability of maintenance on a "no fault" basis made it possible for wives who were separated by mutual agreement, and wives who had made their own decision to leave a marriage, to take the necessary maintenance proceedings to claim an emergency benefit. As a guiding principle for levels of maintenance, the Domestic Proceedings Act placed emphasis on the retention of living standards, rather than relief of destitution.<sup>30</sup> It also placed a new maintenance liability on the father of an ex-nuptial child for the support of its mother at the time of birth and for up to five years thereafter.<sup>31</sup> Responsibility for the collection and enforcement of maintenance was moved from the Department of Justice to the Department of Social Security.

Many of these measures were aimed at improving the economic position of women and children after separation, while upholding the system of private responsibility. However,

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<sup>28</sup> However, as Phillips (1981:14) notes, there is a critical distinction between divorce and marital breakdown: while divorce is a consequence of marital breakdown there is no way of knowing whether a rise in divorce signifies an increase in marriage breakdown or simply the result of a growing proportion of de factor dissolutions going through the legal formalities of divorce.

<sup>29</sup> Department of Statistics (1976:119,124)

<sup>30</sup> It is doubtful that this provision had much effect as it was not mandatory.

<sup>31</sup> This policy had its origins in a private member's bill introduced in 1966 by Labour MP Martin Finlay (Hanan 1969:8).

since the problem of irregular payment or non-payment of maintenance remained, they could not guarantee income security for sole mothers and their children. The problem was exacerbated by a recession in 1967/68 which sharply increased unemployment and was followed by a strong outward migration flow (Farmer 1979:37). These events may have further reduced the likelihood of some sole mothers obtaining maintenance orders at that time. A further problem was the time it took to obtain a maintenance order: the growing volume of cases meant that this could be several months after separation, during which time there was no eligibility for assistance. Difficulties with securing adequate maintenance were recognised by the legislators and improved access to public assistance was seen as the solution:

If the husband cannot or will not pay, then social security should come in at an earlier stage. (Hanan 1969:8)

Another problem was that the benefit system no longer catered adequately for families with children. While widows and deserted wives received Mothers Allowances to help with the costs of children, other parents on benefit had only the universal Family Benefit, which had not been increased since 1958 and had eroded in value. A growing number of families with children being supported by parents on benefits highlighted the need for additional payments for children. On 7 August 1968, Family Maintenance Allowances were introduced as a temporary measure, pending a major review of social security.<sup>32</sup> The legislation introducing these allowances contained special provisions which enabled the Department to advance an emergency benefit to sole mothers, subject to the pursuit of maintenance, and to enforce maintenance orders just as it did for deserted wives. This reduced the delay in obtaining an emergency benefit.

At the same time the Department of Social Security administratively grouped together, under the generic name "Domestic Purposes Benefit", the various emergency benefits paid to women who had lost the support of their husbands, including *de facto* husbands, wives of prisoners and single mothers.<sup>33</sup> These changes improved sole mothers' access to reliable ongoing assistance. However, as the demand continued to grow, the discretionary system of support became increasingly difficult to administer. In March 1969, there were 2,321 emergency domestic purposes in force; by March 1973, they had increased nearly four-fold to reach 9,234.

## THE STATUTORY DOMESTIC PURPOSES BENEFIT

The Royal Commission on Social Security, which began hearing submissions in 1969 and reported in 1972, proposed the introduction of a statutory Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB). It was introduced on 14 November 1973 by the Labour government then in office. Thus, greater public provision for sole parents was initiated by a National government,

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<sup>32</sup> These were later incorporated into the benefit system as child supplements for families on benefits.

<sup>33</sup> Department of Social Security (1969) Annual Report, p15.

recommended by a royal commission, and implemented by Labour, indicating a high degree of consensus at that time.

The statutory DPB extended coverage to all categories of non-widowed sole mothers, separated or divorced men, and widowed sole fathers.<sup>34</sup> Following the recommendations of the Royal Commission, two new categories of eligibility were introduced: older women without children whose past caring responsibilities reduced their ability to support themselves in paid work after separation; and people providing care to other dependants who would otherwise be hospitalised.

