

# Patterns of low pay

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## Key points

- The numbers of jobs paying at levels below the national minimum wage (NMW) threshold appear to be very responsive to the initial and updated threshold levels, although the surveys indicate some evidence of a delay in the response.
- Numbers of jobs paying at the NMW level were at their largest when the threshold had just been introduced or recently been substantially increased. The NMW appears to have little or no spillover effect on higher levels of pay.
- For employees aged 18 to 21 the 'youth minimum rate' (the NMW for people aged 18 to 21) is not much used by employers, who are more than twice as likely to pay them at the adult minimum rate.
- Part-time jobs are about five times as likely to be low paid as full-time jobs, while women's jobs are three times as likely to be low paid as men's. The latter is partly explained by the fact that many more part-time jobs are held by women than by men; nevertheless a full-time job held by a woman is about twice as likely to be low paid as one held by a man.
- There are large disparities in the incidence of low pay between different occupations and between different industry sectors, jobs in the hotel and restaurant sector being particularly low paid. Disparities between different regions of the UK are far smaller.
- The ratio of the proportion of women's jobs to men's paying below £5 per hour is at its greatest (over four) for workers between the ages of 35 and 49. This is believed to be the result of women returning from career breaks, during which their earning potential had not increased.
- To some extent, however, women are more likely than men to be paid below £5 per hour even at ages younger than those where the return from a career break would be expected. This finding has yet to be explained.

***This article looks at how the distribution of low pay has changed since the introduction of the national minimum wage, and at some of the main features of low paid jobs in spring 2002.***

## Introduction

THIS ARTICLE looks at how the distribution of low pay has changed since the introduction of the national minimum wage (NMW) on 1 April 1999, and at the characteristics of the low paid. It utilises the methodology developed by ONS to measure low pay, and on which the estimates published in the low pay First Release are based (see *Box 1*)<sup>1</sup>.

The higher quality estimates for the lower end of the pay distribution derived from the new ONS methodology provide an opportunity for supplementary analysis of the issues surrounding low pay. In respect of low pay much of the

emphasis on the National Statistics website is on the numbers of jobs paid below the NMW (see *Box 1*). It is useful also to look at the lower end of the pay distribution in more general terms.

The first three sections of this article look at the distribution of low pay over the past four years, and its relation to the NMW threshold. The next section looks at the characteristics of people earning less than 10p above the NMW rate, and those aged 22 and over earning less than £5 per hour. The final section looks at differences in low pay between women and men with particular reference to the age breakdown.

## Box I Estimating low pay

ONS produces information about the lower end of the earnings distribution and estimates for the number of jobs paid below NMW rates. These are available on the National Statistics website at:

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=5837>.

The estimates cannot necessarily be used as a measure of non-compliance with the legislation because information on whether an individual is eligible for minimum wage rates is not available. For example, it is not possible to identify people such as apprentices and those undergoing training, who are exempt from the minimum wage rate or are entitled to lower rates. Similarly, if employees receive free accommodation employers are entitled to offset hourly rates by up to 57p per hour (subject to a maximum weekly offset, currently £22.75). The data used to provide the estimates do, however, use a definition of hourly rate of pay that conforms to the NMW legislation. This does not, for instance, include overtime pay or shift premium payments.

The estimates are based on a methodology that combines Labour Force Survey (LFS) and New Earnings Survey (NES) data after making some adjustments that are designed to reduce the shortcomings in measuring low pay inherent in each dataset. The LFS data used is normally that from the whole of the March-May quarter while the NES data relates to a period in early April. Hence the result of the combination is referred to as a 'spring' estimate. The LFS data used for the spring 1999 estimate is from the months of April and May only, so that the estimate can provide a picture of the low pay distribution after the introduction of the NMW.

In terms of measuring low pay, both the NES and LFS have limitations. The NES information should be accurate as it is taken from payroll records, but the survey has limited coverage of workers earning below the PAYE threshold. The low-pay methodology attempts to adjust for this by grossing up the survey estimates to population level. The LFS has more complete coverage of jobs, especially casual and low-paid jobs, but the data on earnings and hours are less precise as payslips or other documentary evidence are not necessarily consulted.

During 2002 ONS conducted a review of the methodology, called the 'central estimates' methodology, resulting in several improvements. These were used to produce the estimates for the years 1998 to 2002, which were released during October 2002. A summary of the methodology and a description of the review are both available from the National Statistics website. Where available, the revised estimates make use of hourly-rate data from the LFS collected from all workers paid an hourly rate, and age at 1 April derived from date-of-birth data in the NES. In both cases these data are only available from spring 2000 onwards, making these estimates of considerably higher quality than the ones for spring 1999 and spring 1998.

Since the NES is based on the returns of UK employers on the interdepartmental business register, data collected on certain individuals in the LFS have no counterpart in the NES. These people include those employed in industry sectors P: private households with employed persons, and Q: extra-territorial organisations and bodies. Consequently, the central estimates methodology is applied to data on jobs in industry sectors A to O.

## The distribution of low pay over the period 1999 to 2002

This section looks at how the distribution of low pay has changed by considering four snapshots of the distribution taken in the spring of each year. When looking at these distributions it is worth bearing in mind the prevailing NMW thresholds. *Table 1* shows their levels and the periods to which they applied. It can be seen that in spring 1999 and spring 2000 the thresholds were £3.60 per hour for those aged 22 and over, and £3.00 for those aged 18 to 21. In spring 2001 the rates were £3.70 and £3.20 respectively, and in spring 2002 £4.10 and £3.50 respectively.

