

## **Lone Parenthood and its Consequences for Children**

Paul Gregg, Susan Harkness and Marina Fernandez Salgado

### **Abstract**

In the UK up to one half of all children will spend at least some time growing up with just one parent resident in the home, either at birth or later as result of separation or divorce. Yet, in spite of its frequency, and a rapid increase in its prevalence, there is little empirical evidence on how the nature of lone-parenthood has changed over recent decades. Nor is there evidence on how the growth in lone-parenthood, to the extent that it is now a social norm, has been associated with a shift in the consequences for children of growing up in a lone-parent family. This study aims to fill these substantial gaps in the literature using data from four major UK birth cohort studies. These follow large samples of children born in the years 1958, 1970, 1990 and 2000 and contain very detailed information on children and their families as well as, for the earlier cohorts, information on outcomes as adults. This data therefore allows the experience of children who have ever lived in a lone-parent family to be tracked over a long period of time. We find evidence of changes in the timing and duration of lone parenthood, with both more children entering lone parent families from birth as well as in later childhood, and an increasing delay to re-partnering. Across cohorts we find the negative effect of growing up in a lone parent family to have declined but we also find evidence of greater diversity of outcomes.

**Keywords:** lone parenthood, children's outcomes, birth cohort studies

## **Introduction**

There is a large literature which relates lone parenthood, , to poverty, worklessness and poor outcomes for children, with children growing up in lone-parent families widely considered to do less well than those living in families that are intact across a range of measures. Children in lone parent families have relatively poor educational and emotional outcomes and are more likely to engage in “risk taking” behaviour (see, for example, Gregg & Machin, 1999, 2001; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001a; Millar & Ridge, 2001). The economic and social vulnerability of children in these families has placed them at the heart of economic and social policy. Yet the stylised facts fail to take recognise the extraordinary pace at which family forms have changed in the UK over recent decades, with much of the evidence that is drawn on being taken from studies which use data based on children born in 1958 or 1970 (in birth cohort studies). Nor do these studies recognise the fluidity and diversity of family structures. As a result academic and policy discussions are all too often based on dated evidence of the performance of children in lone parent families at a time when lone-parenthood was rare, and treating lone-parents as a homogeneous population defined by current family structure rather than taking account of children’s full family history.

This paper examines how what it means to be a lone parent has changed in recent decades using data from four UK birth cohorts (1958, 1970, 1991/2 and 2000). We start by examining how, as lone-parenthood has grown (to the extent that it is now a social norm), the nature of lone parenthood, and its consequences for children, have changed. Using the birth cohort data we build a rich history of the family structure of children which captures both current and past family forms. These family partnership histories are used to develop a series of “typologies” of lone parenthood, using information on the age of children at separation, relationship durations, siblings and re-partnering behaviour. Across the typologies we then compare the implications of different types of experience of lone parenthood for a range of measures of children’s educational and emotional/behavioural outcomes. These outcomes are measured during early, middle and late childhood, and for older cohorts, adults up to age 40. We are then able to assess how, as family histories have changed, this has influence children’s outcomes for across birth cohorts. Finally, we investigate whether, as lone parenthood has become more frequent, whether the outcomes for children growing up in lone parent families have become more diverse.

## **Conceptual Framework and Evidence**

There is a wealth of literature relating lone parenthood (in the UK) and single parenthood (in the US) to children's outcomes (see, for example, Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001a, 2001b; McLanahan, 2004; Amato, 2002). Many reasons have been put forward for the relatively poor performance of these children, with negative selection into lone parenthood and loss of income on becoming a lone parent among the most important (Kiernan et al, 2011; Walker & Zhu, 2011). However, how these outcomes have been influenced by rapidly changing family structures over time is less well understood. In particular, as lone parenthood has grown selection in terms of mothers' characteristics and employment status is likely to have changed. Likewise the dynamics of family structure may have altered, and as the number of lone parents has grown we may too expect to see increasingly diverse outcomes. Each of these factors is considered here.

### *Selection into Lone Parenthood*

There is surprising little evidence for the UK on the extent to which the relationship between lone-parenthood and poor child outcomes is causal rather than selective, or on how as lone parenthood has become more common over time, selection into lone parenthood has changed. While the context of lone-parenthood in the UK differs markedly from that in the US, the US evidence does suggest that much single parenthood<sup>1</sup> occurs among a highly selected group, with those most likely to partner low skilled men increasingly choosing to remain single (Lundberg and Pollak, 2007) and suggesting that many single parents would remain poor even if they had remained partnered (Page and Stevens, 2004). In the UK lone parenthood is associated with high levels of relative poverty, and children in poor households have been shown to have poor educational outcomes (Ermisch and Francesconi 2001a, 2001b). However the causal impact of lone parenthood per se is debated – Walker and Zhu (2011) for example argue that it is the loss of a father's income, rather than father absence per se, that drives this association.

### *Family Dynamics*

Lone-parenthood is a fluid state: it is most often a transitory state before moving into a stable relationship, but significant minorities of lone-parents are long-term lone-parents or have had repeated relationship instability. A large literature documents the adverse association of family instability with children's (Amato, 2005; Cavanaugh and Huston 20006; Formby and

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<sup>1</sup> Note that in the UK / EU context lone-parenthood refers to those parents who live alone with their children. In the US, single parents are the normal unit of analysis and this refers to all parents who are unmarried and therefore includes both those that are single parents and also those that are cohabiting.