The Royal Commission on Social Security saw no reason to treat the widowed differently, and recommended that, for social security purposes, sole parents be distinguished by their responsibility for dependent children, and not by their marital status or the cause of their becoming a sole parent. The fact that widows are not included in the statutory Domestic Purposes Benefit established by the 1973 Social Security Amendment Act suggests that attitudes and beliefs about fault were still an important influence on policy.<sup>35</sup>

The introduction of a statutory DPB represented a major shift towards public responsibility for the financial support of sole parents, but it did not extinguish private maintenance obligations. Applicants for the DPB continued to be required to take maintenance proceedings as a condition of being granted the statutory benefit until the introduction of the Liable Parent Contribution Scheme in 1981, when the Department of social Welfare took over this responsibility and sole parents had only to name the liable parent. This policy was continued when the Child Support Act came into effect in 1992. Currently, the benefit rate is reduced by \$22 per week (about 10% of the basic benefit rate for a sole parent) where a liable person is not named. There is no maintenance disregard: all maintenance received is paid into the Consolidated Account to offset the cost of providing the benefit.<sup>36</sup> For almost all sole parents on benefit, therefore, receipt of maintenance makes no difference to their income.<sup>37</sup>

It is these provisions that distinguish the Domestic Purposes Benefit from other benefits: it is not paid "as of right" to those who meet eligibility criteria unless they also satisfy the maintenance requirement. The DPB therefore has more in common with the New Poor Law in nineteenth century Britain than any of the benefits introduced by the 1938 Social Security Act.

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<sup>34</sup> Sole fathers separated from a de facto partner were not eligible for DPB until 1987.

<sup>35</sup> There is still a separate benefit for widowed sole mothers in New Zealand.

<sup>36</sup> In 1987, this policy was changed in respect of "women alone" DPB recipients (women over 50 without dependent children), allowing maintenance to be treated as "other income". The change followed an unsuccessful appeal to the Social Security Commission by a woman who had received maintenance arrears relating to a period before she came on benefit and had had to pay the whole amount to the Department because she received it while on benefit (SSA 13/80).

<sup>37</sup> Fewer than 1% receive maintenance in excess of the benefit rate.

## RATIONALE FOR SOLE PARENT BENEFITS

The rationale for providing statutory income support was that the loss or absence of a husband's support placed sole parent families at risk of poverty. In particular, the Royal Commission on Social Security felt that children should not be disadvantaged by changing family patterns (RCSS 1972:241,242). Supporting sole mothers in the traditional female role fitted with the view of the Commission that social security should enable people to feel a sense of "belonging and participating" in the community:

The common pattern of life in our society is that family responsibilities are shared by two parents, with the man being the main breadwinner, and the woman principally responsible for the care of the children. The female solo parent is not only deprived of the help a man might be expected to give in the care of the children; she is deprived (in whole or in part) of his financial contribution and her responsibilities in the home limit her ability to earn an adequate family income.

As well as proposing a statutory sole parent benefit, the Commission recommended the withdrawal of tax exemptions for children (which favoured higher income earners) and the doubling of the weekly rate of Family Benefit, from \$1.50 to \$3 per child. These measures, implemented in the 1972 Budget, had the effect of increasing the income of households with children compared to those without, and of low-income families compared to those with high incomes (Easton 1980:107).<sup>38</sup>

These reforms represented a recognition of the vulnerability of some families to poverty despite post-war conditions of economic prosperity. As happened in several other countries, the emphasis of state support for families in New Zealand shifted to a more targeted approach, aimed at better supporting families in greatest need (Gauthier 1996:83). The fact that many of these families were sole parent families headed by women rather than two-parent families headed by men made this shift a controversial one, especially as benefit numbers began to grow. It was a departure from the long tradition of delivering welfare through the male wage. In effect, the state took on the role of the male breadwinner in securing an adequate income for sole parents and their children.

## THE 1976 REVIEW OF THE DOMESTIC PURPOSES BENEFIT

The initial rapid rise in the number of domestic purposes benefits and the impact of this on benefit expenditure prompted the re-elected National government to order a review of the DPB in 1976. Under its terms of reference, the Domestic Purposes Benefit Review Committee (known as the Horn Committee) was required to report on the cause of the increasing numbers, and to assess whether the provision of the benefit was influencing

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<sup>38</sup> However, this effect was short-lived. Tax exemptions for children were restored by the National government in 1976. Inflation quickly eroded the value of Family Benefit, which was doubled again in 1979 to \$6 per week, and it remained at this level until its abolition in 1991.

