

# Work and welfare

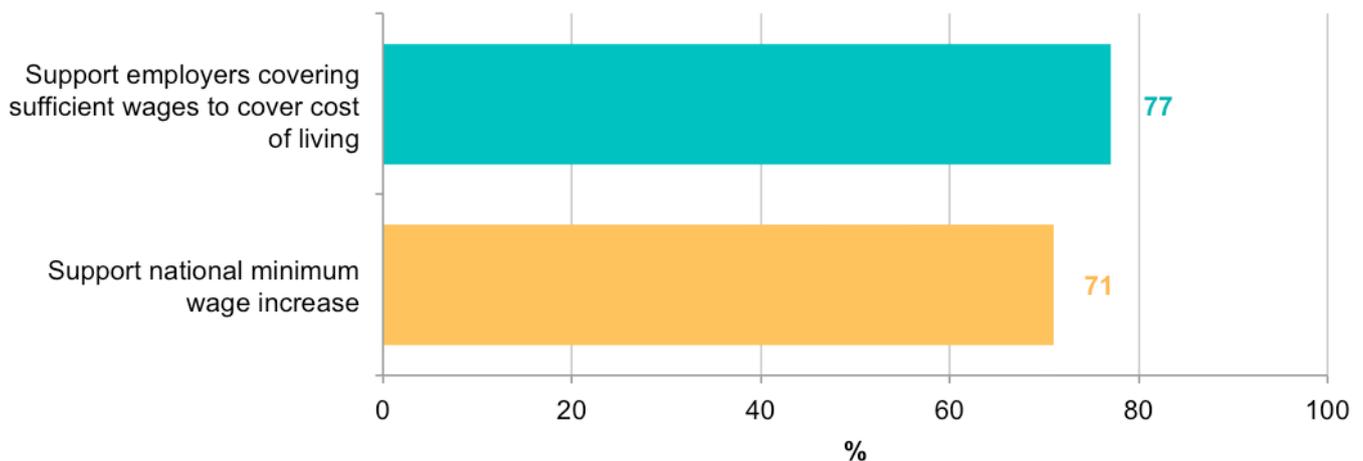
## The changing face of the UK labour market

This chapter explores Britain's attitudes to work and welfare in 2017 and whether they reflect the changing nature of the UK labour market which can be attributed to economic and industrial change. Despite ongoing labour market change, the British public continues to perceive there to be a dignity in work, with intrinsic value placed upon employment that goes beyond simple monetary compensation. We also consider expectations upon employers and the state in supporting people on low incomes, a subject which may be of increasing relevance if the threat of automation and labour market polarisation is realised. Despite the decline of 'jobs for life', people still expect employers to help them grow and develop and that employers should pay wages that cover the cost of living. However they also know that this is often not the case, and, where this is true they expect the government to intervene to support people on low wages.

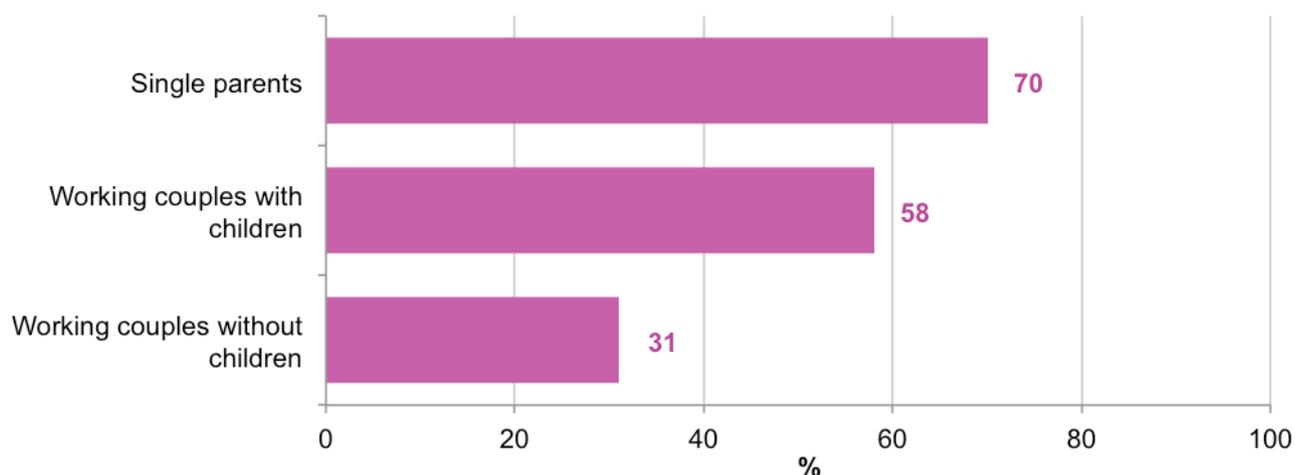
### Spotlight

A majority of the public believe employers should be responsible for paying wages that cover the cost of living. A majority also support a national minimum wage increase and wage top-ups for low-earning single parents and working couples without children.

#### Views of employers' and the government's responsibilities regarding wages



#### Support for government wage top-ups for low earning...



## Overview

---

### Precarious work may be the new norm

**A significant minority of young people have unpredictable work patterns, but almost all are confident they will be working in a year.**

- In the context of a recent rise in precarious or insecure work, nearly a fifth (17%) of workers aged 18-25 have changing working hours given at short notice compared with only 5% of those aged 36-65.
  - Despite being more likely to have precarious work, young workers aged 18-25 remain confident that they will be working in 12 months' time (94%).
- 

### The robots are coming

**While there is recognition from the public that automation will have an impact on the world of work, most don't think it will affect them.**

- Automation is expected to have a significant impact on the labour market in the coming years. Three-quarters (75%) feel that in the next 10 years machines or computer programs will do many of the jobs currently done by humans.
  - However, just 1 in 10 (10%) of people in work are "very" or "quite" worried about the threat automation poses to their own job.
- 

### State support still needed to support low-paid workers

**A majority of the public are in favour of government support for low-paid workers, and there are signs that attitudes towards unemployment benefits are softening.**

- Despite three-quarters (77%) of the public perceiving employers to be responsible for paying sufficient wages to cover the cost of living, there is still a role for the state to support workers.
  - 7 in 10 (71%) support increasing the minimum wage, while 58% support wage top-ups for working couples with children and 70% support top-ups for single parents.
  - There is some evidence that traditionally sterner attitudes towards unemployment benefits are softening; one fifth (20%) feel that the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the unemployed, the highest they have been since 15 years ago.
-

