

Population Europe

demography  
drives your future

# Population & Policy

COMPACT

## Boosting Children's Lifetime Chances in Times of Diverse Family Forms

### Authors:

FABRIZIO BERNARDI  
JOHN ERMISCH  
ANNE H. GAUTHIER  
JUHO HÄRKÖNEN

### Key messages:

- The impact of family dissolution on children varies considerably and lasting effects persist for only a minority.
- To prevent negative consequences of family dissolution on children's development, policies should prevent economic downward mobility and provide support to children and parents to adapt to new family dynamics and forms.
- Life chances of children depend more strongly on the socio-economic background of their parents than on the family form they are living in.
- Mitigating the effect of parental socio-economic background on children is one of the major challenges for family policies.

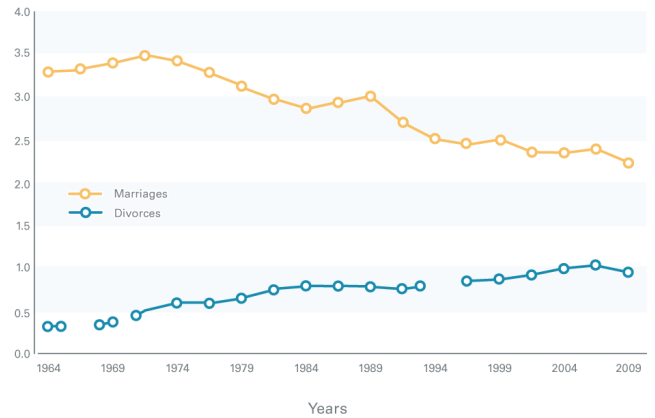
## MARRIAGE – AN OUT-DATED MODEL OF FAMILY BUILDING?

DYNAMICS OF FAMILY FORMATION have changed substantially over the last decades as a consequence of the second demographic transition: Age at marriage rose, childbearing was postponed, cohabitation, births outside marriage and divorce increased, as well as the number of individuals opting to not have children (van Gaalen and van Poppel 2009). Thus, family forms are becoming more and more diverse in modern societies. In 1960, for example, only one out of 70 children was born outside of marriage in the Netherlands – today this is true for every second child. Importantly, the large majority of those children are born to cohabiting parents, as opposed to single mothers. In Europe, however, the numbers differ strongly: In 2012, the percentage of births outside of marriage ranged from 8% in Greece to 67% in Iceland (Table 1).

Country	Year					
	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2012
Austria	13	13	18	24	31	42
Bulgaria	8	9	11	12	38	57
Denmark	8	11	32	46	45	51
Estonia	-	-	-	27	55	58
Finland	4	6	13	25	39	42
France	6	7	11	30	44	56*
Germany	8	7	12	15	23	35
Greece	1	1	2	2	4	8
Hungary	6	5	7	13	29	45
Iceland	25	30	40	55	65	67
Ireland	2	3	6	15	32	35
Italy	2	2	4	7	10	28
Netherlands	1	2	4	11	25	47
Norway	4	7	15	39	50	55
Poland	-	5	5	6	12	22
Spain	2	1	4	10	18	36
Sweden	11	19	40	47	55	55
United Kingdom	5	8	12	28	40	48
EU-27	-	-	-	17	27	40

**Table 1** Live births outside of marriage in selected European countries, 1960-2012 (% share of total live births)  
Source: Eurostat  
\*2011 data

At the same time, parents are more willing and able to separate than ever before (Figure 1). This results in a substantial decrease in the percentage of children living with both biological parents. Nowadays, divorce rates seem to have slowly levelled off or even decreased in countries with high levels of divorce such as the UK, while in countries with comparably low levels of divorce (e.g. South European countries), the upward trend is still on-going (Eurostat).



**Figure 1** Marriages and divorces, EU-27, 1964-2010 (in millions)  
Source: Eurostat

## DIVORCE AND CHILDREN'S RISK OF SOCIAL DISADVANTAGES

ON AVERAGE, CHILDREN OF DIVORCED PARENTS have a greater risk of faring more poorly compared to children of intact families in regard to cognitive development, psychological well-being and educational attainment. However, there is a considerable heterogeneity, with most children doing just fine, while others are doing worse. If previous family life has been ridden with daily conflicts, some children might even benefit in the long-run from less psychological stress. Even when immediate negative consequences from parental separation are evident, lasting effects persist only for a minority of children (Härkönen 2014).

Moreover, the causes of negative effects are not always a given: It is often uncertain whether it is divorce itself, the characteristics of the former family life, or events that happened before the separation that had lasting effects. The impact of parental divorce also depends on the immediate economic consequences and the general instability surrounding family dissolutions. Country comparisons show that there are strong differences in terms of the economic penalty associated with divorce. The general pattern is that divorced mothers in Scandinavian countries that provide generous welfare provisions are much better off than divorced women in other nations. This means that public support for single parents is an important explanation for cross-national variation in educational performance between children from single-parent and two-parent families (Garriga and Härkönen 2009).