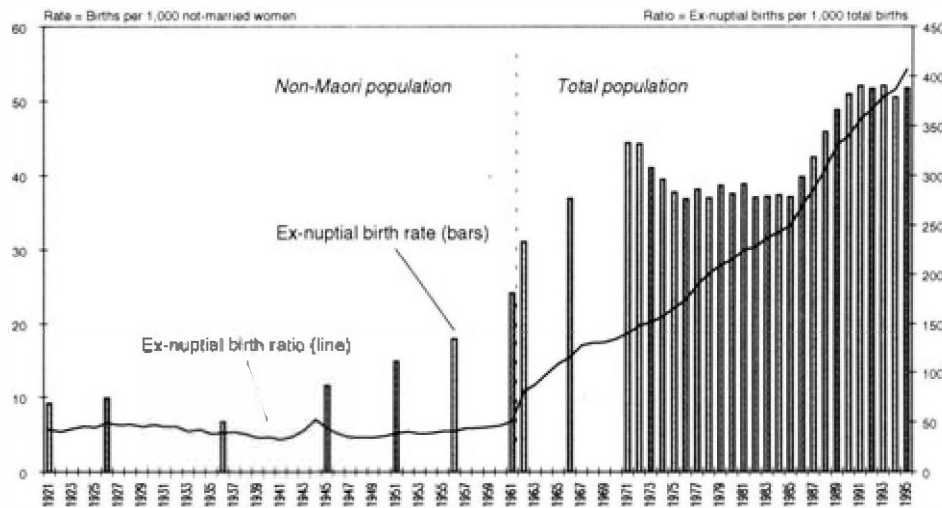
marital and reproductive behaviour. However, in its 1977 report, the Horn Committee overestimated the extent of marriage breakdown and unmarried motherhood, and the impact of these trends on benefit numbers, by using incorrect and misleading statistics (Swain 1977, 1979).

Divorce rates were calculated by dividing the number of divorces in a particular year by the number of marriages celebrated in the same year, rather than the number of existing marriages. This exaggerated the level of divorce and the increase in divorce over time, from "1 divorce per 12 marriages in 1965 [to] 1 per 5 in 1975". The actual divorce rates for those years are: 3.1 per 1,000 married couples in 1965 and 6.8 per 1,000 married couples in 1975.

The report cited the ex-nuptial birth ratio (the number of ex-nuptial births per 100 total births) as evidence of the increase in unmarried motherhood. This measure can be misleading because it is affected by changes in marital fertility as well as ex-nuptial fertility (C.J. O'Neill 1979:141, Khawaja 1985:168). The ex-nuptial birth rate (the number of ex-nuptial births per 1,000 women who are not currently married) is a more appropriate measure of the fertility behaviour of single women.

The tendency for the ex-nuptial birth ratio to misrepresent the nature and magnitude of changes in nuptial and ex-nuptial fertility is illustrated in Figure 3. It shows that, during the 1950s (a period of high marital fertility), the ex-nuptial birth ratio was flat, while the rate of births to single women was rising. Conversely, in the early 1970s, (when marital fertility was rapidly declining) the ex-nuptial birth ratio continued increasing, but the ex-nuptial birth rate declined. IN fact, contrary to the Horn Committee's conclusion, the likelihood of unmarried women giving birth *actually fell* during the period in which the statutory DPB was introduced (from a peak of 44 per 1,000 in 1971 to 37 per 1,000 in 1976). Even among teenage single women, there was no rise in fertility in response to the introduction of the DPB: their birth rates declined gradually over the 1970s, from 33 per 1,000 in 1972 to a low point of 25 per 1,000 in 1984.

**Figure 3: Ex-Nuptial Birth Rates and Ex-Nuptial Birth Ratios 1921 to 1995**



Source: *New Zealand Official Yearbook*, (various years), *Demographic Trends 1996*, Table 2.5.

Notes:

For 1945 to 1961 (non-Māori population), the ex-nuptial birth rate is the number of ex-nuptial births per 1,000 never-married, divorced or widowed women aged 15-44 (census counts). From 1962 onwards, the rate is the number of ex-nuptial births per 1,000 mean number of non-married women aged 15-49 years. The denominator for the ex-nuptial birth ratio is the total number of births (nuptial and ex-nuptial).

The growth in cohabitation partly accounts for the rise in ex-nuptial births from the mid-1980s, which occurred mainly among women aged 20-34. Between 1988 and 1995, almost half of all ex-nuptial birth registrations included the names of both parents living at the same address (Statistics New Zealand, unpublished tables). A declining proportion of ex-nuptial births occur to young women. In 1996, 17% of women who had ex-nuptial births were teenagers, down from 38% in 1980 and 41% in 1970. The proportion who were under 25 was 50% in 1996, compared with 74% in 1980 and 76% in 1970. It is not possible to distinguish first ex-nuptial births from second or subsequent ex-nuptial births in New Zealand fertility data. Therefore, in some cases, these births will be enlarging the size of existing families, rather than creating new ones.

It was on the basis of these misleading statistics that the Horn Committee recommended a reduced rate of benefit for up to six months, to discourage couples from separating too readily and to reduce the incentive for single women to keep their children rather than have them adopted. However, this policy had no discernible effect on marital, reproductive or birth placement behaviour; its main effect was to reduce the incomes of sole parents.