## Authors

**Nancy Kelley,**  
Deputy Chief-Executive,  
The National Centre for Social  
Research

**Professor Christopher Warhurst,**  
Institute for Employment Research

**Robert Wishart,**  
Senior Researcher (Analyst),  
The National Centre for Social  
Research

## Introduction

Over the last four decades, globalisation and technological advances have driven significant structural change to the UK labour market. The impacts of these changes have been profound: income inequality rose substantially throughout the 1980s before stabilising (McGuinness, 2018); manufacturing work has declined and service work increased; the labour market has feminised and the male-centric breadwinner model of employment been undermined (Rubery et al., 2015). The outcome is a long-term polarisation of the UK labour market (Eurofound, 2015), with a rise in the proportion of high-skill, high-wage and low-skill, low-wage jobs, and a shrinking proportion of mid-level jobs. More recently, since the global financial crisis, there has been a rise in temporary, part-time, zero-hours contracts and involuntary self-employment, with implications for the distribution of income and job security.

For young workers in particular the transition into paid work has become more difficult (Purcell et al. 2017), with periods of precarious employment now the norm. The challenges faced by young people have led some to refer to the risk of there being a ‘lost generation’ confronted with fewer employment opportunities and lower pay (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015). While younger workers must deal with increased precarity, older workers are being encouraged to remain in the labour market for longer and there are now more older people in work than ever before (Department for Work and Pensions, 2017).

These themes have been brought into sharp focus by the prospect of a ‘fourth industrial revolution’. Triggered by the work of Frey and Osborne (2013), some economists forecast that millions of jobs will be lost in the coming decade, as workers are replaced by robots using artificial intelligence (AI). Techno-anxiety has gripped the popular media, along with many politicians and academics. Of course, such fears can be overplayed; technological innovations tend to be followed by job creation as well as job loss and the reconfiguring of the tasks of some existing jobs (Economist, 2016).

The changing nature of work also raises profound questions about the role of the welfare state. As the structure of the UK labour market has changed since the 1980s, so has the nature of the welfare safety net. This change is characterised by an increasing emphasis on conditionality (Dwyer, 2004), active labour market policy and the ‘work first’ approach which uses a system of financial incentives and sanctions to encourage people to take any job they are capable of getting, whatever the quality (Daguerre and Etherington, 2009). At the same time, policies such as the National Minimum Wage, Tax Credits and Universal Credit have been implemented to address some of the impacts of low pay and precarity.

The British public remains very positive about work, with six in ten (59%) saying they would enjoy work even if they didn’t need the

**The challenges faced by young people have led some to refer to the risk of there being a ‘lost generation’**

**6 in 10 say they would enjoy work even if they didn’t need the money**

money, eight in ten (83%) saying work is good for physical health and nine in ten (90%) saying work is good for mental health (see Tables A.2, A.3, A.4 and A.5 in the appendix to this chapter). However, in this chapter, we explore whether the changes occurring in the UK labour market are giving rise to new attitudes to work and welfare. We start by examining how the increase in precarious employment has affected attitudes towards job security. Next we explore whether the concerns voiced by academics and the media regarding technological developments in the labour market are reflected by public attitudes. We then assess whether changes in the labour market have affected perceptions of welfare and where responsibility lies for ensuring that people have enough to live on.

## Job security

In the context of the shift to more precarious contract types, job quality has become a significant concern in the UK (Taylor, 2017). While there are competing definitions and measures of job quality (Findlay et al., 2013), it is clear that job security is an important component of ‘good work’. The rise in non-standard employment might be expected to affect some more than others, with particular concern for young people entering the job market.

To assess views about job security, and whether they differ by income group or age, we ask all respondents in paid employment the following questions:

*To what extent, if at all, do you worry about losing your job?*

*How difficult or easy do you think it would be for you to find a job at least as good as your current one?*

In general, the British public feels fairly confident about job security. As Table 1 shows, a quarter (26%) of those in paid employment worry “a great deal” or “to some extent” about losing their job, while most (71%) worry “a little” or not at all. However some subgroups of the population appear more worried than others. Two-fifths (37%) of those in the lowest income group worry “a great deal” or “to some extent” about losing their job, compared with one fifth (22%) of those in the highest income group (although it should be noted that the sample size is small for the low income group, and therefore the results should be viewed with caution). These responses may reflect the more precarious employment of low-wage workers, (e.g. Stuart et al., 2016), but also the fact that lower income households are more dependent on earnings, and have less financial resilience in the form of savings or borrowing power.

**In general, the British public feels fairly confident about job security**

**Table 1 Employee concerns about job security, by household income group**

	Less than £1,200 per month	£1,201 to £2,200 per month	£2,201 to £3,700 per month	£3,701 or more per month	All
<b>Worry about losing their job</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Worry a great deal or to some extent	37	31	27	22	26
Worry a little or not at all	62	64	70	76	71
<b>Finding a job at least as good as your current one</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Easy	42	32	33	41	37
Neither easy nor difficult	19	22	20	21	21
Difficult	35	41	44	36	39
<i>Unweighted base</i>	91	220	314	463	1269

*Base: all employees*

*Base for Less than £1,200 per month is <100 and therefore findings should be treated with some caution*

There is a significant divergence between younger and older people's level of confidence that it would be easy to find a job at least as good as their current one if they became unemployed. As shown in Table 2, half (51%) of 18 to 25 year olds feel that this would be very or fairly easy, although again note that the sample size for the 18-25 group is small, and therefore the results should be viewed with caution. This is higher than for any other age group and more than double the proportion (24%) of those approaching retirement age (55-65). This finding is interesting given the difficulties young people are experiencing in entering the labour market (Purcell et al., 2017).

Confidence in finding a good replacement job declines steadily with age, which may reflect older workers having better quality (and therefore more competitive) roles, but also perceptions of declining employability. In particular, the very low level of confidence in the oldest group (56-65) is consistent with well documented problems for older workers: at 27%, the economic inactivity rate of 50-60 year olds is more than twice that of workers aged 35-49 (Office for National Statistics, 2017), and estimates indicate that as many as one million economically inactive older workers did not choose to stop working (Franklin et al., 2014).