Table 1 The national minimum wage: thresholds for hourly pay by age of job holder; United Kingdom; April 1999 to date

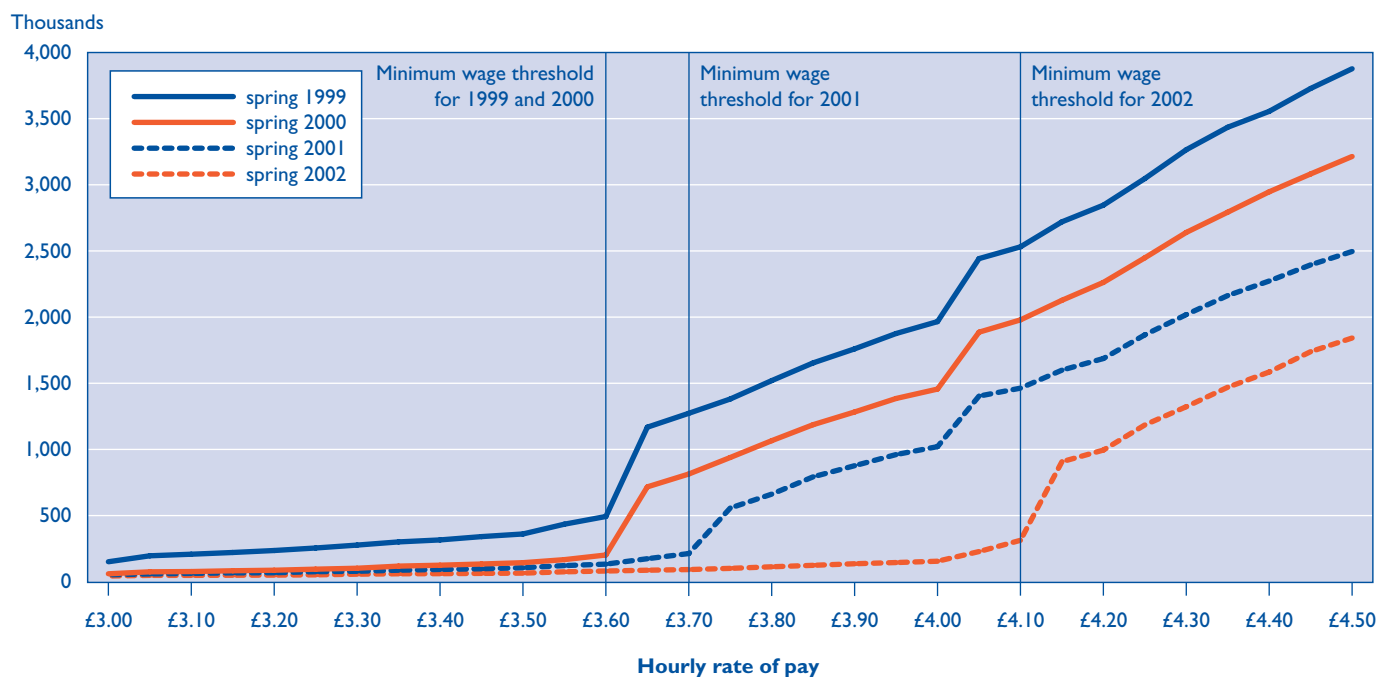
	£	
	Age 18 to 21	22 and over
<b>Periods when thresholds in force</b>		
April 1999 to May 2000	3.00	3.60
June 2000 to September 2000	3.20	3.60
October 2000 to September 2001	3.20	3.70
October 2001 to September 2002	3.50	4.10
From October 2002	3.60	4.20

Source: Department of Trade and Industry

*Figure 1* shows the earnings distribution for jobs held by people aged 22 and over. In the year 1999 there were substantially greater numbers of jobs paid below the NMW wage threshold than in the other three years. Additionally, there were also greater

numbers of jobs paid at a range of levels significantly below £3.60. The most likely explanation for this is that the NMW had just been introduced and was still being adapted to. Between 1999 and 2000 there were sharp drops in the numbers of jobs paid below these levels,

Figure 1 Numbers of jobs paid below different hourly rates of pay for people aged 22 and over; United Kingdom; 1999 to 2002



Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

Table 2 Jobs paid at the level of the minimum wage<sup>a</sup> for people aged 22 and over; United Kingdom; 1999 to 2002

	Thousands <sup>b</sup>	Per cent
1999	675	3.0
2000	515	2.2
2001	345	1.5
2002	595	2.5

Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

a Defined as paid at least the minimum wage and less than 5p per hour above it.

b To the nearest 5,000.

perhaps reflecting that during this period the legislation had settled in.

In contrast, the year 2001 shows very small decreases in numbers of jobs paid below levels up to £3.60 per hour, but large falls at levels between £3.60 and £3.70. In 2001, when the threshold had been increased to £3.70 per hour, the number of jobs paying less than this amount fell by 600,000, whereas in 2000 the number paying less than £3.60 fell by only 290,000.