Much of the rapid growth of DPB numbers in the early 1970s can be explained simply by the increased propensity for sole parents to take up the newly available assistance, rather than rely on infrequent maintenance payments and low wages.<sup>39</sup> In 1971, there were 4,432 domestic purposes benefits being paid and approximately 14,250 non-widowed

<sup>39</sup> Swain (1977) made the comparison with the well-studied introduction of National Health subsidies for dentures and spectacles in the UK in the late 1940s, which produced a dramatic increase in take-up of the subsidy. He argued that attributing the increase in DPB numbers to a massive increase in marital breakdown was as logical as interpreting the increase in these National Health subsidies as the wholesale collapse of dental health and eyesight in the British people.



sole parents, a ratio of 31%.<sup>40</sup> By 1976, the proportion of non-widowed sole parents on DPB was 60%.

## BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS OF THE DPB

The Horn Committee's report was published before substantial research findings were available that could explain the rise in marriage breakdown in New Zealand in the 1970s and it has been influential in public discourse about the incentive effects of benefits. Another source often cited is Easton (1978, 1980, 1981), who claimed that the "no fault" principle on which the DPB was established created a precedent and would lead to substantial behavioural effects.

The issue of the effect of the DPB on marital and reproductive behaviour was examined in 1988 by the Department of Social Welfare's Task Force on the Royal Commission on Social Policy (TORC). In its mimeographed report, the Task Force noted that most claims contained assertions about the effect of benefit provisions, based either on a theory of incentive effects or on anecdotal evidence. It concluded that there was no good research-based evidence one way or another on the effect of the DPB on choices about adoption and single parenthood (p20) and that while incentive structures which might encourage partners to separate do exist in the DPB, especially for couples on low incomes, there is a lack of evidence on the extent to which they have an effect on decisions to separate (p36).

Indeed, it would be difficult to isolate the impact of the DPB on separation, given that there were several important changes in family law in the 1970s that reflected, and may have influenced, the propensity to divorce (Figure 4).<sup>41</sup> The introduction of legal aid in 1970 reduced the financial costs of divorce for spouses with low incomes. The Matrimonial Property Act 1976 guaranteed each spouse a half share in matrimonial property after divorce. In 1980, the Family Proceedings Act brought in "no fault" divorce, the sole ground being irretrievable breakdown of the marriage, evidenced by two years living apart. The Family Proceedings Act also effectively ended spousal maintenance. These reforms made divorce accessible to a wider range of people and increased certainty about its financial outcome, as did the introduction of the DPB. Of all the assertions on this issue, perhaps the most reasonable is that of Carmichael (1985:89):

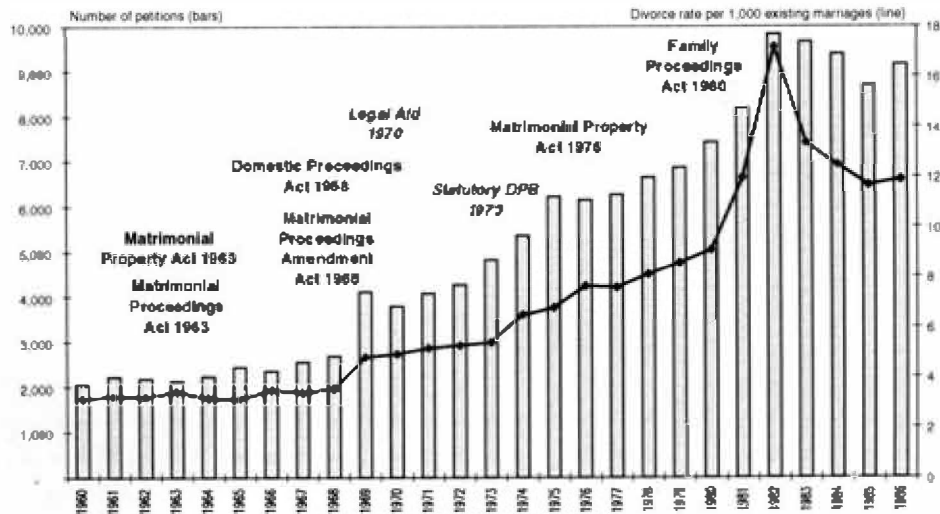
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<sup>40</sup> This estimate of the number of non-widowed sole parents in 1971 was calculated by multiplying the number of sole parent households with children under 15 in that year (19,000) by .75 (the proportion of sole parents who were not widowed in 1976).

<sup>41</sup> It is unlikely that the rise in the divorce rate in 1974 is attributable to the introduction of the statutory DPB in November 1973. Given that the most common ground for divorce required a waiting period of two years, and taking account of administrative delays, it is more likely to reflect the final stage of divorce proceedings that began in earlier years.

"While the DPB cannot be held to have affected the quality of marriages it seems certain to have been a crucial consideration in many decisions to resolve marital difficulties by separating since the late 1960s."

**Figure 4: Divorce Petitions or Applications, Divorce Rates and Family Law Reforms 1960 to 1986**



Sources: Statistics New Zealand, *Demographic Trends 1996*, Justice Statistics (various years). There is a break in the series of applications for marriage dissolution after 1986.

