



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

SOLOMONIC CHOICES: PARENTAL SEPARATION, CHILD WELL-BEING AND FAMILY POLICIES IN EUROPE



FamiliesAndSocieties

This policy brief summarises recent research findings on the consequences of parental separation for the future of children, and presents suggestions for policy interventions to prevent adverse consequences associated with it.

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INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that family configurations have become more and more diverse over the last decades. Single-parent families, cohabiting families of the opposite or same sex, and intergenerational households are only examples of the current diversity. In Europe, family structures still vary substantially among countries. For instance, in 2011 the number of live births outside marriage ranged from 7.4% in Greece to 65% in Iceland. However, trends over time have substantially increased everywhere (see table 1).

The promotion of policies supporting the reconciliation between work and family for all family forms are one of the main EU challenges today. The picture becomes more complex when taking family disruptions such as parental separation into consideration. This creates challenges for policy-makers as the lack of appropriate interventions may have an impact on the life chances of parents and children. But what do we know about the consequences of parental separation on the future of children? And to what extent can policy interventions prevent adverse consequences associated with it? These were the main questions discussed in January 2014 at the first Stakeholder Seminar of the FP7 project FamiliesAndSocieties.

The event was hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels and organised by Population Europe/Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, the network of Europe's leading demographic research institutes, which took over the dissemination activities of the project FamiliesAndSocieties. The meeting was chaired by Professor Fabrizio Bernardi from the European University Institute, who is also the co-leader of the work package "Family Dynamics and Inequalities in Children's Life Chances" within the FamiliesAndSocieties project. In the following sections, the analyses and policy recommendations of Juho Härkönen, (Stockholm University and also co-leader of this work package), Dimitri Mortelmans (Antwerp University), and Chiara Pronzato (University of Turin) are summarised.

Table 1: Live births outside marriage, 1960-2011 (% share of total live births).

Country	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2009	2010	2011
Belgium	2.1	2.8	4.1	11.6	28.0	45.5	46.2	49.2
Bulgaria	8.0	8.5	10.9	12.4	38.4	53.4	54.1	56.1
Czech Republic	4.9	5.4	5.6	8.6	21.8	38.8	40.3	41.8
Denmark	7.8	11.0	32.2	46.4	44.6	46.8	47.3	49.0
Germany	7.6	7.2	11.9	15.3	23.4	32.7	33.3	33.9
Estonia	-	-	-	27.2	54.5	59.2	59.1	59.7
Ireland	1.6	2.7	5.9	14.6	31.5	33.3	33.8	33.7
Greece	1.2	1.1	1.5	2.2	4.0	6.6	7.3	7.4
Spain	2.3	1.4	3.9	9.6	17.7	34.5	35.5	33.8
France ^a	6.1	6.8	11.4	30.1	43.6	53.7	55.0	-
Italy	2.4	2.2	4.3	6.5	9.7	19.8	21.5	26.3
Cyprus	-	0.2	0.6	0.7	2.3	11.7	15.2	16.9
Latvia	11.9	11.4	12.5	16.9	40.3	43.5	44.1	44.6
Lithuania	-	3.7	6.3	7.0	22.6	27.9	28.7	30.0
Luxembourg	3.2	4.0	6.0	12.8	21.9	32.1	34.0	34.1
Hungary	5.5	5.4	7.1	13.1	29.0	40.8	40.8	42.3
Malta	0.7	1.5	1.1	1.8	10.6	27.4	25.2	22.7
Netherlands	1.4	2.1	4.1	11.4	24.9	43.3	44.3	45.3
Austria	13.0	12.8	17.8	23.6	31.3	39.3	40.1	40.4
Poland	-	5.0	4.8	6.2	12.1	20.2	20.6	21.2
Portugal	9.5	7.3	9.2	14.7	22.2	38.1	41.3	42.8
Romania	-	-	-	-	25.5	28.0	27.7	30.0
Slovenia	9.1	8.5	13.1	24.5	37.1	53.6	55.7	56.8
Slovakia	4.7	6.2	5.7	7.6	18.3	31.6	33.0	34.0
Finland	4.0	5.8	13.1	25.2	39.2	40.9	41.1	40.9
Sweden	11.3	18.6	39.7	47.0	55.3	54.4	54.2	54.3
United Kingdom	5.2	8.0	11.5	27.9	39.5	46.3	46.9	47.3
EU-27 ^b	-	-	-	17.4	27.4	37.3	38.3	-
Iceland	25.3	29.9	39.7	55.2	65.2	64.4	64.3	65.0
Liechtenstein	3.7	4.5	5.3	6.9	15.7	18.5	21.3	23.5
Norway	3.7	6.9	14.5	38.6	49.6	55.1	54.8	55.0
Switzerland	3.8	3.8	4.7	6.1	10.7	17.9	18.6	19.3
Montenegro	-	-	-	-	-	15.7	-	-
Croatia	7.4	5.4	5.1	7.0	9.0	12.9	13.3	14.0
FYR of Macedonia	5.1	6.2	6.1	7.1	9.8	12.2	12.2	11.6
Turkey	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.6	-

