

Literature review on the impact of family breakdown on children – policy brief

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Introduction

This report presents an overview of the available knowledge that is published in the English language on the way that family change affects children. The review considered selected outcomes for children in 12 countries: Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK, selected with reference to Hantrais' (2004) typology to represent different approaches to family policy.

Hantrais' typology of family policy in the European Union (EU) groups countries into categories based on the degree of 'defamilialisation' in family policy and family form. Defamilialised policies are those that offer generous state support for families as opposed to placing undue reliance on family support in order to secure a socially acceptable standard of living (Hantrais, 2004:199) (see Table 1).

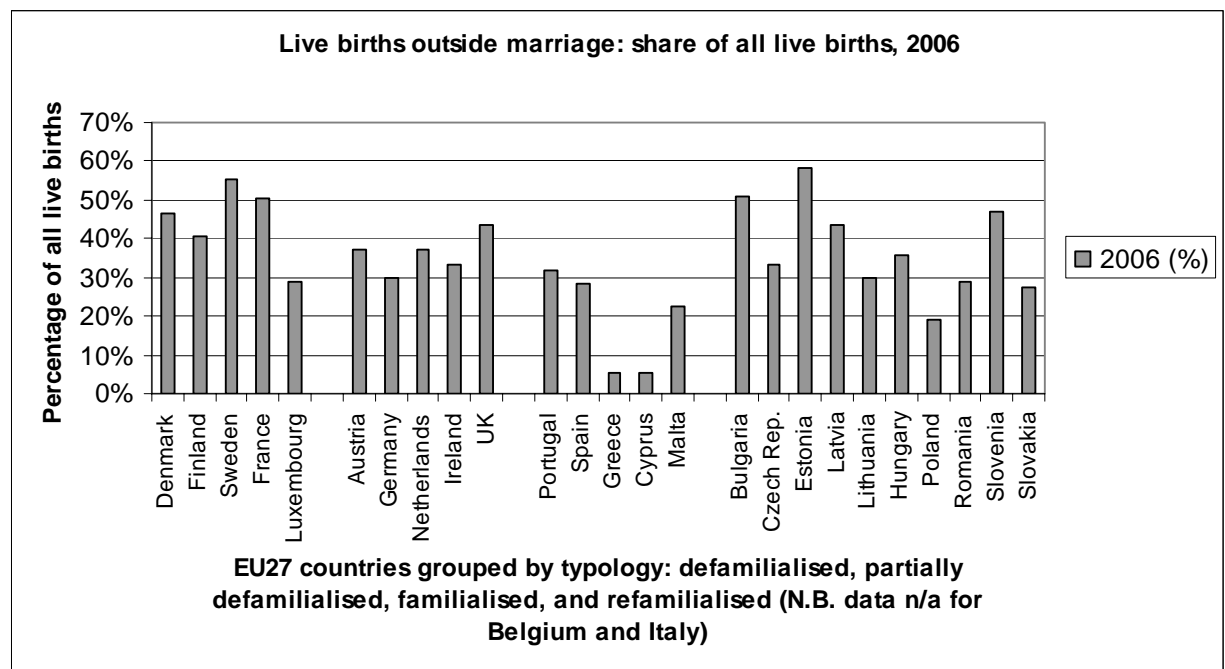
Table 1 Hantrais' (2004) typology of family policy in the EU (with the addition of Bulgaria and Romania)

Typology	Overarching characteristics of family-policy	Countries
Defamilialised	Explicit, coherent, legitimised, coordinated, supportive of working parents, universal/residence	Denmark Finland Sweden Belgium France Luxembourg
Partially Defamilialised	Residence, partially coordinated, partially legitimised, rhetorical, implicit/indirect	Netherlands Austria Germany Ireland, UK
Familialised	Underfunded, un-coordinated, weakly legitimised, non institutionalised, fragmented	Greece, Italy Portugal, Spain Cyprus, Malta
Refamilialised	Implicit/indirect, rhetorical, pro-natalist, semi-legitimised, un-coordinated, institutionalised, transitional, underfunded	Bulgaria Czech Republic Estonia Hungary Latvia Lithuania Poland Romania Slovakia Slovenia