### The Influence of Single Motherhood on DPB Numbers

The common perception that single mothers accounted for the majority of sole parents seeking assistance in the early 1970s is not borne out by the available statistics. The number of ex-nuptial children kept by single mothers between 1968 and 1976 was 20,908, while the number of unmarried DPB recipients current in March 1977 was 5,493. These figures suggest that many single mothers did not apply for a benefit, or that those who did claim a benefit did not remain on it for long.<sup>42</sup> Many later married and adopted their children jointly with their spouse. The number of "one parent and spouse" adoptions grew by 82% between 1968 and 1976, by which time they made up over a third (36%) of notified adoptions (DSW 1977). In 1977, single mothers accounted for a fifth of DPB recipients and that proportion remained stable for many years.

## CHILDCARE POLICY

Childcare policy has developed slowly in New Zealand. The 1947 Bailey Report on preschool education accepted the prevailing attitude that childcare was only for deviant families where the mother "had to work". The first major involvement of government in

<sup>42</sup> In the 1970 survey of ex-nuptial children, 341 (32%) of the single mothers were receiving a benefit (D.P. O'Neill et al. 1976:467). This represents 8% of domestic purposes benefits in forced in March 1971.

childcare was the 1960 Childcare Regulations, which followed a childcare scandal in Auckland involving mistreatment and neglect (Smith and Swain 1988:66).

McDonald (1977) has argued that Bowlby's (1951) theory of maternal deprivation influenced official attitudes towards day care and mothers' employment for many years. A study by the Department of Social Security to investigate the claim that the income test was discouraging widows and deserted wives on benefit from taking up full employment cited deprivation theory as evidence that children under three should not be separated from their mothers (DSS 1968:30). In the conclusions of this study, it was claimed that:

"The Department has a responsibility to ensure that women are not encouraged to work to an extent which would be against the best interests of their children." (DSS 1968:34)

The New Zealand Childcare Association, formed in 1963, and the feminist movement of the early 1970s lobbied for improved alternative childcare but there was no widespread demand among mothers and the idea of expanding services met with government resistance. A survey of women in 1967/68 found that 68% were against the employment of mothers with preschool children (Carmichael 1975:93). The 1975 Select Committee on Women's Rights expressed the prevailing view of the Labour government:

"The basic principle of Government's policy is that no measures should be adopted that might undermine normal family life. The aim was to ensure that as far as possible the family remained the primary source of childcare, and community assistance was extended only where the family could not itself perform this function or where because of special circumstances the child's best interests were served in day care apart from the family..."

"... the Government has emphasised that [the childcare capitation grant] is not intended to encourage mothers to go out to work merely to augment an already adequate income, but rather to help in situations where a particular need was shown."<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, the Select Committee recommended the transfer of responsibility for childcare from the Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education, a policy aimed at reducing the inferior status of childcare services relative to preschool education services. It took a further ten years and another major report on childcare to effect this transfer, which took place in 1986 under the fourth Labour government (Hamilton 1997:104). Since then, government support for childcare has improved gradually. There has been increasing demand for early childhood services in the last decade and the number of childcare services has grown dramatically.

## BALANCING INCOME FROM BENEFITS AND EARNINGS

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<sup>43</sup> Select Committee on Women's Rights (1975:90)

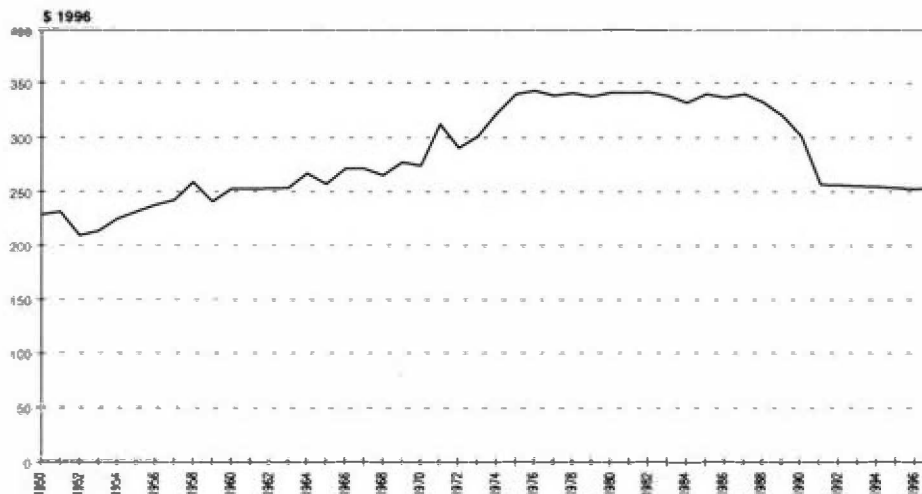
In its review of the DPB, the Horn Committee noted the high level of benefit rates (which were increasing in nominal terms because of inflation adjustments) and the disincentives to employment created by the income exemption. It recommended an increase of 48% in allowable income before abatement and consideration by departmental officials of its views on the employment of sole parents and childcare.

