



## Supporting Lone Parents and Their Children in Europe

Insights from a dialogue between researchers and policy makers

### Key messages:

- Lone parenthood should always be defined in a way that all types of lone parents are included, regardless of their partnership status and the support provided by the other parent.
- Research infrastructures creating longitudinal data with detailed information on family trajectories should be further supported and promoted. This is necessary to identify whether and at which stage of the life course individuals enter into lone parenthood and eventually leave it, as well as how this phase is experienced and its consequences for individuals and their children.
- Policies should provide universal social benefits for disadvantaged persons and families in general. Targeted policies may also be needed as a way to support lone parent families in their specific needs.
- If states fully support gender equality, then they are also supporting lone parents overcoming their key challenges. This can be concretely done for example by offering childcare benefits, well-paid parental leave and care credits in pension systems to all parents, and by creating measures to effectively reduce class inequalities, particularly by tackling female disadvantages on the labour market. The approval of the **EU Work Life Balance Directive** would constitute an important step forward in this direction.

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## › Introduction

Pathways leading to lone parenthood have diversified in the last decades. Until the 1970's, most lone parents were widowed men and women, or young lone mothers. Nowadays the majority are divorced or separated parents. Although lone father families have become more common, the biggest share of lone parents are still mothers who have physical custody of their child(ren), and many of them lack the financial support of the non-resident father.

The role played by parents has also changed substantially over time: Living with one parent does not necessarily imply that the non-resident parent is not actively supporting their child(ren). More and more, children move between two households after parental separation, and parents share financial, care and legal responsibilities more equally. Life course analyses reveal that lone parenthood is becoming a more temporary phase in the life course, as episodes of lone parenthood are becoming shorter than in the past. This is mostly due to an increase in re-partnering and in shared physical custody of children. A major consequence is that it became more complex for policy makers to make sure this population is not in difficult situations and is sufficiently supported by the welfare state. In terms of policy, the role played by lone parents on a country's poverty level has recently been intensively debated (Maldonado 2018). Robust research results indicate that lone parenthood is not a "driving factor" per se of social inequality, and that reducing its scale would not substantially reduce poverty. Family forms are much less relevant than the degree by which social policies support families in precarious situations (Brady et al. 2018).

On January 26, 2018, experts on lone parenthood met in Brussels to discuss the main challenges to be addressed by the academic community and by policy makers in Europe. Discussions were based on results from the recently published book *Lone Parenthood in the Life Course*, edited by Laura Bernardi and Dimitri Mortelmans and available for free download by Springer Open. Participants included: Laura Bernardi (Professor for Demography and Sociology of the Life Course/Researcher at the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: Life course perspectives (NCCR LIVES), University of Lausanne, Switzerland), Yekaterina Chzhen (Social Policy Economic Specialist, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Italy), Annemie Drieskens (President, COFACE Families Europe, Belgium), Stuart Duffin (Tykadýlko pro děti, Czech Republic), Andreas Edel (Executive Secretary, Population Europe/Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Germany), Kinga Joó (European Economic and Social Committee, Employment, Social Affairs and Cit-

izenship Section, Belgium), Júlia Mikolai (Research Fellow, University of St Andrews, School of Geography & Sustainable Development, UK), Dimitri Mortelmans (Professor in Sociology at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences/Head of the Centre for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies, University of Antwerp, Belgium), Julius Op de Beke (Policy Officer, European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Belgium), Anne-Sophie Parent (Secretary General, Age Platform Europe, Belgium), Christine Schnor (Research Scientist, Interface Demography, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium), Philippe Seidel Leroy (Policy and EP Liaison Officer, AGE Platform Europe, Belgium), Olivier Thévenon (Social Policy Analyst, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, France), Margaret Tuite (Team Leader – Commission Coordinator for the Rights of the Child, European Commission, Belgium) and Daniela Vono de Vilhena (Scientific Coordinator, Population Europe/Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Germany).

In the next sections of this policy brief, the issues discussed at the meeting are introduced. Then, concrete policy recommendations are presented.

## › Definitions matter

Diversity among lone parents is there, and definitions are crucial, particularly when it derives rights and responsibilities for law and social policies. This not only refers to parents themselves, but it also relates to residential arrangements and distribution of time of parents and children, the legal obligations of parents and the appearance of step-parents and new children (from previous relationships of step-parents or newborns). The traditional identification of lone parents as having sole parental responsibility complicates the picture even further, as it leaves some lone parents out of the picture.

In practice, it is not always possible to capture this complexity in available data sources. Social empirical researchers are bound to specific definitions depending on the data source they use and the country studied. Studies often rely on household data, which means that structures beyond the household are difficult to capture. Furthermore, studies tend to exclude situations of co-residence with other adults (grandparents and other family members, new partners or unrelated adults) in their definition of lone parenthood. Another criteria to define lone parenthood is the resident child's age. Some data sources limit it to age 16, 18 or 25 to qualify a household as a lone-parent household, thereby excluding situations in which un-partnered parents live to-

gether with their adult children (Bernardi and Mortelmans, in press).

Debates in our meeting revealed the importance of further developing European cross-national studies on lone parenthood (Júlia Mikolai, University of St Andrews), rethinking the meaning of parenthood by including new members of blended families in the picture (Stuart Duffin, *Tykadýlko pro děti*), and regarding situations of *de-facto lone parenthood*, for example when the father is working abroad or has a serious illness or condition and the mother is taking care of child(ren) alone. These concrete examples are not legally considered as cases of lone parenthood and are not captured in most available data. Nonetheless, they have a considerable negative effect on families when they are not properly supported (Kinga Joó, EESC).