By spring 2002 the threshold had been increased to £4.10 per hour. The increase in the NMW rate between spring 1999 and spring 2002 was in line with the growth in the Average Earnings Index over the same period. Numbers of jobs paid at levels below £4.10 in spring

2002, however, were much smaller than the numbers paid at levels below £3.60 in spring 1999, which might be explained by the fact that by spring 2002 the threshold had been in place for six months. After the uprating of the NMW threshold in October 2001, the 2002 curve has a totally different shape from the 2001 curve in the range £3.70 to £4.10. There were large falls over this 12-month period in numbers of jobs paying below £3.70 to below £4.10 per hour, with the number paying less than £4.10 falling by no less than 1,150,000.

Another feature of *Figure 1* is the steep rise in 1999 to 2001 where hourly pay is less than £4.05 per hour but at least £4.00 per hour. This indicates large numbers of jobs paid at this level, and

mainly arises from jobs reported as being paid at exactly £4.00 per hour. This feature is much less marked in 2002 when the NMW rate stood at £4.10. High incidence at round numbers is a general feature of the hourly pay distribution: for instance, if the graph were extended there would be another steep rise corresponding to jobs paid at exactly £5.00 per hour. While the round number phenomenon is to some extent a feature of both the LFS and the NES distributions, it is stronger in the LFS, so it appears that there is some tendency for people to be paid at round numbers but also an extra tendency for respondents in household surveys to report being paid at round numbers.

### Earnings at the minimum wage

Most observers of the lower end of the earnings distribution have an interest in pay at the level of the minimum wage. The national statistical institutes of many countries make this the main focus of their reporting of low pay, and Eurostat compares its incidence for full-time workers across a number of OECD countries. For the

**Table 3** Numbers and proportions of jobs held by people aged 18 to 21 paid at different wage thresholds;<sup>a</sup> United Kingdom; 1999 to 2002

	At NMW threshold for people aged 18 to 21		At NMW threshold for people aged 22 and over		Between the two thresholds	
	Thousands <sup>b</sup>	Per cent	Thousands <sup>b</sup>	Per cent	Thousands <sup>b</sup>	Per cent
1999	45	2.9	110	6.9	190	11.9
2000	35	2.1	125	7.5	110	6.7
2001	25	1.5	90	5.0	105	5.9
2002	45	2.4	130	7.3	170	9.3

Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

a Defined as paid at least the minimum wage and less than 5p per hour above it.

b To the nearest 5,000.

data sources used in the United Kingdom, measurement problems make it difficult to report this precisely, so the following definition will be used for the purposes of this article: a job at the minimum wage is one that pays at least the minimum wage and less than 5p per hour above it.

Using this definition, *Table 2* shows the number and proportion of jobs held by people aged 22 and over paid at the level of the minimum wage. This (and also *Table 3*, which relates to people aged 18 to 21) shows that earnings at the level of the NMW were most prevalent in 1999 and 2002. In 1999 the NMW

had just been introduced, while in 2002 its threshold had recently been substantially increased.

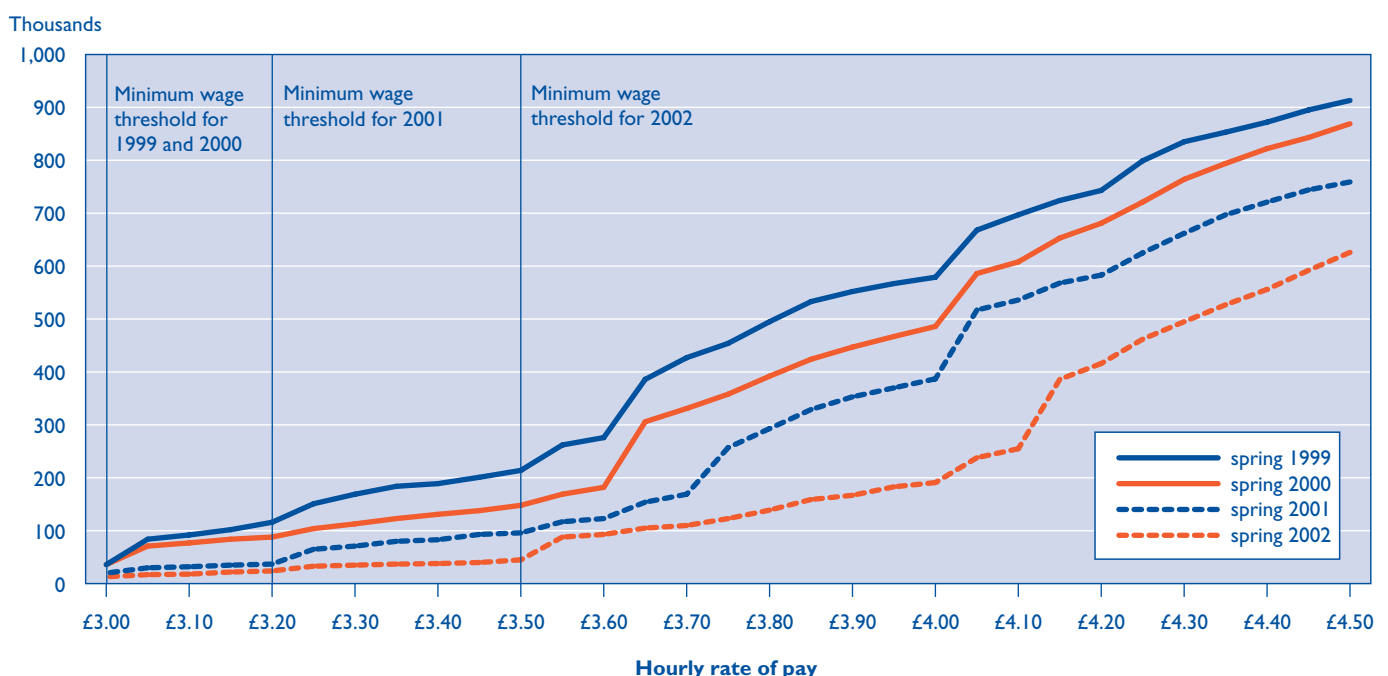
The results presented in this and the previous section show various features of the distribution of low pay that appear to have been strongly influenced by the level of the NMW threshold and its relationship to levels in preceding years. However, at any level beyond 5p above the threshold each year's curve is, in essence, just the previous year's curve shifted downwards, exactly as would be expected with normal wage inflation. It appears then that effects on those further up the low pay distribution