The impact of the benefit reforms of the early 1970s on the incomes of sole parents was certainly substantial: the real benefit rate for a sole parent with one child (including family assistance) rose by 17% between 1971 and 1976. These benefit levels were maintained until the mid-1980s (Figure 5).

Between April 1986 and April 1991, another major set of benefit reforms reduced the real benefit rate for a sole parent with one child by 24%, bringing it back to the level it was in the early 1960s.<sup>44</sup>

Supplementary assistance can increase benefit incomes substantially. In 1971, 26% of domestic purposes benefit recipients also received continuing supplementary assistance (RCSS:286), which increased the benefit for a sole parent with one child by up to 16% (Jack 1973:168). In June 1997, 85% of DPB recipients received an Accommodation Supplement; 10%, a Special Benefit; 22% a Disability Allowance and Special Needs Grants are also available to help with extra costs. Those eligible for the maximum amounts of these supplementary benefits could increase their income by over 50%. However, low and moderate income earners are also eligible for Accommodation Supplement, Family Support and Disability Allowance, and some non-beneficiaries facing hardship may be eligible for Special Benefit. Therefore, these supplements do not give beneficiaries an income advantage over those not on benefit.

**Figure 5 Real Net Benefit Rates (including family assistance) For a Sole Parent With One Child on Widows Benefit or DPB 1950 to 1997**



<sup>44</sup> These reforms included the replacement of child supplement with non-indexed Family Support in October 1986; lowering the rate for a sole parent with one child relative to that for sole parents with two or more children in April 1989 (both enacted by Labour); and the National government's general reduction in benefit rates in April 1991.

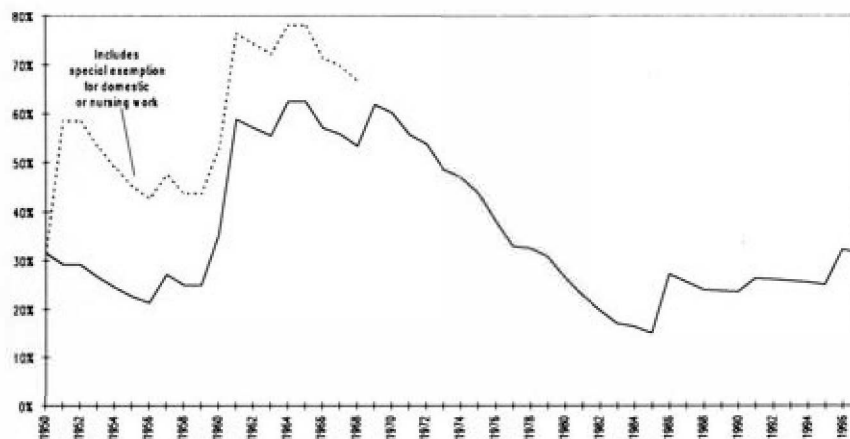
Source: Department of Social Security Annual Reports; Department of Social Welfare Annual Reports, DSW Information Bulletins.

In the post-war period, work incentives for female beneficiaries were introduced to meet labour demand. In 1950, a shortage of domestic workers prompted the National government to double the income exemption for female benefit recipients (including wives of beneficiaries) who undertook such work; in 1955, this was extended to cover domestic or nursing work in private homes or institutions.

During the early 1960s, when benefit levels were relatively low and the demand for women's labour was high, the standard income exemption for widows and deserted wives was raised substantially (by 67% in 1961 and another 20% in 1964). This resulted in a significant advantage for these beneficiaries compared to sickness and unemployment beneficiaries.<sup>45</sup> However, the latter were likely to be on benefit for a much shorter period of time. By earning the maximum income exemption, a widowed or deserted sole mother with one child could receive more income than a general labourer (DSS 1968:23).

The ratio of the standard income exemption to the benefit rate for a sole parent with one child on widows benefit or DPB (including family assistance) reached a peak of 63% in 1964-65 (Figure 6). The ratio declined rapidly during the 1970s to reach a low point of 15% in 1985,<sup>46</sup> recovering slightly thereafter as a result of increased exemptions in 1986 and 1996. Improvements in the adequacy of benefit income in the 1970s, aimed at supporting sole parents as full-time caregivers, therefore came at the cost of reduced incentives to maintain attachment to the labour force.

**Figure 6 Ratio of Income Exemption for Widows or DPB Recipients to the Benefit Rate Plus Family Assistance for a Sole Parent With One Child 1950 to 1997**



Source: Department of Social Security Annual Reports; Department of Social Welfare Annual Reports; DSW Statistical Information Reports.

