

JUST A ROOM IN A SHARED HOUSE: THE IMPACT OF HOUSING BENEFIT CUTS ON SINGLE PARENTS WITH NON-RESIDENT CHILDREN

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Discover Society, May 2017

In 2012, government changes to the age-threshold of the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) came into effect. This meant that if you're under 35, single and without dependents then you can only claim for housing benefit at the rate of a single room in a shared property. In effect, the Government decided that young people on housing benefit needed to share accommodation to bring down costs. This change— estimated to bring savings of £215 million a year— was part of a broader process of welfare retrenchment that has intensified since the 2008 'economic crisis'. But what has been the social cost of a policy that has forced people to share their homes, potentially impacting on people's intimate lives and shaping their ability to maintain and forge relationships?

In this piece, we focus upon the impact that the SAR has had on single parents with non-resident children, suggesting this policy has had a detrimental effect on their capacity to sustain relationships with their children. However, this concern was dismissed in the parliamentary debates, where instead it was argued that:

“living in shared accommodation should not preclude both parents from playing a full part in a child's life... and it is not appropriate for the state to fund two homes for a child” (Lord Freud, House of Lords, 12 October 2011)

As we shall go on to outline, the SAR is a clear illustration of how the government's supposedly 'family-first' policies position the nuclear family as the ideal family form. As a result single parents are not considered to be part of a family constellation that is worthy of protection. This contravenes existing empirical evidence underlining the importance of the relationship between a child and both parents following separation or divorce. According to the literature, having a good quality, continuing bond with the non-resident parent is

central to a child's wellbeing and development (Holt, 2016). Furthermore, research shows that the physical space in which the non-resident parent lives has important implications for the possibility of continued contact and the maintenance of a positive relationship (Haugen, 2010). The lack of appropriate infrastructure for having children overnight and for extended periods has a detrimental impact on the quality of the relationship between parent and child (Parkinson and Smyth, 2004).

This discussion is based upon some of the preliminary findings from our project 'Hitting Home: Single People, Housing Benefit Reform and Equalities Law' funded by the Economic & Social Research Council. The research involves in-depth interviews with a sample of 50 people who have been affected by the SAR, and expert interviews with key people based at organisations that support young people into housing. The housing charities we have spoken with, emphasise that single parents with non-resident children have been particularly hit by this policy. So, who are these single parents? Most of the people that make up this category are parents who have become single as a result of a relationship breakdown but wish to retain a close relationship with their children. Another group is that of parents who have had their children taken away by social services and are seeking to restore their relationship with them. In both cases, parents can only claim the rate of a room in a shared house because their children do not reside with them. Our research suggests that living in shared accommodation has become a major difficulty between these single parents and their children.

The first significant obstacle that single parents living in shared accommodation encounter in their efforts to build an intimate relationship with their children is the fact that living in shared accommodation means parents often cannot decide for themselves whether their children can visit them or stay overnight. They often need to have the permission from their landlord and sometimes that of the other people in the shared house. As one single mother explains:

"the landlord said no one is allowed to stay over, so they (her two daughters) would only be able to come for the day, that's about it. It would be nice if they could come to me..."

Single parents with non-resident children sometimes need the permission from their ex partners or from a social worker before they can have their children visiting them or staying overnight. The people we have interviewed explain that ex-partners and social workers often deem the physical and social characteristics of shared accommodation inappropriate for children, and are thus unwilling to allow the children to visit or stay overnight at the shared house.

The Shared Accommodation Rate is set at such a low rate that claimants are only able to afford a room in a shared house at the very lowest end of the housing market. This means that the quality of the housing they have access to is notoriously poor. A single dad we interviewed tells us that he has not been able to have his children over to visit him for months because, shortly after he moved into his room, a leak developed in the roof of the house which has caused a visible damp problem in his room. He feels that before the damp problem is solved he cannot have his children in what he sees as an unhealthy environment.

Lack of space, cleanliness, and having to share kitchens and bathrooms are also mentioned as being a problem of living in shared accommodation. Kitchens and bathrooms are often described as being filthy and thus not suitable for children. A single father living in a shared house with eight other people points to the intrinsic challenges of living in shared accommodation and how this affects children.

“There are two toilets here and nine people... kids, really young kids, they can’t hold themselves if the toilets are full...” “Daddy I need a wee” and I will be like “Oh mate, I can’t get you there”... you can’t ask them to wait, they are going to wet themselves!”

In addition to the specific spatial environment of shared accommodation, the parents we interviewed often saw shared living as an inappropriate setting for their children due to its social characteristics. Living in a room in a shared house means that you have to share your living environment with a number of strangers. Single parents that rent a room at the Shared Accommodation Rate often have no control over who the other people living in their house are: their gender, age,

lifestyle, etc. There is thus no guarantee that these spaces will be appropriate for a child to come and visit: smoking, drinking and loud music are some of the concerns these parents have. But also simply not knowing what the other people in the house are like, who it is you are exposing your children to and whether your child will be safe in their presence. Living with strangers in a shared house was seen to stand in the way of intimacy as there is a lack of privacy, as a single dad we interviewed puts it:

“When you want to see your kids you want to see them on your own, you don’t want people walking past or coming in or going out, and... you know, it is just not right.”

Parents reluctance to have their children stay over with them may thus be a consequence of responsible parenthood rather than an indication of lack of attachment or emotional separation. Paradoxically, unable to have their children visit or stay overnight, single parents living in shared accommodation can find it extremely difficult to retain a close relationship with their children. Their housing situation means that they are often only able to see their children in public places or at the homes of friends or relatives. It also means that they can only see their children sporadically and for limited amounts of time. In these circumstances, developing a close, intimate relationship built around the sharing of quotidian space and time becomes an impossibility.

The Conservative-led coalition government proclaimed that its policies would ‘support and strengthen family life in Britain today’ (Cameron, 2014). Yet despite this rhetoric about ‘strengthening families’, for single parents with non-resident children, the Shared Accommodation Rate is tearing apart the families the government claims to protect. Cameron’s pledge to put ‘family’ at the heart of every policy is founded upon a narrow and out-dated definition of what counts as ‘the family’; one that conforms to the nuclear family structure. This cut to housing welfare fails to see single parents with non-resident children as a worthy family unit. This fits with an existing discourse which places ‘broken families’ as a social malaise that is at the heart of ‘broken Britain’ (Lister & Bennett, 2010) and thus undeserving of support. Single parents with non-resident children are left to hope that one day they will be able

to have a safe and stable home of their own where they can rebuild their relationship with their children. In the words of a research participant: "I should be able to open my front door and, "all right dad?" they would come running in, give me a cuddle, run up the stairs and put the tele on and have no worry about anybody else..."

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