**Confidence in finding a good replacement job declines steadily with age**

**Table 2 Employee concerns about job security, by age<sup>1</sup>**

	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	All
<b>Worries about losing their job</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Worry a great deal or to some extent	22	23	35	26	25	26
Worry a little or not at all	77	76	62	71	70	71
<b>Finding a job at least as good as your current one</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Easy	51	44	37	30	24	37
Neither easy nor difficult	17	21	25	19	18	21
Difficult	29	33	37	46	52	39
<i>Unweighted base</i>	96	281	299	340	203	1269

*Base: all employees*

*Bases for employees who are 66 or over are very small and therefore they have not been presented in this table*

*Base for 18-25 is <100 and therefore findings should be treated with some caution*

To further explore attitudes to job security, we also ask employees:

***How confident are you that you will be working in 12 months' time? This may be in your current job or in a future job***

The overwhelming majority (95%) of employees are confident that they will be in work in 12 months' time. Medium-term job security appears to follow similar trends to the short-term, with lower-income workers feeling less secure than those in higher-income households. Almost all (98%) employees in the top two income groups feel confident that they would be working in 12 months' time, significantly higher than the four-fifths (81%) of those in the lowest income group.

Again, those under 35 are very confident about their medium-term prospects, with very similar levels of confidence to those of prime working age. While a clear majority (88%) of employees approaching retirement age (56-65 years) are confident that they will still be working in 12 months, this proportion is lower than that observed in other age groups (shown in Table 3).

<sup>1</sup> The age cross breaks used in this chapter differ from those used elsewhere in BSA reporting. The age breaks selected for this chapter (18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65 and greater than 65 years old) were selected because of the expected importance of being retired on attitudes towards work and welfare.

**Table 3 Employee confidence that they will be working in 12 months' time, by age**

	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	All
<b>How confident</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Confident	94	97	97	96	88	95
Not confident	5	3	3	3	8	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	99	332	324	333	192	1319

*Base: all employees*

*Bases for employees who are 66 or over are very small and therefore they have not been presented in this table*

*Base for 18-25 is <100 and therefore findings should be treated with some caution*

In the context of a debate about zero-hours contracts and the gig economy, where working hours may be uncertain, we ask all respondents in paid employment about their short-term working hours:

***Do you know how many paid hours you will be working next month?***

***Yes, I know what hours I'm working for the next month***

***Yes, I'm fairly sure I know what hours I'm working for the next month***

***No, I don't know what hours I will be working for the next month***

***Which of the following statements describes your usual working hours in your main job?***

***I have regular working hours or a regular shift***

***I have changing working hours, which my employer gives me well in advance***

***I have changing working hours, which my employer gives me at short notice***

***I decide the hours I work in order to do my job***

It is important to note that job security and working hours security are not synonymous, and that non-standard employment such as part-time and zero hours contract working can constitute good quality work, depending on workers' personal circumstances (CIPD, 2017; Knox and Warhurst, 2016; Lapanjuuri et al., 2018; Taylor, 2017). However, as with job insecurity, poor working-hours security can have a negative impact on both the level and predictability of employment and pay.

A clear majority (76%) are certain about their hours in the next month. Only a small minority (12%) don't know what their hours will be in the next month. However, there are significant differences

**Three in ten (29%) of those in the bottom income group do not know their working hours in the next month**

between income groups. In particular, workers with low incomes are significantly less likely to know their short-term working hours relative to those in higher income households. Three in ten (29%) of those in the bottom income group do not know their working hours in the next month, more than four times the proportion of those in the highest income group (7%). Similarly, those in the highest income group have greater certainty about their usual hours. More (71%) of this group have regular working hours compared with those (58%) in the lowest income group.

**Table 4 Employee certainty about working hours in the next month, by household income group**

	Less than £1200 per month	£1201 to £2200 per month	£2201 to £3700 per month	£3701 or more per month	All
<b>Do you know how many paid hours you will be working next month</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, I know the hours I'm working next month	50	73	81	82	76
Yes, I'm fairly sure I know what hours I'm working next month	20	13	10	11	12
No, I don't know what hours I will be working next month	29	13	9	7	12
<b>Usual working hours in your main job</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Has regular working hours or a regular shift	58	70	74	71	71
Has changing working hours given well in advance	15	15	10	8	10
Has changing working hours given at short notice	15	10	7	5	8
Decides the hours worked in order to do job	12	6	9	16	11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	244	319	447	157	1319

*Base: all employees*

Age also drives interesting differences in working hours security. People aged 36-55 years are most assured of their work pattern in the next month, with a large majority (81%) of these employees certain of their working hours. Conversely, young workers (18-25) and older workers (56-65) are most uncertain about their working hours (not statistically significant, see Table 5).

**Table 5 Certainty about working hours in the next month, by age**

	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	All
<b>Do you know how many paid hours you will be working next month?</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, I know the hours I'm working next month	66	75	81	80	76	76
Yes, I'm fairly sure I know what hours I'm working next month	16	13	9	12	8	12
No, I don't know what hours I will be working next month	18	11	10	7	16	12
<b>Usual working hours in your main job</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Has regular working hours or a regular shift	64	72	71	76	65	71
Has changing working hours given well in advance	16	10	12	5	11	10
Had changing working hours given at short notice	17	11	5	5	5	8
Decides the hours worked in order to do job	3	7	11	14	19	11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	99	332	324	333	192	1319

*Base: all employees*

*Bases for employees who are 66 or over are very small and therefore they have not been presented in this table*

*Base for 18-25 is <100 and therefore findings should be treated with some caution*

While uncertainty over working hours affects younger and older workers alike, younger workers have the greatest uncertainty about their short-term working hours. Nearly a fifth (17%) of those aged 18-25 have changing working hours given at short notice compared with only 5% of those aged 36-65. Older workers also have greater self-determination over their working hours, with a fifth (19%) of those aged 56-65 deciding their own hours compared with a very small minority (3%) of those aged 18-25.

Despite being more likely to have precarious work than other age groups, younger workers are more confident than older workers about their medium-term employment prospects, and their ability to get a job that is 'as good' if they lose the job they have now. If precarity is indeed the new norm of the UK labour market, these findings suggest that younger workers have adapted to it.

## The robots are coming

Structural change is inevitable as economic and technological developments continue to change the nature of work. Although the form and extent of this change is not yet known, it is clear that the labour market could be disrupted by robots and AI, and there will be

some job losses as a consequence. In fact, in some instances the robots have already arrived. Retailers Amazon and Ocado have, for example, already created distribution centres where product picking is done by robot rather than by human workers. To investigate the perceptions people had of their long-term job security we ask all respondents the following questions:

*Overall, how likely do you think it is that in the next 10 years, machines and computer programmes will do many of the jobs currently done by humans?*

*And what about your own job. How worried if at all, are you that in the next 10 years, your job might be done instead by machines and computer programmes?<sup>2</sup>*

There is a clear perception among most of the public (75%) it is likely that many of the jobs currently done by humans will be done by machines or computer programmes in 10 years' time. Four-fifths (82%) of those of retirement age feel that automation would replace many existing jobs, more than any other age group (Table 6).