<sup>45</sup> The annual income exemption (income disregard, or free area) for a widow or deserted wife with children increased from \$312 in 1960, to \$520 in 1961, and to \$624 in 1964. The domestic/nursing concession was an additional \$156 per year. In comparison, the income exemption for a sickness beneficiary was \$312 in 1960 and \$416 in 1964.

<sup>46</sup> The calculations for Figure 4 are based on income exemptions before tax. They do not take account of the effect of tax changes on the allowable additional income, or the effect of abatement of any supplementary benefits received.

The proportion of sole mothers employed declined continuously from 40% in 1976 to 27% in 1991, while for partnered mothers, employment increased (Table 1). Rather than "belonging and participating", therefore, sole mothers became increasingly distanced from the mainstream of women in New Zealand over this period. By 1996, the employment rate of sole parents had recovered to 36%, but there was a further increase in partnered mothers' employment so that a substantial gap remains.

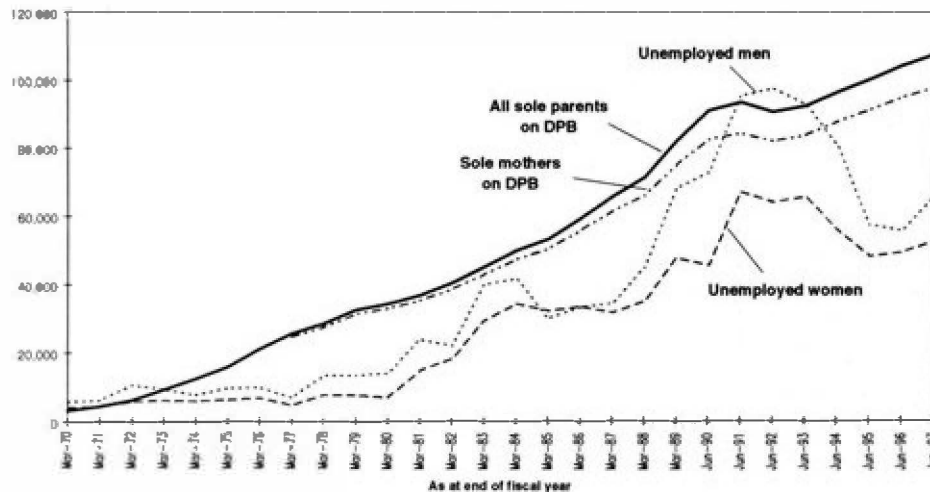
Since the early 1980s, high levels of unemployment have increased the number of families with children on benefits and created an adverse environment for the employment of sole parents. Between 1968 and 1980, unemployment fluctuated but was never above 2% until 1981 (Chapple 1996:2). In the late 1980s, there was a steep rise in unemployment which reached a peak of 11% of the labour force in 1992. Since then, unemployment has fallen substantially, but remains at historically high levels of around 6%. The sharp rise in unemployment in the late 1980s is reflected in a steeper trend in DPB numbers at that time (Figure 7).<sup>47</sup>

**Table 1: Employment of Sole and Partnered Mothers 1976 to 1996**

|                   | 1976    | 1981 | 1986 | 1991 | 1996 |
|-------------------|---------|------|------|------|------|
|                   | Percent |      |      |      |      |
| Sole mothers      | 40      | 35   | 32   | 27   | 36   |
| Partnered mothers | 39      | 49   | 57   | 58   | 65   |

Source: Sole mothers 1976-1991, Rochford (1993) *A Profile of Sole Parents from the 1991 Census*, Table 12, p46; Sole mothers 1996 and partnered mothers, unpublished tabled from Statistics NZ.

**Figure 7: Number of Women and Men Unemployed\* and Number of Sole Parents on Domestic Purposes Benefit 1970 to 1997**



Sources: DSW Annual Reports, Statistical Information Reports; Chapple (1994); Statistics NZ, Household Labour Force Survey.

<sup>47</sup> An examination of factors associated with recent trends in DPB numbers will be made in a future paper.

## RESEARCH AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT ON SOLE PARENTS AND EMPLOYMENT

Two small-scale surveys of the factors affecting the employment of sole parents have been conducted by the Department of Social Welfare (Wylie 1980, Levine et al. 1993). These studies identified a range of barriers to participation, such as disincentives to undertake part-time work, the lack of childcare, and the costs of working. Other studies have used census data to study the characteristics of sole parents in and out of employment (Dominick et al. 1988, Rochford et al. 1992, Rochford 1993).