Changing nature of the family

The EU has undergone substantial changes in regards to family structure, formation and dissolution and fertility rates. The review highlights the well documented decline in marriage in most EU countries, with the EU15 experiencing a fall in the average number of marriages per 1,000 population by nearly 34 per cent between 1960 and 2000 (Hantrais, 2004:51). In the defamilialised and partially defamilialised countries cohabitation has replaced marriage as the marker of first partnership (Kiernan, 1999). As a result the proportion of births outside marriage across Europe has been rising steeply since 1980 (Hantrais, 2004:56) (Fig 1).

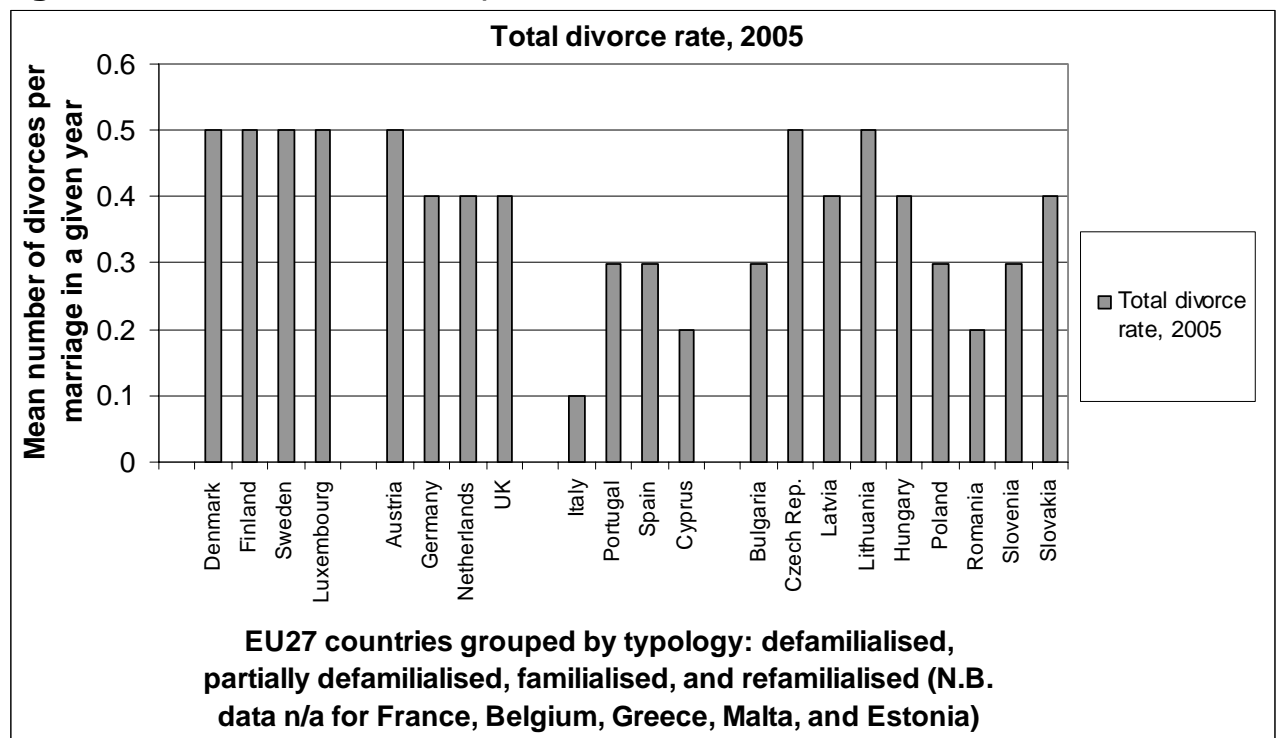
Fig 1: Live births outside marriage: Share of all live births, 2006



Source: Eurostat 2008, Population and Social Conditions, 'Live births by marital status and mother's age at last birthday', demo_fagec

Total divorce rates either increased or remained the same across Europe with nearly one divorce for every marriage in 2005 and 2006 (Fig 2).