Researchers of life chance outcomes are especially interested in effects on education given its importance in shaping life courses and well-being. Research about the long-term consequences of divorce on achieving a university degree shows that the chances of receiving such a degree are lower for people whose parents are divorced than for those whose parents are

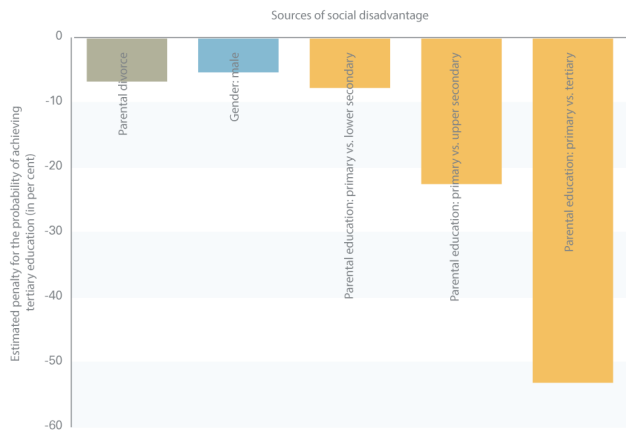
still married (Bernardi and Radl 2014). This effect, however, is considerably lower than the effect of parental socio-economic background: The chances of children with low-educated parents receiving a university degree are 22 percentage points lower than for children of parents with upper secondary education, and 53 percentage points lower than those with parents who hold an tertiary education (Figure 2).

ing differences in school achievement and differences in subsequent wages as adults (Ermisch et al. 2012).

**THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND**

CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES ARE INFLUENCED to a large extent by early-life experiences (e.g. parenting) and returns to investments in early childhood are higher than those on investments at later stages, especially for disadvantaged children (Carneiro and Heckman 2003). Specifically, differences in cognitive performance and social behaviour due to parental socio-economic conditions emerge very early and do not diminish over time. Children from high and low socio-economic backgrounds seldom start out equally prepared for school, both in terms of skills and social behaviour (Ermisch et al. 2012).

Average differences continue up until the university level, and likely beyond. Figure 3 compares academic achievement of adolescents by parental educational level: The higher the yellow bar, the greater the educational advantage is of a child with highly educated parents. The lower the green bar, the greater the educational disadvantage is of a child with low-educated parents.

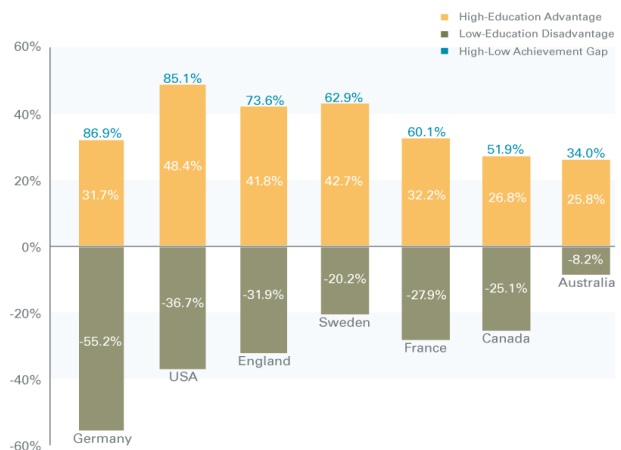


**Figure 2** Divorce penalty in comparison\*  
 Source: Based on Bernardi and Radl (2014), Data: Generations and Gender Survey, Wave 1  
 \* Data collection took place between 2003 and 2008 in AU, AT, BE, BG, EE, FR, GE, HU, IT, LT, NL, NO, RO and RU.

**PARENTAL BEHAVIOUR MATTERS**

DATA FROM TIME USE SURVEYS have revealed that the number of hours devoted to child-rearing and child-caring activities by parents has increased since the 1960s in most countries (Gauthier et al. 2004). Several studies have shown that this higher engagement, particularly among fathers, contributes to an important set of improvements, for example, in terms of cognitive abilities, empathy, self-confidence and self-control, as well as children believing fewer gender stereotypes. Yet, most studies on parenting after divorce have focused solely on mothers and overlooked the role of fathers. The impact of maternal and paternal parenting, however, is equally important to the well-being of children after family dissolution. This is true for children in joint custody and in families with non-residential fathers (Bastaits and Mortelmans 2013).

Since a divorce often results in a decrease in time and money parents are able to invest in their children, institutional factors such as educational system and childcare can help to mitigate structural disadvantages. In particular, the provision of universal preschool education can help to attenuate short and long-term negative consequences on educational trajectories and labour market outcomes. It has been demonstrated in France and Denmark that the universal provision of preschool education gives low-income children a greater shot at social mobility by decreasing



**Figure 3** Adolescent disparities in academic achievement by parent's education\*  
 Source: Figure created with data from Ermisch et al. (2012)  
 Note: Achievement is defined as the difference between the percentage of children in the top quartile of school or test score results and the percentage in the bottom quartile. The gap in achievement is the difference between children of parents with high or low education relative to those with mid-educated parents.  
 \*Data collection took place between 1970 and 2010.