However while the public is clear that jobs will be lost to the clever robots, few think that their own jobs could be at risk. One in ten (10%) of those in work are "very" or "quite" worried that automation will be a threat to their job in the next 10 years. Responses vary by age, with those aged 36-45 most concerned (16%) about automation.

**75% say that it is likely that many of the jobs currently done by humans will be done by machines or computer programmes in 10 years' time**

**Table 6 Attitudes to automation over the next 10 years, by age**

	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66+	All
<b>Likelihood many of the jobs currently done by humans will be done by machines and computer programmes</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely/probably will happen	72	73	74	69	77	82	75
Definitely/probably will not happen	21	21	21	26	19	9	19
<i>Unweighted base</i>	148	365	390	423	419	662	2410
<b>How worried job will be replaced by machines and computer programs?<sup>*</sup></b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very/quite worried	11	10	16	6	9	5	10
Not very/not at all worried	83	86	80	88	80	51	81
<i>Unweighted base</i>	111	323	332	374	247	166	1556

<sup>\*</sup> Base: all in work

<sup>2</sup> Those without a job were able to give this as an answer. These respondents are excluded from the analysis of this question.

Those on higher incomes appear less concerned by the threat of automation. Very few workers (6%) in the highest income group say that they are “very” or “quite” worried about robots or computer programs replacing their job in the next 10 years, compared with a fifth (15%) of workers in the lowest income group. Higher paid workers may be justified in their confidence: although estimates of the impact of automation vary considerably, there is consensus that the focus of job losses will be in sectors such as transport, manufacturing and retail. This evidence perhaps also reflects that higher income jobs are also generally higher skilled (Goos and Manning, 2007) and therefore more complex and so less easy to replace with automation (Muñoz-de-Bustillo Llorente, 2016).

To investigate further, we carried out logistic regression to assess whether people with differing educational qualifications have varying perceptions of the threat posed by automation to their job (the results of this analysis are found in Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter). The analysis included age as a covariate, as those approaching retirement age may have less fear about losing their job if they are likely to no longer be working. The results of this analysis indicate that, when controlling for age, those with GCSE or equivalent qualifications and below as their highest educational qualification attained are significantly more likely to be “very” or “quite” worried about a machine or computer program replacing them at work within the next decade (see Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter).

Nevertheless, across all groups there is less anxiety about the march of the machines than media and policy debates would suggest. There is a very significant dissonance in the responses: on the one hand the public thinks that there will be significant job automation by robots, on the other hand, they believe that their own jobs will be safe.

This confidence of younger groups that the robots are coming (but not for my job) is particularly striking. Those in our younger age groups (18-25 and 26-35) will spend their working lives in a labour market that is evolving at pace in response to disruptive and transformative technology. Relatively conservative assessments suggest that just over 10% of UK workers are in roles that are highly automatable (Arntz et al., 2016), and this process of automation will take place over the next few decades. In addition to displacing jobs, automation will likely require young people to adapt their skills on an ongoing basis (PWC, 2017), something that is recognised in government proposals for a National Retraining Scheme (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017). If more pessimistic models of our labour market future crystallise, young people may also face significant periods of underemployment and unemployment.

If technological change drives further polarisation of the labour market or even a permanent reduction in human work, then more fundamental welfare reform may be needed to address low pay,

**On the one hand the public thinks that there will be significant job automation by robots, on the other hand, they believe that their own jobs will be safe**

precarity and long-term unemployment, particularly among citizens with disabilities and long term health conditions. In the next section, we explore attitudes to welfare.

## Covering the cost of living

As the shape of the labour market has changed over recent decades with rising precarity of work and entrenched income inequality, we might expect to see concomitant changes in attitudes to welfare, including rising support for both income supplements and unemployment benefits.

This section investigates who the British public feels should be responsible for ensuring people have an adequate income: employers, the state or the individuals themselves? We also explore whether changes to the labour market are engendering different attitudes to welfare for different age groups.

We ask respondents a series of questions about pay and different approaches to ensuring pay meets workers' living costs. First we explore whether the public believes the burden is on employers or individuals to ensure jobs pay enough to cover the basic cost of living.

We ask all respondents:

*Which of these statements comes closer to your view?*

*Employers should be made to pay a wage that would cover a basic cost of living*

*People are responsible for finding work that pays enough to cover the cost of their living*

Three-quarters (77%) feel that employers should pay a wage that covers the basic cost of living. Only a fifth (18%) say that people should be responsible themselves for finding work that pays enough to cover the cost of living. Women are more likely to think that the employer is responsible for paying wages that cover the cost of living than men (81% and 73% respectively). Those approaching retirement age (56-65, 80%) and younger (18-25, 82%) respondents are more likely to say that this burden is the employer's than those in the middle of working age (36-55, 74%).

There are a number of policy options for governments trying to mitigate the risk of low pay. One such policy is the National Minimum Wage, first introduced in 1999. At its introduction, the imposition of a wage floor was hotly disputed, as some feared that it could lead to an increase in unemployment. However, consistent econometric analyses have found little or no evidence of negative employment effects arising from the minimum wage (Rand, 2016). In 2015, George Osborne announced the introduction of a new National Living Wage to tackle low pay for over-25s. The aim of the National Living Wage is to ensure that minimum wages reach 60% of median earnings by 2020 (a traditional measure of relative poverty).

To gauge what the public thinks about the current rate of minimum wage, we ask all respondents:

*Do you think the minimum wage should be increased, reduced or kept at the same level it is now?*

**71% think that the minimum wage should be increased**

A clear majority (71%) feel that the minimum wage should be increased, with no evidence of divergence between different groups. Only a quarter (24%) believe that it should be kept at its current rate and very few (1%) believe it should be lowered.