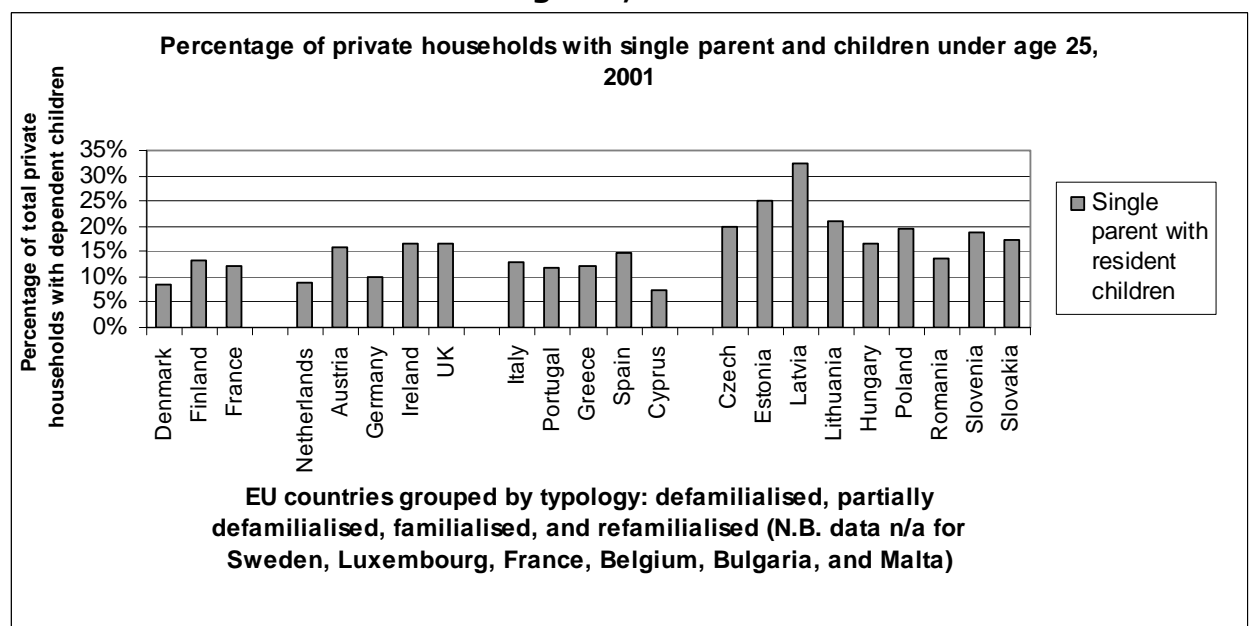
Figure 2: Total divorce rate, 2005



Source: Eurostat 2008, General and Regional Statistics, 'Total Divorce Rate', cab11152

As divorce becomes more common more children live with one parent (Fig 3) and more marriages involve divorced persons, with a consequent increase in stepfamilies (Hantrais, 2004:61).