While Canada and Australia present the smallest disparities between those with high- and low-educated parents, Germany and the United States show the largest differences. In the case of Germany, adolescents with highly educated parents have a school achievement advantage of 32 percentage points compared to those with medium educated parents. In turn, children with low-educated parents have an achievement

disadvantage of 55 percentage points. The sum of these values represents the total achievement gap between adolescents with high- and low-educated parents: 87 percentage points. Advantages from having highly educated parents are largest in the US, England, and Sweden. Adolescents with low-educated parents have the greatest disadvantage in Germany, the US and England. These childhood gaps contribute significantly to intergenerational correlations in education and income.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

REGARDLESS OF THE INCREASING DIVERSITY IN FAMILY FORMS and the decreasing number of children living with both biological parents, parental socio-economic background is still one of the most important factors for explaining inequalities in children's life chances. Policies should therefore support socio-economically disadvantaged families by improving employment opportunities for both mothers and fathers, by providing adequate social transfers for vulnerable families, and by offering opportunities for further adult education and training. Better infrastructure and coverage for early childhood education and care, as well as policies supporting the reconciliation of the different spheres of life – family, private and professional life – are also of key importance.

Negative effects of family dissolution on children's outcome are often related to economic consequences of separations. Policies that support single parents' employment in the form of helping to find and keep employment can be very effective in combating the financial consequences of divorce. For households affected by economic constraints caused by separation, policies should also make sure that there is enough disposable income (e.g. through financial assistance, exemption from taxes and charges, subsidies) for educational resources (e.g. books and computers) and for participation in extracurricular activities (e.g. tutoring), which are both associated with higher educational achievement (Hampden-Thompson 2013).

Apart from economic downward mobility, general instabilities surrounding family dissolutions are factors that can negatively affect the well-being of children. Here, policies providing counselling and support for families going through separations can help with the adjustment. In addition, policies should provide equal rights for mothers and fathers after a divorce and promote co-parenting. Institutional help for tackling possible conflicts and setting up co-parenting strategies should be easily accessible if needed.

These kinds of policies can play a major role in levelling the playing field between children in different family types and partly also between children from different socio-economic backgrounds – which is one of the major challenges of modern family policies.

## REFERENCES

- Bastaits, K. and D. Mortelmans (2013): Does the Parenting of Divorced Mothers and Fathers Affect Children's Well-Being in the Same Way? *Child Indicators Research* 7: 351–367.
- Bernardi, F. and J. Radl (2014): The Long-Term Consequences of Parental Divorce for Children's Educational Attainment. *Demographic Research* 30(61): 1653-1680.
- Carneiro, P. and J. Heckman (2003): Human Capital Policy. In: Heckman, J., Krueger, A. B. and B. M. Friedman (eds): *Inequality in America: What Role for Human Capital Policies?* Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ermisch, J., Jäntti, M., Smeeding, T. and J. A. Wilson (2012): What Have We Learned? In: Ermisch, J., Jäntti, M. and T. Smeeding (eds): *From Parents to Children: The Intergenerational Transmission of Advantage*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 463-481.
- Garriga, A. and J. Härkönen (2009): The Effects of Marital Instability on Children's Well-being and Intergenerational Relations. *State of the Art Report*. EQUALSOC Project.
- Gauthier, A., Smeeding, T. and F. Furstenberg (2004): Are Parents Investing Less Time in Children? Trends in Selected Industrialized Countries. *Population and Development Review* 30(4): 647-671.
- Hampden-Thompson, G. (2013): Family Policy, Family Structure, and Children's Educational Achievement. *Social Science Research* 42: 804-817.
- Härkönen, J. (2014): Divorce: Trends, Patterns, Causes, Consequences. In: Treas, J. K., Scott, J. and M. Richards (eds): *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 303-322.
- Van Gaalen, R. and F. van Poppel (2009): Long-Term Chances in the Living Arrangements of Children in the Netherlands. *Journal of Family Issues* 30(5): 653-669.

## IMPRINT

Publisher: Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Sciences on behalf of the collaborative network "Population Europe"  
Editors: Andreas Edel (V.i.S.d.P.), Daniela Vono de Vilhena, Ann Zimmermann  
Technical Coordination: Emily Lines  
Layout: Visuv, Greifswald  
Print: Blueprint Berlin GmbH, Berliner Straße 13 – 14, 10715 Berlin  
Contact: Population Europe Secretariat, Markgrafenstraße 37, 10117 Berlin, Germany  
Phone: +49 (0)30 2061 383 30, Fax: +49 (0)30 2061 383 50  
Email: [office@population-europe.eu](mailto:office@population-europe.eu)  
Web: [www.population-europe.eu](http://www.population-europe.eu)

The opinions of the authors do not necessarily reflect those held by the publisher or the editorial office.

This volume of *Population & Policy Compact* has been published with financial support of the European Union in the framework of *Population Europe*. Reprints of any part of the articles are permitted as long as the original authors and publishers are given credit. Please provide us with a specimen copy.

**demography**  
drives your future