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Invisible hands: child employment in the UK

The stereotype newspaper delivery boy/girl represents less than half of child employment. The majority work in other areas, mostly in the service economy such as shops, hotel and catering, cleaning and care work. There were also a number employed in farm-work, construction, and even factories.

The majority of children earn under £2

per hour. Girls earn on average more than boys, due to their employment in more 'adult' work. But many children are paid very little. The report found:

- A 14-year-old girl working 12.5 hours per week delivering newspapers for 48p an hour.
- A 15-year-old girl working 29 hours a week in a café for £1 an hour.
- An 11-year-old working 10 hours in an old people's home for £5.

Children work an average of around 8 hours in a school week, but the range of hours worked is wide — from under one hour per week to over 30. Older girls especially, age 14 and over, find shop and catering work easy to come by, and this is the hardest-working group of all.

One of the most disturbing findings was the high rate of accidents suffered by children at work. Nearly half of all children who worked had had an accident at work in the preceding year, and one in 10 needed medical treatment.

Too early, too late, or prohibited employment

The lack of enforcement of regulations to protect children who work is also a cause for concern. Two-thirds of children were employed illegally, that is they work too early in the morning or late at night, for too many hours and in prohibited locations or occupations.

The report makes no recommendations to prohibit children from working — indeed we found that children very much want to work. However, teachers did express concern at the effect such long hours may have on educational

The image of child employment in the UK today has become polarised, with the exploited Dickensian child factory worker at one extreme, and the modern independent money-earning paper boy at the other. The reality, however, is more complex, and it is only in recent years that child employment has been closely studied.

The major problem in investigating child employment is that unlike adult employees they pay no tax and no National Insurance, so they appear in no government statistics. In order to discover the nature and extent of child employment, it is therefore necessary to go out and talk to children themselves.

This was the main aim of the research recently undertaken by the Low Pay Unit and Southbank University. Entitled *Invisible Hands*, the report provides a valuable insight into the experience of child employment in modern Britain.

The survey covered over 1000 children in North Tyneside between the ages of 10 and 16, in January this year asking them, among other things, if they had a regular part-time job during the school term, how many hours they worked and what they were paid.

A wide range of ages and jobs

The results confirmed those of earlier Low Pay Unit investigations — that children of all ages are working regularly in a range of employment. One in five children between the ages of 10 and 16 have a regular part-time job, and one in three had worked during the past six months. Over a third of 15-year-olds are in work.

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attainment. The pressure on children and schools to achieve good results is great. Workloads are heavy and in their exam year constant, yet this is the very age at which children are most likely to work.

So why do children take up this burden? Overwhelmingly, it is for the money, which is spent mostly on clothes, music and other consumer goods. The survey was not designed to explore the relationship between child employment and household income, but some observations can be made in this area. Around one in 14 children who worked gave some or all of the money they earned to their parents, and one in 10 children were the only members of their family with a job. There was also a lower

level of employment among schoolchildren in more affluent areas of the region, and teachers expressed the belief that children from poorer households work to buy the designer labels which are vital to a child's status in the school but which their families cannot afford.

Much is still unknown about child employment, especially the links with household income and the risks to health and education. But hopefully the report goes some way to bringing to light the experience of child workers — the invisible hands in the UK economy.

Invisible Hands: Child Employment in North Tyneside costs £20 from The Low Pay Unit, 27-29 Amwell Street, London EC1R 1UN (0171 713 7616).