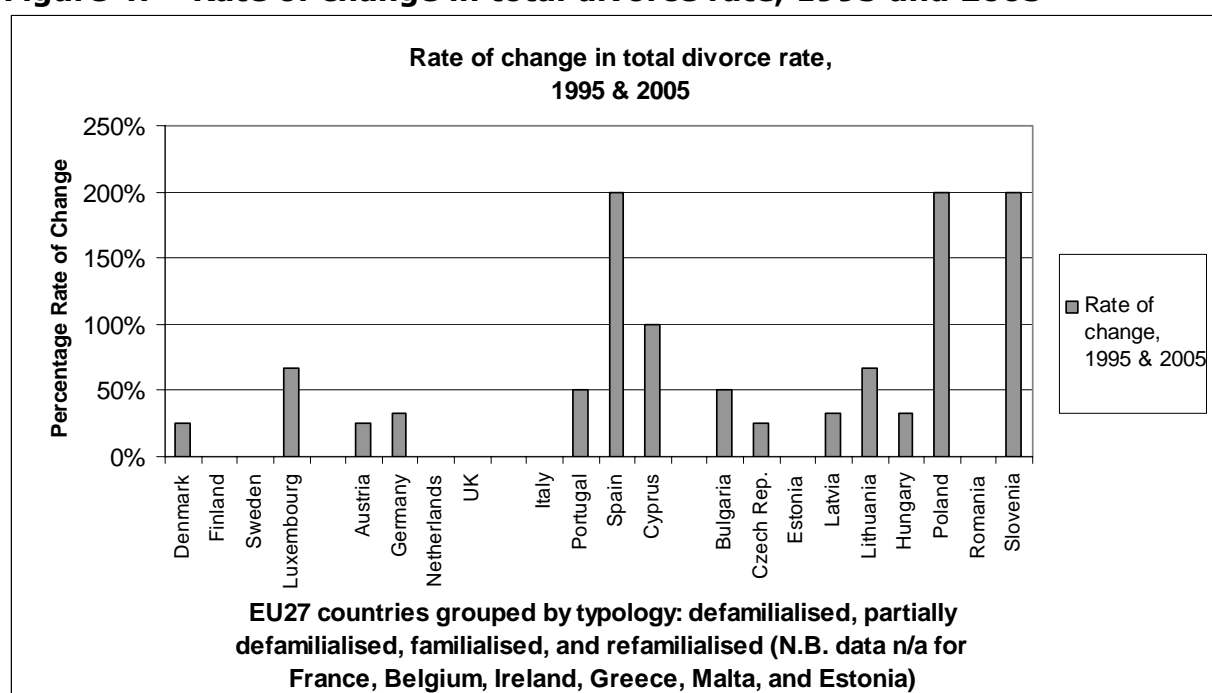
Fig 3: Percentage of private households with single parent and children under age 25, 2001



Source: Eurostat 2008, Population and Social Conditions, 'Family nuclei by type, number of resident children in the family, current economic activity of parents and presence of other persons in the household', cens_nhm

While these trends are more advanced in the defamilialised and partially defamilialised countries, the evidence suggests that the familialised countries are on a similar course. The largest increases in divorce being reported in the refamilialised and familialised countries (Fig 4)

Figure 4: Rate of change in total divorce rate, 1995 and 2005



Source: Eurostat 2008, General and Regional Statistics, 'Total Divorce Rate', cab11152

Impact of family breakdown on educational attainment of children

While findings are sensitive to methodology, children from non-intact families are more likely than those living with both their parents to be exposed to risks which represent barriers to educational achievement. These risks are associated with restricted access to resources and opportunities caused by low income and poor access to employment which may be compounded by stress and anxiety or by working arrangements that fail to take account of the additional need for flexibility when supporting and raising children alone. Educational outcomes are of particular concern as they are crucial to the future life-prospects of children and young people.

Impact of family breakdown on health status of children

The findings suggest a relationship between single parenthood and negative health outcomes for children although, once again, these findings are sensitive to methodology. Nevertheless, there is evidence of health disadvantages for children from non-intact families, with both mental and physical health adversely affected.