An alternative to imposing a wage floor is for governments to supplement the incomes of low-paid individuals using welfare payments. Since 2003, the government has provided supplementary income in the form of Working Tax Credits and Child Tax Credits, which have now been integrated into Universal Credit as part of the welfare reform programme. While entitlement to tax credits has risen substantially over this period, the percentage of spend given to working families has fluctuated between 51% and 57% (HM Revenue and Customs, 2017). To investigate the level of support for such a policy, we ask all respondents the following:

*Some working couples with children find it hard to make ends meet on low wages. In these circumstances, do you think...*

*... the government should top-up their wages,*

*... or, is it up to the couple to look after themselves and their children as best they can?*

*And what about working couples without children? If they find it hard to make ends meet on low wages, do you think ...*

*... the government should top-up their wages,*

*... or, is it up to the couple to look after themselves as best they can?*

*And what about working lone parents? If they find it hard to make ends meet on low wages, do you think ...*

*... the government should top-up their wages,*

*... or, is it up to the parents to look after themselves and their children as best they can?*

**Support for topping up low wages is closely associated with whether people have children, a position that is consistent with attitudes to welfare overall**

As Table 7 shows, a majority (58%) feel that the government should top up the wages of working couples with children. A substantial majority (70%) feel the government should top up the wages of working lone parents. However, there is less public support for working couples without children having their low wages topped up by the state (31%). Here, the dominant view is that working couples without children are responsible for "look[ing] after themselves as best they can" (56%). These responses suggest that support for topping up low wages is closely associated with children, a position

that is consistent with attitudes to welfare overall, where benefits to families with children are viewed far more positively than benefits to unemployed adults (see Figure 1) later in the chapter.

While support for the minimum wage is high across all groups, there are divergences between younger and older groups when it comes to topping up wages for families with children, with younger respondents consistently more supportive of state intervention than older respondents.

Two-thirds (67%) of people aged 18-25 feel that the government should top up the wages of working couples with children, compared with less than half (46%) of those of retirement age (those over 66 years old). There is even stronger support among young people for the government topping up low wages of lone parents. Four-fifths (79%) of those aged 18-25 support state intervention compared with three-fifths (57%) of those aged 66 or older. A notable minority are unable to choose between the various statements (14%, 13% and 11% respectively).

**Table 7 Attitudes to topping up low wages, by age**

	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66+	All
<b>Working couples with children</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
The government should top up their wages	67	62	66	61	54	46	58
It is up to the couple to look after themselves and their children as best they can	20	23	20	25	30	37	27
<b>Working couples without children</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
The government should top up their wages	34	33	33	31	34	22	31
It is up to the couple to look after themselves as best they can	55	51	54	56	53	63	56
<b>Working lone parents</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
The government should top up their wages	79	74	79	73	65	57	70
It is up to the parents to look after themselves as best they can	12	11	12	16	22	26	17
<i>Unweighted base</i>	148	365	390	423	419	662	2410

It is possible that this greater sympathy for the principle that the government should top up the wages of families with children is itself associated with the changing structure of the labour market. For younger age groups, the concept of the 'family job' where a single working class wage could support a whole family is an idea from the distant past: juggling work and childcare is now the norm.

So far we have considered how to support people in work and on low pay, but how should the unemployed be supported? In order to gauge respondent views on unemployment and its drivers, we ask all respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement about how easy it would be for an unemployed person to get a job in their local area:

*Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted one*

The British public appears fairly bullish about job prospects for the unemployed, with over half (56%) feeling that most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to, compared with less than a fifth (18%) who disagree. This high level of support for the idea that getting a job is relatively easy does not vary by age, education level or income.

However if the predictions about automation are right and the future is one in which technology drives up unemployment substantially (Frey and Osborne, 2013), public attitudes to and support for welfare benefits may become increasingly important.

We ask all respondents about support for increasing government spending on a range of welfare benefits:

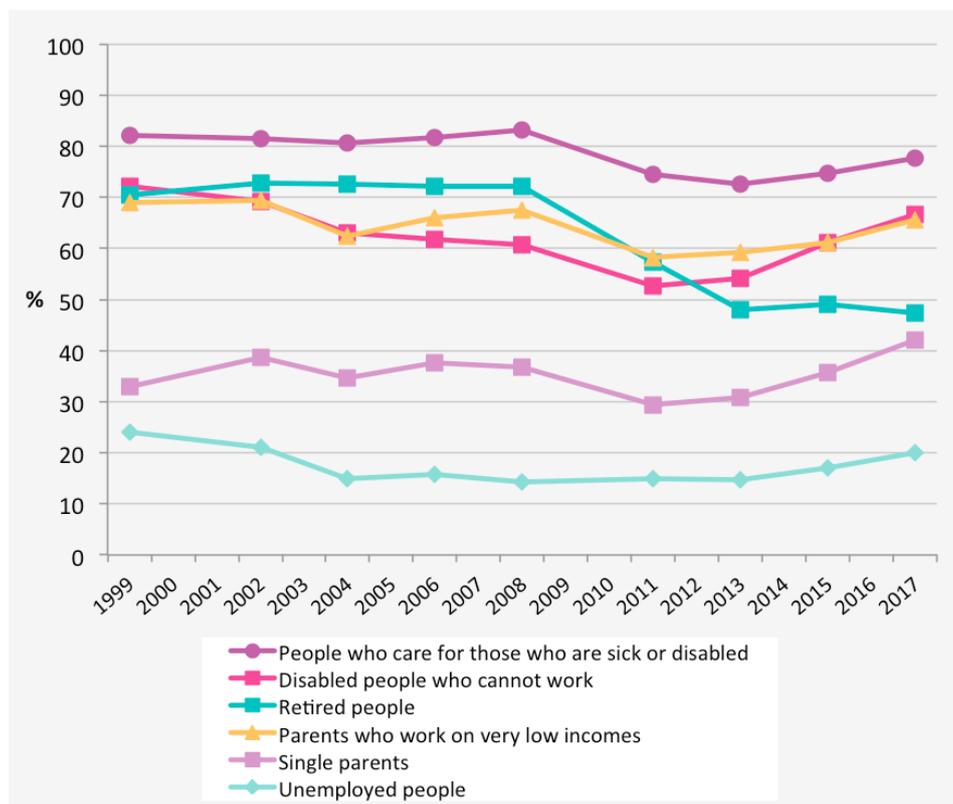
*Some people think that there should be more government spending on social security, while other people disagree. For each of the groups I read out please say whether you would like to see more or less government spending on them than now. Bear in mind that if you want more spending, this would probably mean that you would have to pay more taxes. If you want less spending, this would probably mean paying less taxes.*

The benefits we asked respondents about are for: the unemployed; disabled people who cannot work; parents who work on very low incomes; single parents; retired people; people who care for those who are sick, and disabled retired people.