^a Excluding French overseas departments for 1960 to 1990.

^b Excluding French overseas departments and Romania for 1990.

Source Eurostat (online data code: demo_find)

Graphics Population Europe

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Trends in parental separation

The long-term trend in union dissolutions has been one of increasing divorce and separation between couples. However, in countries with high levels of divorce, rates seem to have slowly levelled off or even decreased (see figure 1), while in countries with low levels of divorce, the upward trend is still on-going.

There is no single explanation for why divorce rates have increased in certain countries or stabilised in others. Suggested reasons range from economic trends to cultural shifts and legal reforms but all of them have their limitations. Many explanations point to the change in gender roles, and, in particular, to the increases in married women's labour market activity. Indeed, the growth of female employment and divorce rates are two processes that started during the same period of time in most countries. However, there is no strong evidence that shows a causal link between female employment and divorce. Cultural changes in individual and family behaviours indicate a shift towards a greater acceptance of non-traditional family structures. In this sense, divorce would no longer be a matter of stigmatization. Another interpretation for the increase in divorce rates is that individual values have changed, and reorientations provide subjective motives for separation. At the same time, improvements in women's economic independence would have also provided the means for doing so. In other words, individuals are more ready, willing, and able to separate and divorce.

Figure 1: Percentage of marriages that ended in divorce before the 10-year anniversary.



Source Office for National Statistics (United Kingdom); Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, (United States of America); Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Italy)

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Recent stabilisation of trends in some countries seems to be related to the increase in the age at marriage: older ages at marriage are associated with lower risks of divorce. In regard to educational levels, in the past, divorce was more common among the highly educated, however over time the differences have levelled off. In many countries (such as Belgium, UK, the Netherlands and in Nordic countries) separation nowadays is more common among the less educated.

Divorce law: towards liberalisation

The right to divorce has changed markedly throughout the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st. Divorce was not granted until recently in several Western countries (for example, Italy legalised divorce in 1974, Spain in 1981, Ireland in 1997, and Malta in 2011) and it is still difficult to obtain in others. During the first years of its establishment, divorce could only be granted on the basis of serious fault (such as adultery, violence, or mental illness) or in case of mutual consent. Even then, the process was usually expensive and lengthy. It was not until the

sixties and seventies that the liberalisation of divorce laws in Europe were implemented (see table 2).

Do these legislative changes affect divorce rates, or do they merely reflect a higher acceptance and a higher demand for divorce? Recent research has generally concluded that liberalisation of divorce laws promoted short-term spikes in divorce rates, presumably as spouses in ill-functioning marriages formalised an existing *de facto* separation. Empirical evidence suggests that these effects were not lasting and the long-term effect of the liberalisation was, at most, a modest increase in divorce rates. Moreover, reducing state control over marriages and divorces did change the divorce process and the dynamics of marriages: unilateral divorce shifted the power balance to the spouse more willing to exit, while the shortening of the legal process and the weakening need to prove fault or irreconcilability have made divorce processes faster and possibly less conflict-ridden.

Table 2: Divorce Laws by Country: 1950-2003.