from the introduction and uprating of the NMW (so called spillover effects) are negligible.

### Earnings of young people

*Figure 2* shows the earnings distribution for jobs held by people aged 18 to 21. Numbers of jobs are much lower here than for those aged 22 and over, as this is a relatively narrow age band. Consequently, when making comparisons between years and between different earnings bands, only relatively large differences are likely to be statistically significant.

**Figure 2** Numbers of jobs paid below different hourly rates of pay for people aged 18 to 21; United Kingdom; 1999 to 2002



Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

**Table 4** Proportions of jobs paid at less than 10p above the national minimum wage<sup>a</sup> by sex, age group and working pattern; United Kingdom; spring 2002

	All	Full-time	Per cent Part-time
<b>All</b>			
Aged 18 and over	4.3	2.0	10.8
Aged 18-21	5.2	4.4	6.2
Aged 22 and over	4.3	1.8	11.3
<b>Men</b>			
Aged 18 and over	2.3	1.5	10.4
Aged 18-21	4.4	*	*
Aged 22 and over	2.2	1.3	12.3
<b>Women</b>			
Aged 18 and over	6.5	2.9	10.9
Aged 18-21	6.1	*	*
Aged 22 and over	6.5	2.8	11.1

Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

a Less than £4.20 per hour for people aged 22 and over; less than £3.60 per hour for people aged 18 to 21.

\* Sample size too small for reliable estimate.

**Table 5** Proportions of jobs held by people aged 22 and over paid at less than £5 per hour by sex and working pattern; United Kingdom; spring 2002

	All	Full-time	Per cent Part-time
All	14.4	7.6	34.1
Men	7.7	5.7	31.2
Women	21.6	11.0	34.7

Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

**Table 6** Occupations with highest incidence of low pay; United Kingdom; spring 2002

	SOC90 code <sup>a</sup>	Per cent
<b>Paid less than 10p above the national minimum wage<sup>b</sup></b>		
1 Bar staff	622	28.9
2 Tailors, dressmakers	556	24.3
3 Waiters, waitresses	621	22.6
4 Hairdressers, barbers	660	20.9
5 Petrol pump forecourt attendants	722	19.5
6 Cleaners, domestics	958	18.7
7 Launderers, dry cleaners, pressers	673	17.9
8 Kitchen porters, hands	952	17.4
9 Lift and car park attendants	955	17.4
10 Window dressers, floral arrangers	791	16.2
<b>Paid less than £5 per hour<sup>c</sup></b>		
1 Market and street traders and assistants	732	76.5
2 Petrol pump forecourt attendants	722	70.6
3 Bar staff	622	70.3
4 Retail cash desk and check-out operators	721	67.0
5 Waiters, waitresses	621	66.0
6 Launderers, dry cleaners, pressers	673	65.9
7 Kitchen porters, hands	952	65.8
8 Cleaners, domestics	958	60.7
9 Counterhands, catering assistants	953	59.1
10 Shelf-fillers	954	57.0

Sources: New Earnings Survey; ONS estimates

a Occupations are coded according to the 1990 Standard Occupational Classification.

b Less than £4.20 per hour for people aged 22 and over; less than £3.60 per hour for people aged 18 to 21. For those aged 18 and over.

c For those aged 22 and over.