As Figure 1 shows, attitudes towards benefits for the unemployed have always been sterner relative to other groups. However, in 2017 one fifth (20%) support higher benefits for the unemployed. While this may seem a fairly low level of public support, it is the highest proportion since 2002, suggesting British attitudes towards the unemployed are softening. This can be contrasted with the trend regarding increasing support for retired people, which continues to fall.

**Attitudes towards benefits for the unemployed have always been sterner relative to other groups**

**Figure 1** Proportion saying the government should spend more on different benefit claimants, 1999-2017



The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

We also ask whether they agree or disagree with the following statements:

*If welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet*

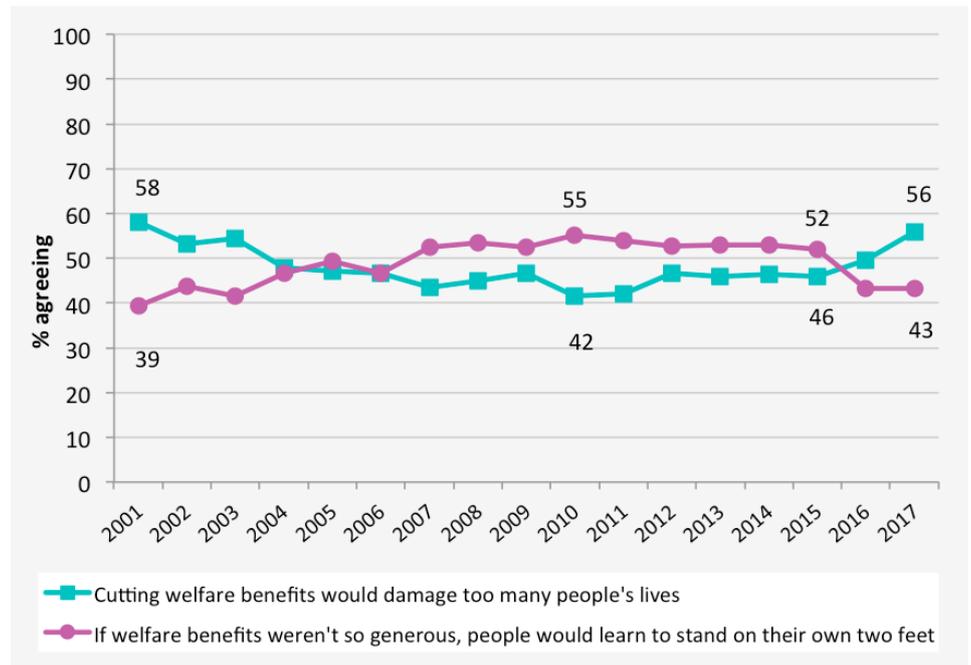
*Cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives*

In 2001, approximately two-fifths (39%) of people agreed that the generosity of welfare benefits creates dependence (see Figure 2). This rose steadily over the decade to just under three-fifths (55%) in 2010. For the duration of the coalition government (2010-2015) the proportion of the public agreeing with this statement appeared relatively stable. However, in the last two years there has been a marked drop in support for this statement. In 2017 only two-fifths (43%) agree (see Figure 2).

Over the same time period, we can see a corresponding change in the proportion who are concerned about the impact of cuts to welfare on people's lives. In 2001, three-fifths (58%) of people felt that cutting benefits would damage too many people's lives. This proportion fell steadily to two-fifths (42%) in 2011. However in the last couple of years there has been a sharp rise in the proportion of people who agree with this statement, highlighting a possible tipping point in public attitudes towards welfare spending cuts.

**In the last couple of years there has been a sharp rise in the proportion of people who agree that cutting benefits would damage too many lives**

Figure 2 Views on the impact of welfare benefits, 2001-2017

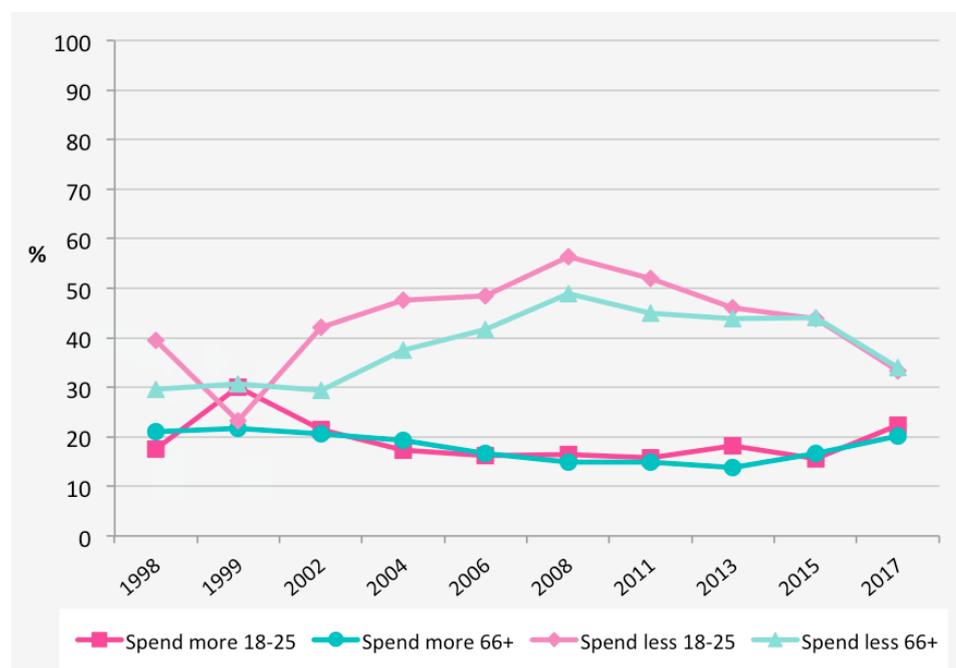


The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

In addition to an overall softening of attitudes towards unemployed people, there are significant differences in the views of older and young people when it comes to welfare. Just over a third (35%) of younger people (18-25) agree that welfare benefits create dependency, compared with half (50%) of those aged 66 or older. Similarly, two-thirds (65%) of young people are concerned that cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people’s lives, compared with half (53%) of older people. However, when we ask about whether the government should spend more or spend less on unemployment benefits specifically, this difference between younger and older people disappears, and for both groups we see a marked increase in support for spending more on unemployment benefits, and a marked decrease for spending less on unemployment benefits over the last two years (see Figure 3).