### › Lone parents and poverty – how to tackle it?

Even if lone parenthood is, for many, a transitory state in the life course, it interferes severely with many life domains, at least for a certain period of time. Researchers agree on the fact that lone parent families have higher poverty risks than coupled parents: Almost 50 per cent of lone parents with dependent children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (EU-28 average, Eurostat 2016).

However, it is often uncertain whether this is due to the family status itself, individuals' social background, or events that happened at a previous stage of the life course that had lasting effects (Bernardi et al. 2014). Most frequently, those that become lone parents would have been poor even if they had not had a child, or if they had continued to live with a partner. In addition, evidence suggests that it is not the lone parenthood status as such that predominantly determines child outcomes (Bernardi and Mortelmans, in press).

How can a lone family be prevented from falling into poverty? Universalistic types of interventions not targeted at lone parent households coexist with interventions focused on lone parents, particularly when aiming to prevent and alleviate poverty for the household and for children. Studies focusing on income taxes, transfers and family policies tend to suggest that a mix of universal and targeted support is the most efficient way of combating poverty among lone parents as they combine preventative and protective measures. From a universalistic perspective, proven relevant policies are those that: 1 – support gender equality, for example by offering childcare benefits and well-paid parental leave, and 2 – reduce class inequal-

ities, particularly by tackling female disadvantages in the labour market (Bernardi and Mortelmans 2018).

In our meeting, Yekaterina Chzhen (UNICEF) pointed to studies suggesting that cash transfers are extremely effective in reducing poverty (Bradshaw et al. 2018). However, she also noted that much of the financial support is means-tested, and the support is reduced for individuals at higher wage levels. Christine Schnor (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Olivier Thévenon (OECD) argued in the same direction by noting that middle income families should not be forgotten when discussing lone parenthood and poverty, as lone parent families with middle income often face problems with non-payment of child alimony, high childcare costs and other employment barriers.

Targeted policies should be carefully implemented as taxes and benefits often interact in unexpected and incoherent ways. Bradshaw and colleagues (2018) illustrate the situation by mentioning that some countries have higher cash benefits for lone parents, but then undermine that advantage by taking those benefits into account when assessing housing benefits. Stuart Duffin (*Tykadýlko pro děti*) mentioned similar examples of benefits for lone parents impacting other social benefits, such as access to subsidised childcare, or the case of receiving study subsidies and lone parent benefits at the same time. Annemie Drieskens (COFACE Families Europe) noted the importance of taking a systematic "two-generation approach" when tackling vulnerable groups by approaching parents and children's needs at the same time.

Overall, stakeholders participating in our meeting tended to focus on vulnerable situations rather than on family forms as a factor creating precarity. Annemie Drieskens (COFACE Families Europe) highlighted that instead of targeting specific family structures, policies should rather approach families in vulnerable situations as a whole. Anne-Sophie Parent and Philippe Seidel (AGE Platform) stressed that if access to resources is limited, then this will have long-term effects and be reflected, e.g. in pensions. Finally, Annemie Drieskens (COFACE Families Europe) and Kinga Joó (EESC) mentioned the importance of the proposed EU Work Life Balance Directive in this context and it was agreed upon during our meeting that policies supporting work-life balance of mothers and fathers, and fathers' involvement in childrearing should be further promoted as a way of preventing lone parent poverty. It would increase employment possibilities and also their take up of parental leave to better balance work and family life, and raise consciousness about financial and childrearing responsibilities among both parents.

## › Preventing unintended consequences for parents and children post-separation

Lone parenthood is usually not a chosen path, but rather a state provoked by separation, widowhood or unexpected pregnancy. The chances that it will bring challenges for individuals and their children are high. Recent research presented in the book *Lone Parenthood in the Life Course* (Bernardi and Mortelmans, in press) highlights some major patterns. First, it shows that the transition into and the duration of lone parenthood have negative effects on health satisfaction and wellbeing of parents. Second, it shows that there are differences in the wellbeing of children across family types. However, the rigorous empirical analyses presented in the book show that the reasons for these findings go beyond the family structure. Instead, income change and employment status play an important moderating role in these results for parents. Regarding children, it shows that much of the adverse consequences of childbearing outside marriage pertaining to the child's health and educational development appear to be an artefact of pre-existing socio-economic disadvantages. The results suggest that when faced with similar conditions while growing up, children from one-parent families fare similarly in most regards to children from married families.

From the side of stakeholders, much emphasis was given to the importance of guaranteeing that a separation and new living arrangements do not affect children (Yekaterina Chzhen, UNICEF). Similarly, Christine Schnor (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) noted that social policies should not lead to families being stigmatised. Olivier Thévenon (OECD) highlighted the importance of promoting family counselling to prevent conflict that may create more chances for parents to improve relations after separation, which can positively affect the wellbeing of all family members and the child support payments. Stuart Duffin (Tykadýlko pro děti) stressed the importance of taking into account the roles of both biological parents and step-parents while exploring the effects of separation, and Annemie Drieskens (COFACE Families Europe) suggested considering the role of social networks in supporting parents after divorce, as the wellbeing of parents is closely linked to the wellbeing of children.

## › Policy recommendations

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detailed information on family trajectories should be further supported and promoted. This is necessary to identify whether and at which stage of the life course individuals enter into lone parenthood and eventually leave it, as well as how this phase is experienced and its consequences for individuals and their children.

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