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FAMILY PORTRAIT: Single parent families and transitions over time

SUMI RABINDRAKUMAR, GINGERBREAD

Supported by **ÁLVARO MARTÍNEZ-PÉREZ, WINONA SHAW, NATHAN HUGHES AND
PHIL MIKE JONES, THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD**

Summary

- Public policy and research needs a more nuanced understanding of single parent family life, reflecting how households change over time and looking beyond households to understand the true nature of 'family'.
- Experiencing single parenthood is more common than typically reported. While surveys typically suggest that one in four families with children are headed by a single parent at any one point in time, longitudinal data suggests that one in three families with children will have been a single parent family at some point over a six-year period.
- Transitions out of single parent family status are common. Over six years, one in seven single parents reported getting married or cohabiting. Of these parents, nearly three quarters (re)partnered with a biological parent of their child.
- Family extends beyond the single parent household unit. In particular, grandparents play a key role in providing both financial and practical support.
- There is no evidence of a negative impact of living in a single parent household on children's wellbeing, with regard to self-reported life satisfaction, quality of peer relationships, or positivity about family life. Children who are living or have lived in single parent families score as highly, or higher, against each measure of wellbeing than those who have always lived in two parent families.

BACKGROUND

The Office for National Statistics reports that, in 2017, there were around 1.8 million single parent headed households with dependent children in the UK, representing 22% of families with dependent children. This proportion has been relatively static over the past 20 years. However, despite single parent families being a consistent feature of contemporary family life in the UK, assumptions of the negative impact of living in a single parent family often dominate policy discussions of child wellbeing.

Many studies have explored differences between children and young people in single parent families compared to two-parent households, repeatedly concluding that diverse experiences and outcomes occur independent of their family form. Children's outcomes are affected by a broad range of factors such as household income, parental health and wellbeing, and family size, which play a significant role, regardless of their family type (1,2).

What is lesser known, however, is how transitions into and out of single parenthood affect children's outcomes. Research often focuses on cross-sectional data, which does not allow us to capture or explore the intrinsically fluid and dynamic structure of family life that many experience (3,4). Consequently, there may be an assumption that children's family environments are fairly static over their childhood, or that, at most, allowance is only needed for a single event such as parental divorce or remarriage.

Moreover, there is arguably an over-reliance on data collection methods that equate 'family' with 'households', potentially misrepresenting and underestimating some single parent headed family units; i.e. a single parent with dependent children living with other adults, such as their parents or friends. This household approach also has the potential to ignore significant family connections that occur between households (5,6).

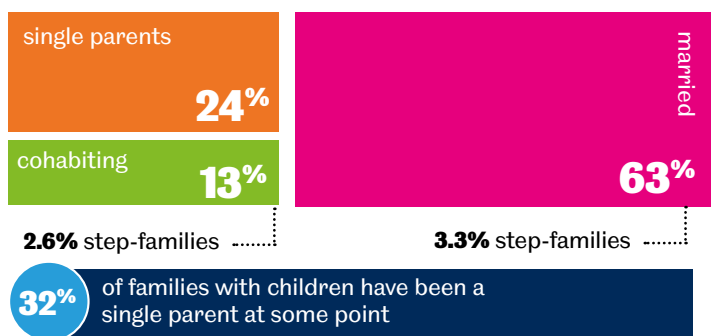
In this research, we use the rich longitudinal data from Understanding Society to examine changing family dynamics for parents and children experiencing single parenthood. Specifically, we have explored what the experiences of over 27,800 households with children, over a six-year period, tell us about:

- How common it is to experience single parenthood, as a permanent or transitory family type;
- Movements into and out of different family types over time;
- Relationships within the family; and
- Children's self-reported wellbeing within different family types.

SINGLE PARENTHOOD OVER TIME

In keeping with official statistics, our analysis found that 24% of families with children reported being single parent families at any one point in time (Figure 1). However, a different picture emerges when we look over time at all those who have been a single parent. While one in four parents report living in a single parent household overall, a third of families with children have been a single parent family at some point over the six-year period examined. Experience of single parenthood is therefore more common than typically reported in cross-sectional surveys or in policy and media reports.

Figure 1: Families with children by household type, Waves 1-7



FAMILIES AND TRANSITION

This more common experience of single parenthood indicates the significance of examining transitions in family structure. Looking at cumulative transitions from year to year gives us some idea of patterns of family change over a six-year period.

Over the six-year period, one in seven (14%) single parents reported marriage or cohabitation, and therefore a transition out of single parent status (Figure 2). Of these parents, nearly three quarters (re)partnered with a child's biological parent. This suggests it is common for biological parents to have a continuing and evolving role when parents live apart.