**Two-thirds (65%) of young people are concerned that cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people’s lives, compared with half (53%) of older people**

**Figure 3 Proportion of 18-25 year olds and those who are 66+ who think we should spend more or spend less on unemployment benefits, 1998-2017**



The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

The British public as a whole feels strongly that work should pay, and pay enough to meet a basic standard of living. A substantial majority support the idea that employers should pay adequate wages, and the the government should increase the minimum wage. This indicates that the National Living Wage ambition to bring the minimum wage for over 25s up to the relative poverty line by 2020 is likely to be strongly endorsed. The picture in relation to topping up wages is more mixed, perhaps as a consequence of the strongly-held belief that providing an adequate wage is the responsibility of the employer, and attitudes to support for the unemployed are slowly but steadily softening.

There are some substantive differences of opinion between younger and older people in Britain about supporting people who are struggling to meet the cost of living. On average, younger people appear to have more sympathetic attitudes than their older peers when it comes to topping up wages, are less concerned about the concept of welfare dependency, and more concerned that cuts to welfare would damage people's lives.

## Conclusions

Debates about the future of work and, with it, the future of welfare are coming sharply into focus as economists and commentators predict labour market futures characterised by precarious employment, or even mass unemployment if the robots take over work. While some experts are concerned about this possible future, others eulogise it, claiming it will provide a welcome escape from wage labour.

Interestingly, while the majority of the public believes that the robots are indeed coming, and that many jobs currently done by humans will be done by robots in the future, they are equally clear in their view that the robots are coming for other people's jobs, not their own. Anxiety in the policy community and the commentariat about the negative consequences of automation has not yet spread to the general public. Only time will tell if this proves to be myopia from the public or hysteria from the 'experts'.

Perceptions of the availability of work now and in the future remain relatively buoyant. Most people are confident they could get another job if they became unemployed, and believe that unemployed people generally can find a job if they want one. At the same time, there appears to be growing concern that the government should do more to push up or top up wages, and that welfare benefits may be too low, including for unemployed people.

There are important differences between the attitudes of young people as they enter the labour market and start their careers, and older people who are nearing retirement. Young people favour wage top ups more than older people and are more concerned about the potential impact of cuts to welfare spending. Most of all, they are confident about their employability and job security, including over the long term, despite evidence suggesting that it is precisely this generation who will be most challenged by the impact of technological change.

Whatever the future holds, given the public's positive attitudes towards work and changing attitudes to welfare, it seems likely that as the labour market changes the public will look to the government and employers to create new jobs to replace the old, rather than demanding fundamental reform of the welfare system.

**Young people are confident about their employability and job security despite evidence suggesting that they will be most challenged by the impact of technological change**

## Acknowledgements

The National Centre for Social Research is grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Department for Work and Pensions for their financial support which enabled us to ask the questions reported in this chapter. The views expressed are those of the authors alone.

## References

Arntz, M., T. Gregory and U. Zierahn (2016), 'The Risk of Automation for Jobs in OECD Countries: A Comparative Analysis', *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 189, OECD Publishing, Paris

Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (2017), *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain Fit for the Future*, available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf)

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2017), *To gig or not to gig? Stories from the modern economy*, London: CIPD. Available from: [www.cipd.co.uk/Images/to-gig-or-not-to-gig-2017-stories-from-the-modern-economy\\_tcm18-18955.pdf](http://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/to-gig-or-not-to-gig-2017-stories-from-the-modern-economy_tcm18-18955.pdf)

Daguerre, A. and Etherington, D. (2009), *Active labour market policies in international context: what works best? Lessons from the UK*, Department for Work and Pensions

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2017), *Digital Skills for the UK Economy*, London, available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/492889/DCMSDigitalSkillsReportJan2016.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/492889/DCMSDigitalSkillsReportJan2016.pdf)

Department for Work and Pensions (2017), *Fuller Working Lives A Partnership Approach*, Department for Work and Pensions, available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/587654/fuller-working-lives-a-partnership-approach.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/587654/fuller-working-lives-a-partnership-approach.pdf)

Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Health (2017), *Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper*, available from: [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/564038/work-and-health-green-paper-improving-lives.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/564038/work-and-health-green-paper-improving-lives.pdf)

Dwer, P (2004), 'Creeping Conditionality in the UK: From Welfare Rights to Conditional Entitlements?' *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 29, No2

Economist (2016), *March of the machines*, 25 June, 2012

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2015), *Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015*

- European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) (2015), *'Upgrading or polarisation? Long-term and global shifts in the employment structure'*, European Jobs Monitor 2015, Dublin, Eurofound
- Findlay, P., Kalleberg, A. and Warhurst, C. (2013), 'The challenge of job quality', *Human Relations*, **66(4)**: 441-451
- Franklin et al (2014), *The missing million: illuminating the employment challenges of the over 50s. Joint report for ILC-UK, PRIME and BITC*
- Frey, C. B. and Osborne, M. A. (2013), *The Future of Employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation*, Oxford Martin Programme on Technology and Employment, University of Oxford
- Goos, M. and Manning, A. (2007), 'Lousy Jobs and Lovely Jobs: The rising polarization of work in Britain', *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, **89(1)**: 118-133
- HM Revenues and Customs (2017), *Child and Working Tax Credit Statistics: Finalised annual awards in 2015-16*, available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/617128/Child\\_and\\_Working\\_Tax\\_Credits\\_statistics\\_finalised\\_annual\\_awards\\_-\\_2015\\_to\\_2016.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/617128/Child_and_Working_Tax_Credits_statistics_finalised_annual_awards_-_2015_to_2016.pdf)
- Knox, A., Warhurst, C., Nickson, D. and Dutton, E. (2015), 'More than a feeling: using hotel room attendants to improve understanding of job quality', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, **26(12)**: 1546-1567
- Lepanjuuri, K., Wishart, R. and Cornick, P. (2018), *'The characteristics of those in the gig economy'* Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, London
- Loretto, W., Phillipson, C. and Vikcerstaff, S. (2017), *'Skills and training for the older generation: Training the new work generation'* in Warhurst, C., Mayhew, K., Finegold, D. and Buchanan, J. (eds.) *Oxford Handbook of Skills and Training*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- McGuinness, F. (2018), *Income Inequality in the UK: House of Commons Briefing Paper 7484*, House of Commons Library
- Muñoz de Bustillo, R. Fernández-Macías, E., Esteve, F. and Antón, J. (2011), *'Measuring More than Money: The Social Economics of Job Quality'*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar
- Muñoz de Bustillo, R. (2016), 'The coming of the robots: what implications for job quality?', available from: [www.bryder.nu/quinne1/node/33](http://www.bryder.nu/quinne1/node/33)
- Office for National Statistics (2017), *Labour Market Statistics Timeseries*
- Purcell, K., Elias, P., Green, A., Mizen, P, Simms, M., Whiteside, N., Wilson, D., Robertson, A. and Tzanakou, C. (2017), *Present tense, future imperfect? Young people's pathways into work*, Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick

- PWC (2017), *Will Robots Really Steal Our Jobs: an international analysis of the potential long term impact of automation*, available from: [www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/assets/international-impact-of-automation-feb-2018.pdf](http://www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/assets/international-impact-of-automation-feb-2018.pdf)
- Rand (2016), 'The Impact of the National Living Wage on Employment: A meta-analysis', Cambridge, UK
- Rubery, J. (2015), 'Change at Work: Feminisation, flexibilisation, fragmentation, and financialisation', *Employee Relations*, **37(6)**: 633-644
- Stuart, F., Pautz, H., Crimin, S. and Wright, S. (2016), *What Makes for Decent Work? A Study with Low Paid Workers*, Oxfam UK
- Taylor, M. (2017), *Good Work: The Taylor review of modern working practices*, London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
- Warhurst C., Mathieu, C. and Wright, S. (2017), 'Workplace Innovation and the Quality of Working Life in an Age of Uberisation', in Oeij, P., Rus, D., and Pot, F. D. (eds.) *Workplace Innovation: Theory, Research and Practice*. Heidelberg: Springer
- Warhurst, C., Mathieu, C. and Wright, S. (2018f), 'Vorsprung durch Technik: the future of work, digital technology and the politics of the platform economy' in Bennett, L. (ed.) *Future of Work*, Chicago: University of Chicago

## Appendix

In Table A.1 we present a logistic regression where the dependent variable is whether the respondent is not worried (worries “a little” or not at all) that their job will be replaced by machines or computer programs. A positive coefficient indicates a higher score while a negative coefficient indicates a lower score. For categorical variables, the reference category is shown in brackets after the category heading.

**Table A.1 Machines or computer replacing the respondent’s job within the next decade – logistic regression**

	Coefficient	Standard error	p-value
<b>Age (continuous)</b>	0.01	0.01	0.11
<b>Education (no qualifications)</b>			
O level or equivalent	**0.75	0.29	0.010
A level or equivalent	**1.26	0.30	0.000
Degree and higher education	**1.43	0.30	0.000
Constant	0.65	0.42	0.119
R2 (adjusted)	0.03		

*Unweighted base: 1336*

\*=significant at 95% level \*\*=significant at 99% level

The data in Tables A.2, A.3, A.4 and A.5 are explored in the introduction.

**Table A.2 Attitudes to work**

	All
<b>A job is just a way of earning money – no more</b>	%
Agree	28
Neither agree nor disagree	18
Disagree	50
<b>I would enjoy having a paid job even if I did not need the money</b>	%
Agree	59
Neither agree nor disagree	19
Disagree	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2410</i>

**Table A.3 Attitudes to work and its relationship with health**

	<b>All</b>
<b>Relationship between work and mental health</b>	%
Good	90
Bad	5
<b>Relationship between work and physical health</b>	%
Good	83
Bad	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2963</i>

**Table A.4 Attitudes to returning to work after recovering from a back problem**

	<b>All</b>
<b>When should this person be expected to return to work</b>	%
As soon as they can do some of their job	40
As soon as they can do most of their job	40
Not until they can do all of their job	20
<b>In principle, going back to work quickly will help speed their recovery</b>	%
Agree	41
Neither agree nor disagree	29
Disagree	29
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2963</i>

**Table A.5 Attitudes to returning to work after recovering from depression by age**

	<b>All</b>
<b>When should this person be expected to return to work</b>	%
As soon as they can do some of their job	39
As soon as they can do most of their job	37
Not until they can do all of their job	22
<b>In principle, going back to work quickly will help speed their recovery</b>	%
Agree	52
Neither agree nor disagree	26
Disagree	20
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2963</i>

The data on which Figure 1 is based on are as follows:

**Table A.6 Proportion saying the government should spend more on different benefit claimants, 1999-2017**

	1999	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011	2013	2015	2017
<b>% who say should spend more on...</b>									
Unemployed people	24	21	15	16	14	15	15	17	20
Disabled people who cannot work	72	69	63	62	61	53	54	61	67
Parents who work on very low incomes	69	69	62	66	67	58	59	61	66
Single parents	33	39	35	38	37	29	31	36	42
Retired people	70	73	73	72	72	57	48	49	47
People who care for those who are sick or disabled	82	82	81	82	83	74	73	75	78
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3143	3435	3199	3240	3358	3311	3244	3266	2963

The data on which Figure 2 is based on are as follows:

**Table A.7 Views on the impact of welfare benefits, 2001-2017**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
% agree if welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet	39	44	42	47	49	47	53	54	53
% agree cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives	58	53	54	48	47	47	44	45	47
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2795	2900	873	2609	2699	2822	2672	3000	967

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
% agree if welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet	55	54	53	53	53	52	43	43
% agree cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives	42	42	47	46	46	46	50	56
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376	2781	2400	3258

The data on which Figure 3 is based on are as follows:

**Table A.8 Proportion of 18-25 year olds and those who are 66+ who think we should spend more or spend less on unemployment benefits, 1998-2017**

	1998	1999	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011	2013	2015	2017
<b>% say should spend more</b>										
18-25	18	30	21	17	16	17	16	18	16	22
66+	21	22	21	19	17	15	15	14	17	20
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3146	3143	3435	3199	3240	3358	3311	3244	3266	2963
<b>% say should spend less</b>										
18-25	39	23	42	48	48	56	52	46	44	33
66+	30	31	29	38	42	49	45	44	44	34
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3146	3143	3435	3199	3240	3358	3311	3244	3266	2963

## Publication details

Phillips, D., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Perry, J. (eds.) (2018), *British Social Attitudes: The 35th Report*, London: The National Centre for Social Research

© The National Centre for Social Research 2018

First published 2018

You may print out, download and save this publication for your non-commercial use. Otherwise, and apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to The National Centre for Social Research.

The National Centre for Social Research  
35 Northampton Square  
London  
EC1V 0AX  
info@natcen.ac.uk  
ISBN: 978-1-5272-2591-6