Country	1 Year when divorce allowed	2 No-fault	3 Unilateral ^a
Austria	pre-1950	pre-1950	1978 (6)
Belgium	pre-1950	pre-1950	1975 (10), 1983 (5), 2000 (2)
Denmark	pre-1950	pre-1950	1970 (3), 1989 (2)
Finland	pre-1950	pre-1950	pre-1950 (2), 1988 (0)
France	pre-1950	1976	1976 (6)
Germany inc. GDR after 1991	pre-1950	pre-1950	1977 (3)
Greece	pre-1950	1979	1983 (2)
Iceland	pre-1950	pre-1950	1993 (2)
Ireland	1997	1997	No
Italy	1971	1975	No
Luxembourg	pre-1950	pre-1950	1979 (3)
Netherlands	pre-1950	1971	1971 (2)
Norway	pre-1950	pre-1950	pre-1950 (7), 1993 (2)
Portugal	1976	1976	1976 (3)
Spain	1981	1981	1981 (5)
Sweden	pre-1950	pre-1950	pre-1950 (3), 1974 (0)
Switzerland	pre-1950	pre-1950	2000 (4)
United Kingdom ^b	pre-1950	1971	1971 (5)

^a The length of the separation requirement in years is specified in parenthesis.

^b The divorce law for Scotland post-dates that of England and Wales by 5 years. The analysis does not take this into account.

Source González and Viitanen, 2009, based on Boele-Woelki et al. (2003, 2004), Dutoit et al. (2000), Smith (2002), and national legislation

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Who divorces more often?

Studies have shown that young couples face higher risks of divorce, e.g. due to their lower socioeconomic stability or in some cases unreasonable expectations. Having been previously married or cohabiting before marriage also predicts a higher divorce risk. Couples with children, especially small ones, have lower divorce risks than childless couples. However, this seems to vary by country and period of time. Having children can also destabilise marriages if it means less time for fostering the relationship. It has been shown in surveys that strong reasons for divorce, such as infidelity or violence, have been cited less often by couples, whereas relational problems, and reasons related to the division of daily burdens, have increased in importance.

When looking at the average length of marriage, it seems that the so-called “seven year itch” does exist: marital satisfaction can decline over the course of marital life but couples have the highest risk of divorce between the fourth and the seventh year of being married. After this, the risk begins to decline gradually.

Women have typically always been more likely to start the process leading to divorce. This remarkably stable finding seems to be found for every society where such statistics exist, Western and non-Western alike. Exceptions have been during major wars and their aftermaths. Many findings suggest that women’s divorce filings are more closely related to socioeconomic factors and women are more likely to name relational motives such as growing apart, not getting enough attention or communication problems for their divorces. At the same time, men appear less likely to initiate divorce when the couple has young children, possibly reflecting an anticipation of weaker post-divorce contact with their children.

The impact of divorce on children: not the same for everyone

It is true: on average, children of divorced parents have a greater risk of faring more poorly in comparison with children of intact families. This has been a consistent finding from various countries and relates to grade retention, the kind of track entered in high school, cognitive development, psychological wellbeing, and educational attainment overall. However, the causes leading to potential disadvantages are not always granted and may not be related to the divorce itself. For instance, families who divorce differ in many characteristics from intact households. It is very often uncertain whether it is the divorce itself, the characteristics of the former family, or events that happened before the separation that lead to these results.

Taking this complexity into account, what has been shown by the presenters is that parental separation has the potential to create considerable stress and turmoil in children’s lives. But this is not always the case. For many, perhaps even most children, any negative effects of parental separation on wellbeing are rather short-lived. It may sound contradictory but some children may even benefit from parental separation, especially if pre-separation family life has been ridden with daily conflicts and psychological stress. Still, it has to be stated that some children may have a higher risk of experiencing longer-term losses in terms of socioeconomic and psychological wellbeing after divorce.

In a recent study on divorce in 14 countries (Australia, Austria, France, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Hungary, Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, and Russia), Fabrizio Bernardi and Jonas Radl explored its long-term consequences in terms of probability of achieving a university degree. With data from the Generations and Gender Survey, they found that, on average, the chances of receiving a university degree were about seven points lower for those having experienced a divorce than those who had not. This is about the same disadvantage that men have with respect to women in achieving a university degree. However, this disadvantage is larger for children from highly educated families. For children from low educated families, the chances of going to a university are rather low to start with, and a divorce does not seem to make a real difference. Previous research has suggested that the following mechanisms underlie the lower educational outcome of children of separated families: parental conflict (pre- and post-divorce, meaning that it may not be the divorce itself causing the children’s lower educational outcome); parents and children’s emotional crises linked to parental separation; a reduction in economic and social resources; a reduction in parental time dedicated to children; and a change in parenting practices.