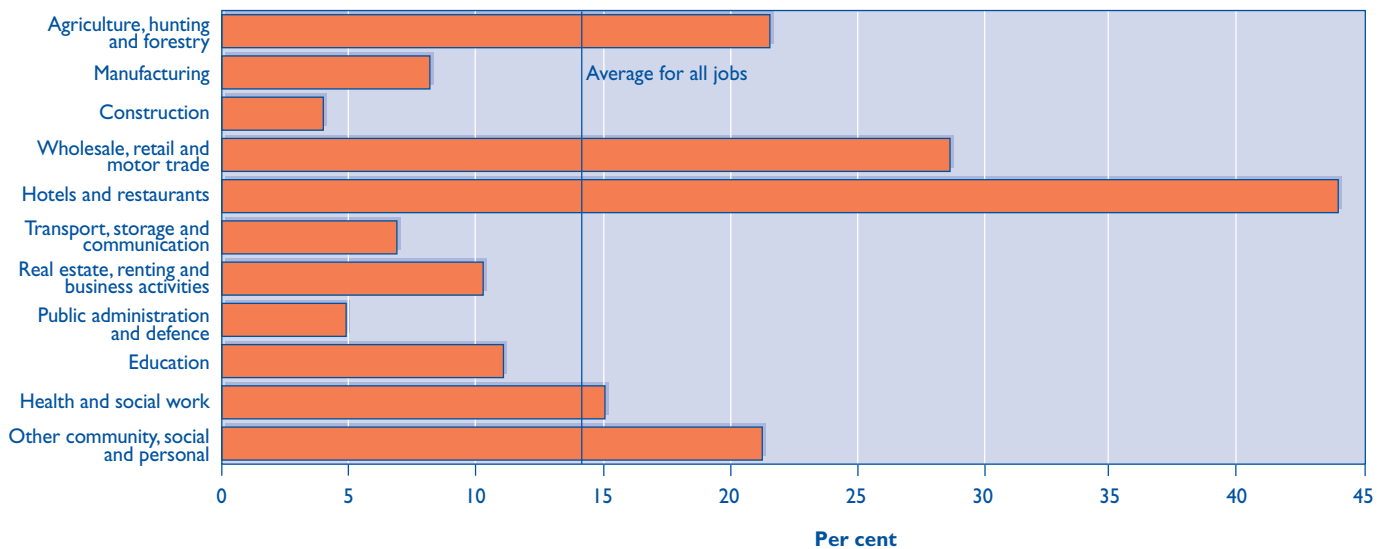
However, similar features relative to NMW thresholds appear to be present in this distribution as in the distribution for those aged 22 and over. The 2001 curve flattens in the £3.00 to £3.20 range, and the 2002 curve flattens in the £3.20 to £3.50 range. In the year 2000, where the threshold had not been increased in the previous 12 months, numbers of jobs paying below the level of the NMW actually remained constant, whereas in each of 2001 and 2002 they dropped by 50,000 on the previous year. And there is again in the years 1999 to 2001 the steep rise corresponding to jobs reported as being paid at exactly £4.00 per hour.

Another steep rise in *Figure 2* occurs at the level of the minimum wage for those aged 22 and over (the **adult** minimum rate). In fact, for the year 2002 the concentration of jobs paid at £4.00 per hour is no longer a strong feature, apparently because employers have preferred to pay at the adult minimum rate instead. *Table 3* provides the number and proportion of jobs held by people aged 18 to 21 paid at the level of the minimum wage for their age group (the youth minimum rate), at the adult minimum rate and at a level between the two. It shows that, for each year, more than twice as many of these jobs were paid at the adult minimum rate as were paid at the youth minimum rate. And in spring 2000 more of these jobs were paid at the adult minimum rate than were paid in the much broader band lying between the two minimum rates.

## Characteristics of the low paid

Using the ONS low-pay estimates methodology, this section presents data for spring 2002 showing proportions of jobs paid less than 10p above the NMW, and at below £5 per hour where jobholders are aged 22 and over. While these give a snapshot of the situation at one particular point in time, examination of the spring 2000 and 2001 data has shown very similar patterns. *Tables 4* and *5* are given by age group, sex, and whether the job is full-time or part-time. Both tables show women to be nearly three times as vulnerable to low pay as men. This

Figure 3 Proportions of jobs paid at less than £5 per hour by industrial sector; United Kingdom; spring 2002



Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

disparity between the sexes shows strongly for those aged 22 and over; it is present but not so large for the age range 18 to 21.

There is an even greater disparity between the pay of full-time and part-time workers, part-time jobs being about five times as likely to be low paid as full-time ones. Among part-time jobs the sex of the jobholder appears to make little difference to the likelihood of the job being low paid. Women are marginally more likely than men to be paid below the £4.20 threshold, although among part-time workers aged 22 and over men are slightly more likely to be low paid. At the £5.00 per hour threshold for jobholders aged 22 and over women are slightly more likely to be low paid. The idea that holding a part-time job makes one even more vulnerable to low pay than being a woman is supported by the fact that full-time jobs held by women are less likely to be low paid than the average for all jobs. However, it is still the case that women holding full-time jobs are about twice as likely to be low paid as are men holding full-time jobs.

Over four times as many women as men hold part-time jobs, so there is presumably some connection between the vulnerability of part-time workers to low pay and the vulnerability of women