Cherlin 2007; Osborne and McLanahan 2007; Osborne, Berger and Magnusson, 2012). Research suggests that for a minority of those passing through lone-parenthood there are multiple transitions rather than moves between stable relations (Marsh and Perry, 2003) and this may be an important source of variation in children's experiences. The importance of identifying multiple categories of family structure to examine its effects on child outcomes is noted by Carlson and Corcoran (2001), while Osborne and McLanahan (2007) have highlighted how in the US unstable relationships – in particular multiple partnership transitions - are associated with poor child outcomes. And while re-partnering may be an important potential route out of poverty, for children in lone-parent families remarriage does not diminish the negative consequences of lone-parenthood with step-children having similarly negative outcomes as those living with a lone-parent (McLanahan, 1997; Sanson et al., 2002; Hansen et al, 2010). It seems likely therefore that some patterns or “typologies” of lone parenthood are worse for children's outcomes than others. In addition however other factors are likely to matter too – the duration of time spent as a lone parent may matter, with longer durations giving greater stability to children, although it may also increase the duration of poverty. The stability of preceding and post-ceeding relationships is likely to matter too – with greater stability expected to be linked to better outcomes for children. How the consequences for children of being in a lone-parent family differ across these dimensions, or has changed over time, have been little explored in the empirical literature on lone parent families.

### *Diversity of Outcomes*

As the experience of lone parenthood has grown it might be expected that lone parent families may be becoming more heterogeneous. An analysis of data from the General Household Survey shows that in the UK, while lone parenthood has grown most rapid and is most common among those with fewer qualifications, the share of mothers with degrees who are single has also risen with 12% being single by 2004. How does the experience of lone parenthood differ for these children – in particular is lone-parenthood in the UK such a dominant characteristic that children's outcomes are poor regardless of their background? Or do they retain the advantages of class and education, particularly as the labour market opportunities of mothers have improved? US evidence suggests that there diversity has been growing among mothers, with some better educated lone mothers doing very well, in particular where they maintain work and receive maintenance, while others “fail

spectacularly” (Alderson and Doran, 2010) although the experience of children has not been examined.

## **Methods**

### *Data and Sample*

We use data from four major UK birth cohort studies (for cohorts born in 1958, 1970, 1990 and 2000). The birth cohorts are ideally placed to allow us to examine the influence of family structure on child outcomes for a representative sample of children. Each of the cohort studies contain very detailed information on families and their children for a large sample of children born in 1958, 1970, 1990 and 2000. This data therefore will allow us to track the experience of children and lone-parent families over a longer period of time. The most recent survey, the Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS) follows a nationally representative sample of babies born in the Millennium and their families. At the time of the first sweep of the survey, when the cohort child was around nine months old, approximately 17 per cent of mothers were lone mothers. The survey was repeated when the children were around three, five, seven and eleven years of age. Retrospective employment and partnership histories are available between sweeps of the survey. The earlier cohorts, the 1958 National Child Development Survey (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS) do not have complete relationship histories between sweeps but have data at birth, early school age (age 7 for the NCDS and 5 for the BCS), end of Primary school (11 and 10 respectively) and at age 16. In addition, there are questions concerning the nature and duration of the relationship at the time of birth of the study child. Child educational development can be observed at all sweeps from early school age onward and into adulthood. Some domains of non-cognitive measures are available on a reasonably comparable basis for NCDS, BCS and MCS but there is richer data in the later studies. The final data set, the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) collected data from over 10,000 children born in 1991/92 with very detailed information collected on parents and children at 8 weeks, 8, 21, 33 and 47 months and then annually between age 6 and 13.

### *Estimation Techniques*

Our objective is to explore how educational attainment and measures of emotional well-being at early, middle and late childhood are affected by different family histories on. We do this by developing a set of typologies of lone-parenthood defined by age of children on entering

lone parenthood, duration of lone-parenthood, and the stability of preceding and subsequent relationships for each of the birth cohorts. These typologies are then linked to other socio-economic characteristics of lone-parents including age, education and work experience, and to those of the absent parent where they were observed prior to lone parenthood. Using the longitudinal element of the data we then use fixed estimators to condition on both observable and unobservable characteristics and examine changes between early, mid and late childhood. Looking across the cohorts this allows us to describe how children's routes into lone parenthood have evolved since 1958, at the subsequent experience of children as parents re-partner, and at the consequences of these transitions for children.

## **Findings**

Our analysis shows, as expected, a sharp decline in the number of children living with both natural parents, with a rise in the number born to lone mothers and in those becoming single over time. These changes are driven by a number of factors. First, in the earliest cohort, 1958, children born to lone mothers were frequently adopted. By 1970 the number of children living with both natural parents had fallen, but there had been no growth in lone parenthood – instead more children were growing up in step-parent families. The latest birth cohort shows a further change: by 2000 lone parenthood was much more common both because fewer children were living with both natural parents and because step parenthood was much less common. There is evidence of changes in selection into lone parenthood with the negative effect of growing up in a lone parent family declining for children in more recent birth cohorts and being less marked for children who entered lone parenthood at a later age. Reduced rates of re-partnering, and increased rates of single parent employment, are two of the drivers that have led to improvements in outcomes for these children.