It is more common for those who were single parents due to bereavement to repartner through marriage (13%), than it is among those single parents who report having always been single, or having been separated or divorced (8%).

Figure 2: Transitions between family types

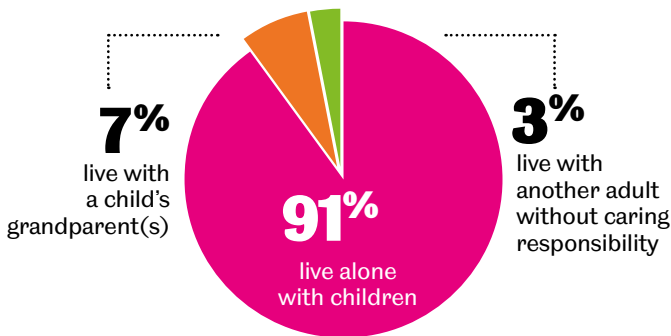
	REMAIN SAME	CHANGE (WAVES 1-7)
Single parent due to divorce or separation	85%	14% repartner 1% bereaved
Single parent due to bereavement	84%	16% repartner
Married	94%	3% cohabit 3% separate/divorce
Cohabiting	77%	11% marry 12% separate

Consistent with other literature, cohabiting parents are most likely to experience change in family structure. Interestingly, this is as important as a route to marriage as a route into single parenthood - those leaving cohabitation are as likely to marry as to become a single parent (Figure 2). Similar patterns of transition were found among married families, who faced an equal likelihood (3%) of moving to cohabitation and a single parent family over the six years.

SINGLE PARENTS ARE NOT NECESSARILY ALONE

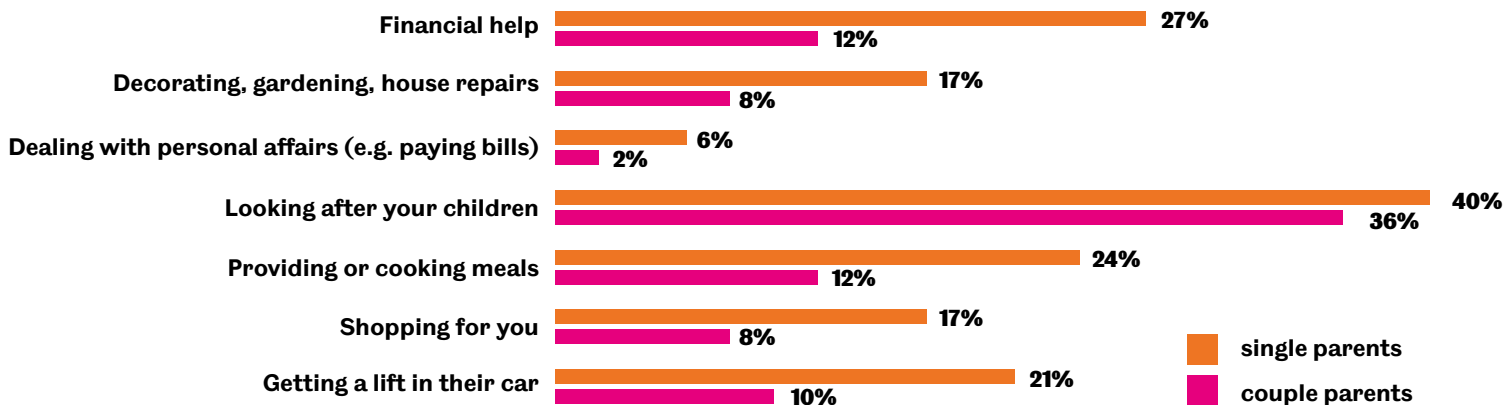
Looking within households illustrates it is not just the child(ren)'s other biological parent who holds a key relationship with single parent families. Grandparents also play a key role. Unsurprisingly, nearly all single parents report living with no other adult. Nevertheless, around one in ten report living with their child's grandparent(s), or another adult who does not have any caring responsibility for their child or children (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Single parents by living arrangements



Single parents are also more likely to receive help from their child(ren)'s grandparents than two-parent households (Figure 4). This is particularly evident with financial support and practical help with tasks such as preparing meals, doing everyday chores, and DIY. While parents in all family types report high reliance on grandparents for childcare, single parents are still significantly more likely to receive this support. These differences are biggest for single parents who are the only adults in the household, indicating the importance of support and caring networks beyond the household.