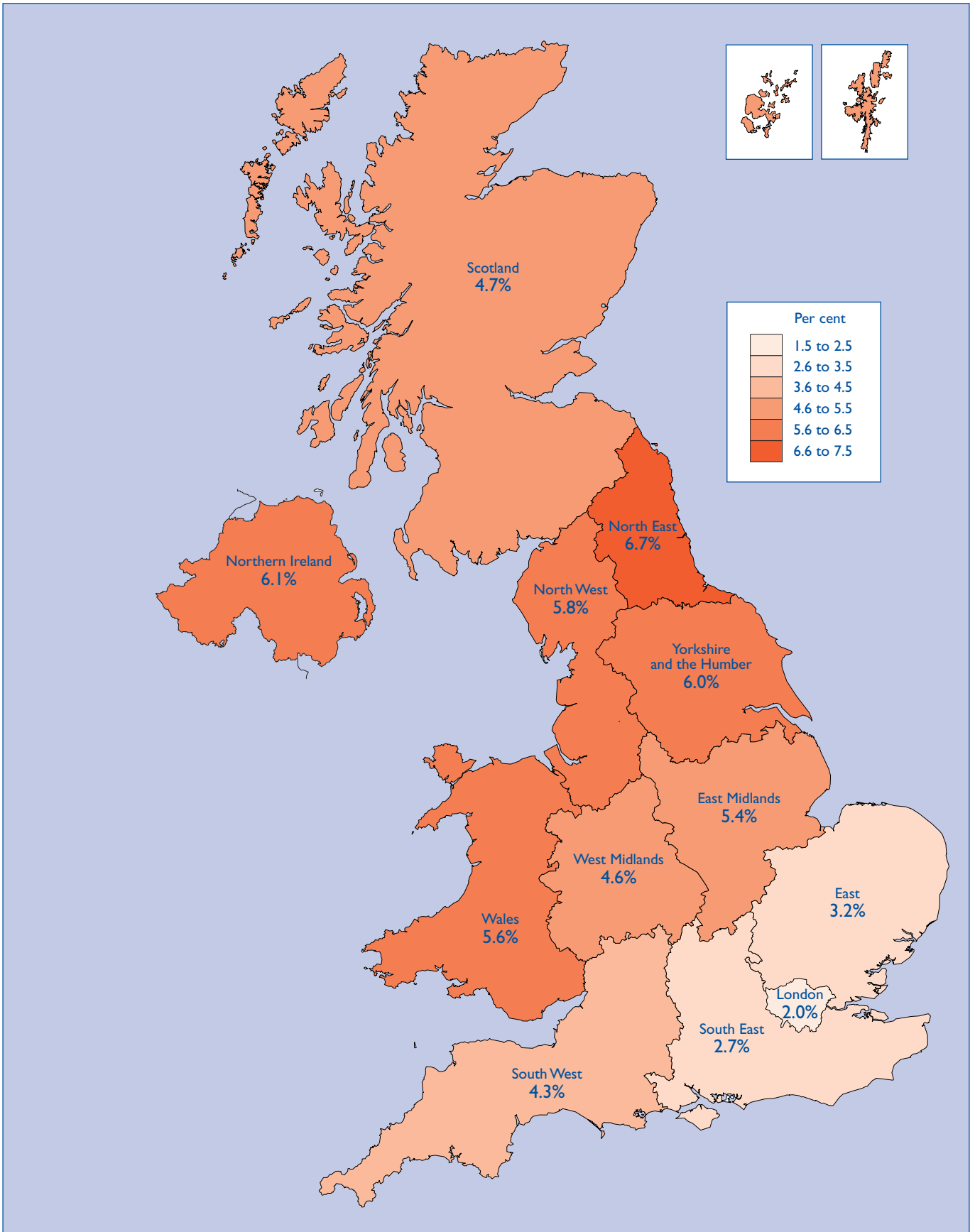
to low pay. Another factor is that occupations offering a large number of part-time jobs and also employing a high proportion of women tend to be low paid, but it would be beyond the scope of this article to suggest either the fact that most of these jobs are held by women or that most are part-time influences this tendency. Examples, as identified through the examination of NES data, are childcare and related occupations, and retail cash desk and check-out operators.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of jobs paying less than £5 per hour for jobholders aged 22 and over by industry sector. (The picture for the threshold 10p above the national minimum wage rate is similar, and so for reasons of space is not shown here.) The industry sector shown to be predominantly low paid at this level is hotels and restaurants (44 per cent). It is also by far the most vulnerable to pay at and below the NMW threshold. There is also a high proportion of low-paid jobs in the wholesale, retail and motor trades sector (29 per cent). The agriculture, hunting and forestry sector (22 per cent) and the community, social and personal sector (21 per cent) have significantly higher than average low pay, while the health and social work sector (15 per cent) has slightly higher.

Table 6 shows that bar staff were the most likely to be paid less than 10p above the NMW in spring 2002, while market and street traders and assistants were the most likely of those aged 22 and over to be paid at less than £5.00 per hour. Data for these estimates were obtained from the NES, applying the low pay methodology normally used to obtain the NES element of the central low pay estimate. As they are at a finer level of classification, the occupations listed are more recognisable than the major occupational groups shown for jobs paid below the NMW threshold on the National Statistics website. These two lists can be compared with the one for lowest-paid occupations in Table 7 of an earlier article about the NES (see pp643-655, *Labour Market Trends*, December 2002). It should be noted, however, that there are some differences in coverage (for example, the above article covers only Great Britain and full-time employees on adult rates).