The development of policy to encourage the employment of sole parents on benefit has proceeded as follows:

- 1978: Income exemption increased by 19% (from \$21 to \$25 per week). Additional income between \$25 and \$40 abated by 40c for every \$1, income over \$40 by 80c for every \$1.
- 1979: Childcare earnings disregard of \$20 per week for DPB and widows benefit recipients using registered or approved day care (unchanged since).
- 1983: Training Incentive Allowance to help DPB, widows or invalids benefit recipients with the costs of study to enhance their employment prospects.
- 1986: Income exemption increased by 140% (from \$25 to \$60 per week). Additional income up to \$80 abated at 30%, income thereafter, at 70%. Family Support tax credit introduced, paid to low- and moderate-income families with children, including those on benefits. However, taxation of benefits was introduced at the same time. Effective marginal tax rates increased because of secondary tax and abatements for Family Support and Accommodation Benefit. A Guaranteed Minimum Family Income was also introduced for families in full-time employment (20 or more hours for sole parents; 30 or more hours for couples with children).
- 1986: Transition to Work Allowance to guarantee that those on benefit for more than 12 months who entered full-time employment were at least \$20 per week better off (maximum tax-free payment of \$40 a week; maximum period of 13 weeks). This was withdrawn on 1 July 1996 and has been incorporated into Special Needs Grant provisions.
- 1992: An existing Child Care Subsidy programme that included residual welfare provisions not covered by the education system was refocused and targeted towards lower income groups. The maximum payment increased from \$32 to \$65 per week. From July 1993, conditions of payment changed to provide up to 30 hours (10 three-hourly sessions) of subsidised childcare to parents on low incomes who were in paid employment, training or education.<sup>48</sup> The hours of subsidised care for other low-

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<sup>48</sup> Extended in 1994 to cover children eligible for Handicapped Child's Allowance or their siblings; the siblings of a child in hospital; and seriously disabled or ill caregivers.



income parents (including beneficiaries with no employment) were reduced to 9 hours per week in 1997, the maximum subsidy was \$69 a week, for a maximum of 30 hours per week.

- 1994: COMPASS, a voluntary programme to facilitate sole parents' entry into education, training and employment, was piloted in four sites, and implemented nationally in 1995.
- 1996: Income exemption increased by 33% (from \$60 to \$80 per week), with an abatement of 30% for additional gross income of up to \$180 a week, and a 70% abatement thereafter. Independent Family Tax Credit introduced for families not on benefit (\$7.50 per child per week, increased to \$15 in 1997). Pilot funding for the establishment of Out of School Care and Recreation programmes in disadvantaged areas, administered by the Community Funding Agency.

Following the 1996 change in the abatement regime, the number of DPB recipients with other income increased by 19% in the year to June 1997, bringing the proportion with other income to 22% of all DPB recipients (up from 19% in June 1996).

Work and training obligations are the most recent direction of sole parent policy in New Zealand. Since 1 April 1997, recipients of a domestic purposes or widows benefit who have no children or a youngest child age 14 or over have been required to seek part-time employment, training, or education. (Spouses of unemployment beneficiaries with these characteristics are required to seek full-time employment.) Mandatory annual interviews to discuss future plans for employment have also been introduced for domestic purposes and widows beneficiaries and the spouses of unemployment beneficiaries whose youngest child is aged between 7 and 14 years. Sanctions apply to those who do not comply with these requirements.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, attention has been drawn to the existence of two cultural traditions in New Zealand and their influence on each other over time. Among non-Māori, a community responsibility for sole parents was accepted only gradually, beginning with those considered most deserving. The expectation that mothers and children should be maintained by individual men has been a consistent theme since the establishment of the colony, reflected today in the retention by the state of child support for sole parents on benefit. However, Māori attitudes towards marriage and children influenced the removal of legal discrimination against children born outside registered marriage.

The need for new provisions was generated by social and demographic changes in the 1960s. Changing attitudes towards fault were evident in divorce and maintenance law reform and these views were carried over to benefit reform. A desire to prevent child poverty and enable sole parents to provide the full-time care typical of most mothers influenced the establishment of a categorical sole parent benefit at a relatively generous

rate. However, as partnered mothers raised their levels of employment, sole mothers became increasingly separated from the mainstream. Disincentives in the benefit system contributed to this trend.

The State's intervention in the market (setting and supplementing wages) historically favoured men on the assumption that they were breadwinners, and measures to support sole mothers in employment have only recently been developed. The state of the labour market has constrained policy development in this direction.

The paper has looked at the evidence for claims about the influence of the DPB on behaviour. It has alluded to the importance of research in the policy process. In the thirty years since the DPB came into being, there has been little research on the effectiveness of New Zealand's sole parent policy, either in meeting its original aim of preventing child poverty, or in addressing more recent concerns about benefit dependence and adverse child outcomes. The need for quality research, evaluation and monitoring remains high as new directions for sole parent policy are pursued.

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