Finally, in line with previous evidence, a change in family structure or a parental divorce does not necessarily lead to a lower psychological wellbeing among children. Certain protective factors can help, for instance parenting.

Parenting strategies after divorce

Family relations and parenting matter for the connection between family forms and children’s outcomes. Most studies on parenting after divorce have focused solely on the mother and overlooked the role of fathers. However, involvement of both parents, which includes parent-

child contact after a relationship breakdown has been proven to be of key importance: for children, the impact of paternal and maternal parenting is equally important to their self-esteem and satisfaction with their life. Evidence also suggests that supportive and authoritative (high control and support) parenting is more important for children's wellbeing than spending the same amount of time with each parent after divorce.

The role of the new partner in this process is also relevant. New partners can have beneficial effects on the health and wellbeing of divorced individuals. However, the new partner may hinder the parenting of the non-resident parent (mostly the father). Continued opportunities for both the biological parents and the new partners to support a child are often neglected processes that could increase the life satisfaction in the post-divorce life of children and adolescents.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- In the long term, divorce rates are not significantly affected by divorce legislation. Thus, a shift towards stricter regulation of divorces may not create more stable unions, especially since much of modern family life occurs outside the institution of marriage. States should not discriminate against any family form and not prioritise marriages over other types of family arrangements.
- Fathers and mothers should have the same rights before and after a divorce. The promotion of co-parenting also seems generally beneficial for children if there is no parental conflict. When there is parental conflict during or after the divorce, this should be tackled first before setting up a co-parenting strategy.
- Co-parenting means more than equally shared time: It should be understood as two parents that remain equally involved and who try to make important decisions concerning the child together, regardless of the amount of time spent with them. A formal parenting agreement, like the one that is used in the Netherlands, might be a next step towards successful co-parenting after divorce.
- Income transfers and policies aimed at helping divorced parents to find and maintain employment can be effective in combating the financial consequences of divorce and thus also weaken longer-term effects on children of separated and divorced parents.
- To target psychological stressors and their effects on parenting and other social relationships, the availability of conciliation policies and counselling programmes are of key importance.
- In general, all policies aimed at reducing social inequalities and that favour the reconciliation of family life, private life and professional life will also help in reducing children's disadvantages associated with a divorce.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

FamiliesAndSocieties aims to investigate the diversity of family forms, relationships and life courses in Europe, to assess the compatibility of existing policies with these changes, and to contribute to evidence-based policy making. The consortium brings together 25 leading universities and research institutes from 15 European countries, three transnational civil society actors and a large number of national and international stakeholders.

The points of departure for the project are that family life courses are becoming more complex and diverse, that individuals' lives are interdependent - linked within and across generations - and that individual life courses are shaped by social contexts and policies. Four transversal dimensions are integrated into the project: gender, culture (ethnic, migrant and cultural identities, sexual orientation), socioeconomic resources, and life stages.

The project has four main objectives: to explore the growing complexity of family configurations and transitions across and within European societies; to examine their implications for children, women and men with respect to inequalities in life chances, intergenerational relations and care arrangements; to investigate how policies address family diversity and its consequences; and to identify likely paths of future changes in family compositions and related policy needs.

The approach is multidisciplinary, combining a wide range of expertise in social sciences, law and the humanities, represented in the consortium. Comparative analyses are being applied and advanced quantitative methods to high quality register and survey data used. Moreover, qualitative studies are being conducted. The project will develop two databases, one on the legal content of family forms available in European countries, and another on EC/EU initiatives in core family-policy areas during the last decades.

The project is organized into 12 work packages including management and dissemination activities. Substantive work packages address family configurations, new gender roles, the new role of children and assisted reproductive technology, inequalities in children's life chances, childcare arrangements, intergenerational links, social inclusion/exclusion of migrants, policies and diversity over the life course, and foresight, synthesis and policy implications. All major European regions are represented in the project governance. Together with various stakeholders, government agencies, national and local policy-makers, non-governmental organizations and additional members of the scientific community across Europe, the project will identify and disseminate innovation and best policy practices.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	FamiliesAndSocieties – Changing families and sustainable societies: Policy contexts and diversity over the life course and across generations.
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FURTHER READING

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