Figure 4: Grandparents' support by living arrangements



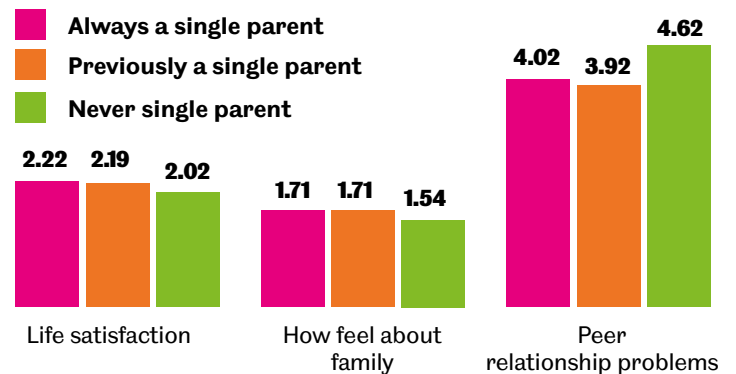
THE IMPACT OF SINGLE PARENTHOOD ON CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

Capturing data over a number of years helps us to understand the impact of living in and transitioning between various family types on multiple measures of children's wellbeing. In this case, wellbeing is measured by looking at 'life satisfaction', 'feelings about their family', and 'the quality of relationships with peers'.

On average, those who have been in a single parent family at some point report higher levels of life satisfaction than those children who have never lived in a single parent family. Similarly, those with experience of living in a single parent family on average report more positive feelings about the family than those who have not. Lastly, those children who have experienced or always lived in single parent families tend to report less problematic relationships with their peers than those who have never lived in single parent families. In all cases, the differences between those who have never lived in single parent families, and those who have either experienced or always lived in single parent families is statistically significant, meaning the difference we observe is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Figure 5: Children's wellbeing

Ratings on a scale up to 5. Higher average indicates better/more positive life satisfaction and how children feel about their family and, conversely, worse peer relationship problems.



Given the diversity of families within these groups, further analysis is needed before we can suggest that living in a single parent household has a positive impact on a child's wellbeing. Even so, counter to the dominant public perception, what is clear is that this robust dataset provides no evidence of a negative impact of living in single parent households on these indicators of children's wellbeing.

Recommendations

By taking a more dynamic view of family life, these findings challenge common political and public narratives around single parents and their families. Not only is the experience of single parenthood more common than typically reported, but family and caring relationships are more complex and often extend beyond the household unit. Crucially, there are clear signs that children's wellbeing is not negatively affected by living within a single parent household. This fresh look at family life must now be reflected in policy making and research alike. To ignore these trends risks remaining out of touch with the reality of everyday lives and the UK's family landscape.

Policy makers must:

- Recognise the fluidity of families and separation – single parenthood is common, separation in itself does not mean the breakdown of relationships with a child's biological parent, particularly given the prevalence of repartnering for biological parents.
- Think beyond the household – support networks and relationships between and within households should be understood and valued in policy decisions.
- Resist popular narratives regarding the perceived 'problems' of single parenthood for children – ensure targeted policy making by taking proper account of the evidence on what affects family outcomes

Researchers must:

- Further examine patterns of family transitions, so as to more robustly understand the prevalence of different household types, and move away from static conceptions of family structure.
- Provide more robust data on separated families' relationships with a child's other parent, to properly understand relationships beyond the immediate household.
- Undertake further extensive longitudinal analysis regarding the impact on children's outcomes of living in single parent families and those experiencing transitions between family types. This includes considering longer term outcomes, as well as the differential impact due to additional factors, such as wider family support, income and unemployment.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The results presented here are based on analysis, led by Dr. Álvaro Martínez-Pérez, of Waves 1 to 7 of Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study (www.understandingsociety.ac.uk). Understanding Society is the largest panel survey in the world, and tracks changes in social and economic circumstances and attitudes through repeat surveys of a sample of over 40,000 households, or 100,000 individuals, across the UK. This analysis looks at the data collected for 27,834 households with children between 2009 and 2017. The analysis is based on descriptive longitudinal methods (transition tables) and cross-sectional frequency tables on the pooled data. Statistical analysis uses mean comparison tests methods for two and multiple samples.

This research has been carried out by a multidisciplinary team as part of the Crook Public Service Fellowship scheme in the Faculty of Social Sciences. The scheme is funded by a donation from Professor Tony Crook and is supported by the ESRC Impact Accelerator Account. It allows future leaders in the public and not-for-profit sectors to work closely with academics on pressing policy issues to influence their sector and potentially wider society.

Gingerbread (www.gingerbread.org.uk) is the leading national charity working with single parent families. The views and results presented here are those of the authors and not necessarily those of The University of Sheffield or Gingerbread.

FURTHER READING

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About the author

Sumi Rabindrakumar led policy research on welfare reform, financial exclusion, employment and child maintenance at Gingerbread until September 2018, and is now Head of Policy and Research at the Trussell Trust. She has worked on mixed methods research and evaluation for over ten years, previously working at children's charity Coram and the Audit Commission.