The regions of the United Kingdom show relatively little disparity in rates of low pay in comparison with disparities by sex, part-time working, industry or occupation. Generally speaking, the prevalence of low pay increases with distance from London, although Scotland is close to the average. Figure 4 shows the regional distribution for the

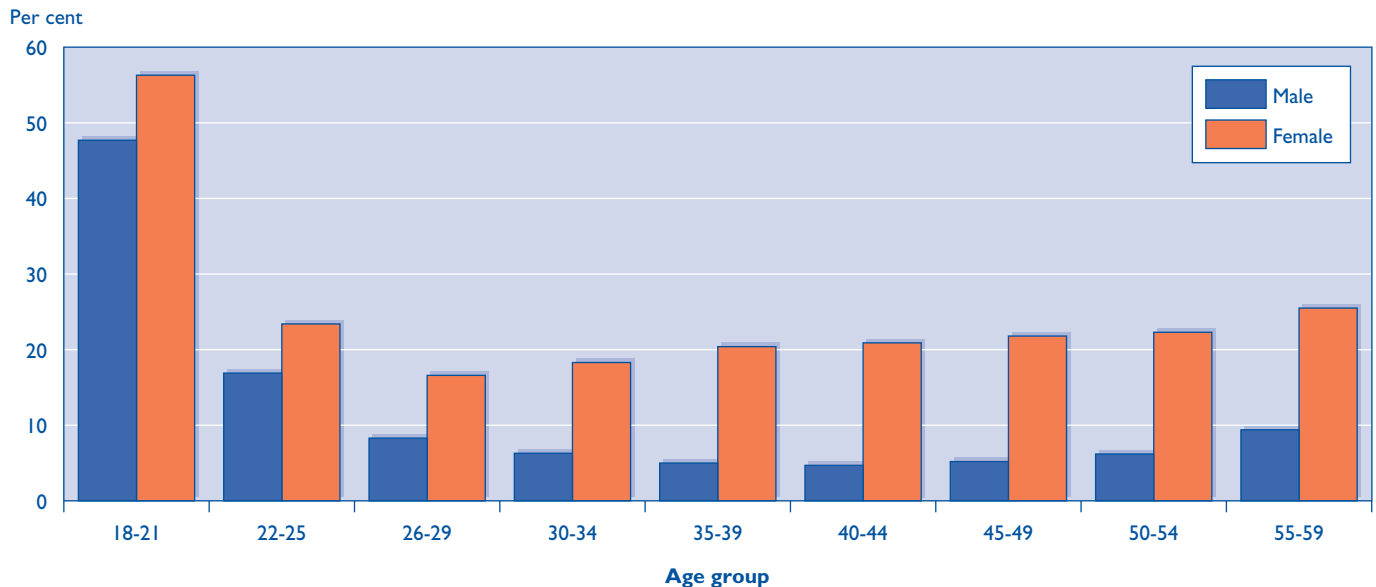
Figure 4 Proportion of jobs paid at less than 10p above the national minimum wage<sup>a</sup> by government office region and country; spring 2002



Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

<sup>a</sup> Less than £4.20 per hour for those aged 22 and over; less than £3.60 per hour for those aged 18 to 21.

Figure 5 Proportions of jobs paid at less than £5 per hour by sex and age group; United Kingdom; spring 2002



Sources: New Earnings Survey; Labour Force Survey; ONS estimates

proportion of jobs paid at less than 10p per hour above the NMW rate.

To be precise, much of the discussion in this section has been about the characteristics of low-paid jobs rather than of low-paid people. Industry, occupation and whether it is full-time or part-time are characteristics of a job, while a geographical region is usually the characteristic of both the job and its holder. Characteristics of low-paid people and jobs can interact in complex ways, as with sex, occupation and whether the job is full-time or part-time. One personal characteristic that undoubtedly influences pay levels is educational qualifications. Data from the spring 2002 LFS shows that the likelihood of low pay increases steadily as the level of the highest educational qualification decreases: among people aged 22 and over those with no recognised qualification are just over 20 times as likely to be paid below £5 per hour as are graduates.

### Differences in low pay between women and men

Differences in pay between women and men over the entire earnings distribution are usually presented in terms of the gender pay gap. This is an average

of women's pay given as a percentage of the corresponding average of men's pay. The average used can be the mean or median. If weekly, monthly or annual pay is used for this purpose, part of the resulting pay gap will arise from the greater incidence of part-time working among women, and another part will arise from the fact that, on average, men work longer hours in full-time employment than do women. It is usual to base the gender pay gap on hourly pay to attempt to measure the average difference in the price of men's and women's labour, although unadjusted for the type of work being carried out.

The low pay methodology has been specifically designed to describe the lower end of the pay distribution, but lends itself to estimates of proportions of jobs paying below a given threshold rather than averages. This article therefore applies this approach to the examination of differences in low pay between women and men, while at the same time exploring at what ages these differences occur. The threshold chosen for the presentations here is £5.00 per hour, although similar patterns were observed for £4.50 and £6.00 per hour.

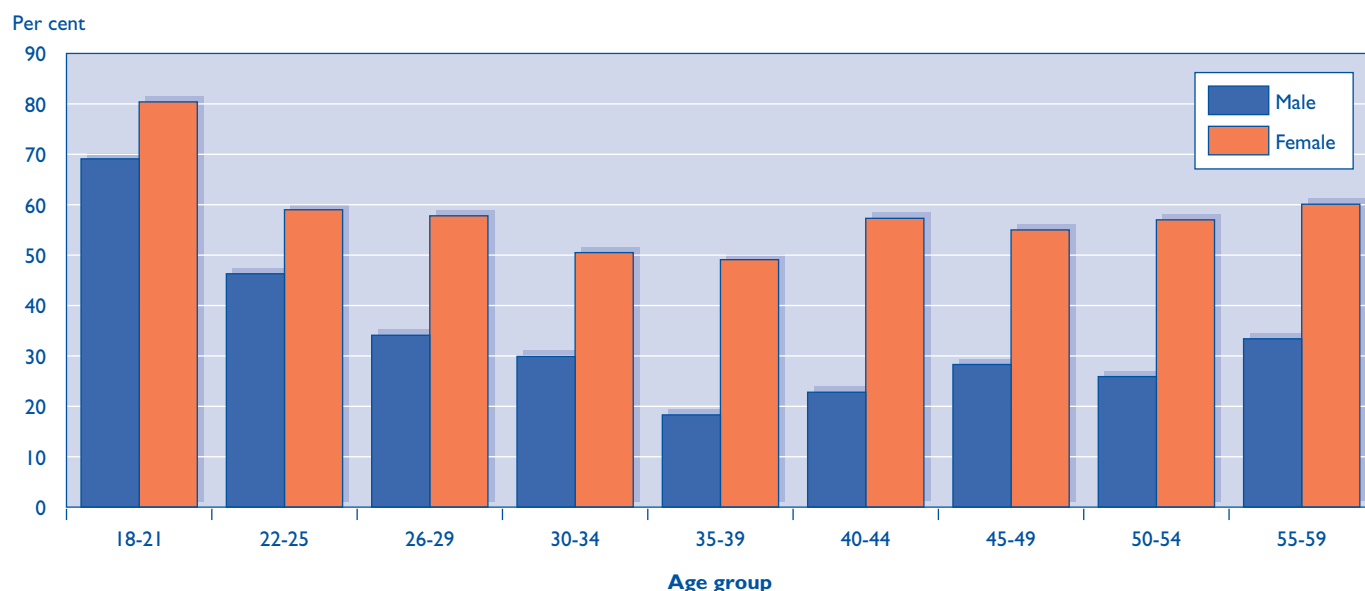
As has already been noted (see *Table 5*), women are nearly three times as likely as men to be paid below £5 per hour in the 22 and over age group. This

equates to a difference of about 14 percentage points. However, one would not expect this situation to hold throughout the age range. The pay gap between the sexes might reasonably be expected to widen at the age when women return to paid work after career breaks, as their earning potential will tend to have been put on hold while that of their male counterparts will have been increasing in the preceding years.

*Figure 5* explores this hypothesis by showing the percentages of men and women earning below £5 per hour in various age bands. The greatest disparity between the sexes, in terms of the ratio between them of the percentage of jobs paid less than £5 per hour, is indeed in the age range 35 to 49. The age bands 35 to 39, 40 to 44 and 45 to 49 years are the only ones where this ratio is greater than four, being 4.1, 4.4 and 4.2 respectively.

There is, however, an unexpected feature of *Figure 5*, namely that women are more likely than men to be paid below £5 per hour even in the 18 to 21 age band. This observation appears to be fairly robust, as it is present in both the constituent surveys (the NES and the LFS), and examination of the spring 2000 and 2001 data has shown a similar finding. It also shows that by the time the 26 to 29 age band has been reached

Figure 6 Proportions of jobs paid at less than £5 per hour in the hotels and restaurants industry sector by sex and age group; United Kingdom; spring 2002



New Earnings Survey; ONS estimates

women are about twice as likely as men to be paid under £5 per hour.

Explanations of these features at such young ages are unlikely to come from career breaks. It could be hypothesised that women, whether by their own choice or not, are predominantly employed in occupations or industries that are low-paying, while these occupations or industries are not in themselves paying more to men than they are to women. This, however, does not appear to be the case, at least at the level of industry sectors or major occupational groups.

Figure 6 gives an illustration of this. The hotel and restaurant industry sector has been chosen as it is particularly low-paying, and the data source is the NES as this survey has the more reliable industrial classification. In this figure a similar pattern is seen to that of Figure 5, not only in the middle of the age range but also for the younger age groups. The fact that this is the lowest paying industrial sector leads to the ratio of the percentages for women and men being somewhat less than in Figure 5, while the difference between women and men is correspondingly greater in terms of percentage points. For the 18 to 21 age band even the ratios of the percentages are the same in the two figures, and in this band the likelihood

of being paid at least £5 per hour in the hotel and restaurant sector is over one-and-a-half times greater for a man than for a woman.

Other industrial sectors and major occupational groups show similar patterns. There appears not to be a simple explanation for the early age at which the difference in low pay between women and men begins to occur, although the use of a finer level of detail in industrial or occupational classification might aid understanding. It undoubtedly appears to be the case, however, that the difference is greatest in the age range 35 to 49, with the most likely explanation of this being the return of women from career breaks.

## Conclusion

Comparison of low pay distributions over the past four years shows the numbers of jobs paying at levels below the NMW thresholds were very responsive to the level at which the threshold was initially set, and to subsequent upratings. However, the contrast between spring 1999, when the threshold had just been introduced, and later years, when any new threshold had been in place for at least six months, indicates some evidence from the surveys of a delay in the response.

Low pay particularly affects some groups, for instance women and part-time workers (who are often likely to be women). Disparity in pay between the sexes starts at an early age, for reasons that are not clear. This might be a fruitful area for further research, not just in the field of low pay but over the entire earnings distribution.

## Note

Low pay estimates First Release is available at [www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/lpe1002.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/lpe1002.pdf).

## Reference

Bulman, J., 'Patterns of pay: results of the 2002 New Earnings Survey', pp643-55, *Labour Market Trends*, December 2002.

### Further information

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