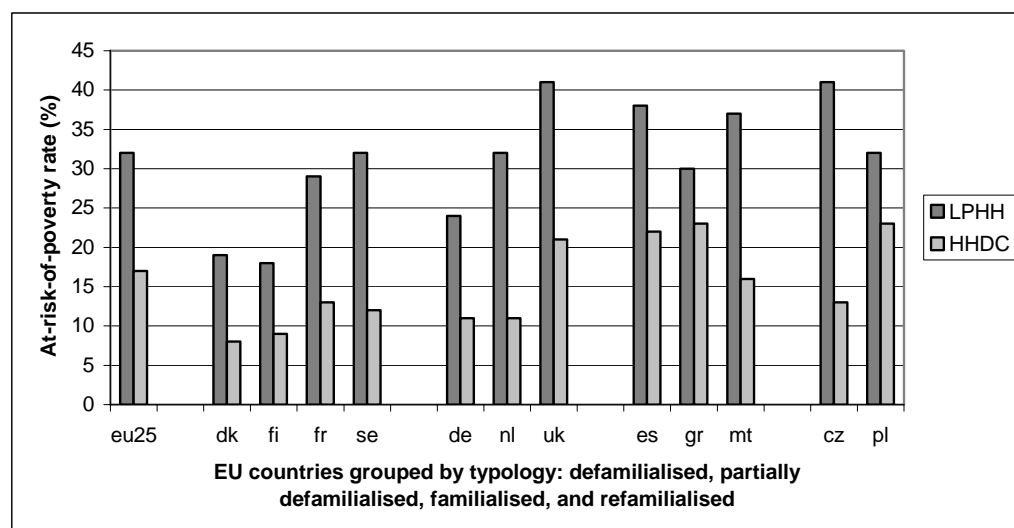
Impact of family breakdown on housing situation of children

Family breakdown can have substantial, long-lasting adverse repercussions for the housing situations and living arrangements of children of single parent families. A fall in household income, market pressures and the lack of affordable housing can push post-breakdown households with children into poor quality or inappropriate housing.

Impact of family breakdown on the risk of poverty of children

The vulnerability to poverty of single parent households is demonstrated by at-risk-of-poverty rates for 2006 (Fig 5). Thirty-two per cent of single parent households in the EU25 were living below the poverty threshold compared to 17 per cent of all households with dependent children. The lowest poverty risks were among the defamilialised countries which all had poverty rates at or below the EU25 average.

Figure 5: At-risk-of-poverty rate (60 per cent of median equivalised income after social transfers), lone parent households and households with dependent children, 2006



Source: Eurostat 2008, Income and living conditions, 'At-risk-of-poverty rate, by household type', ilc_sis1a

Explanatory frameworks

While the general thrust of the literature is that family breakdown is associated with poorer outcomes for children, there is debate about the nature of this link. Some researchers have argued that the association has been overstated and that background features of family life, which often go unmeasured, may exercise a greater influence on children's outcomes than family structure *per se*. Others believe that there are specific risk factors associated with growing up within a non-intact family which exercise a real effect upon outcomes. A third type of explanatory framework considers the extent to which differing family policy environments across countries mediate the link between family structure and children's outcomes.

The role of family policy

Family policies differ substantially from country to country, creating a variety of legal statuses and social settings for children from one-parent families. These policies generate rights to public and private transfer payments, and give access to the labour market, the educational system, childcare and other support for parenthood.

The review offers some insights into the extent to which outcomes for children in different countries are mediated by specific family policy environments. The complexity of the relationship between the variables makes it difficult to identify policy recommendations. Nonetheless, analysts have proposed a range of measures including:

- Provision of affordable child/day care in order provide a safe environment for children and help parents into paid work, which in turn would enable them to improve their earnings and hence their children's health and well-being.
- Firms need to see employees as potential caregivers. Policies that enable single parents to achieve a work-life balance, such as flexible hours, are required.
- Increased financial and in-kind benefits. There is a reasonably convincing body of evidence that redistributive welfare strategies, generous childcare support, in-work benefits and guaranteed minimum wages and equal access to high quality jobs in the labour market produce better outcomes for children. While there are some indications that family and community networks in familialised and refamilialised countries provide a degree of protection from economic stress it is equally possible that they put additional financial pressure on to already poor families.
- EU Member States need to ensure that their housing policies are able to provide support for families experiencing family breakdown at every stage of their transition in living arrangements. In some instances this may entail upgrading the housing stock (not least as a route to improving children's health).
- Providing appropriate social support for single mothers, in particular for frontline staff and professionals in relevant agencies to be sensitive to (sub-)groups that are most likely to be at risk of poor outcomes as a consequence of family breakdown.
- Ongoing monitoring and reporting of child welfare across Europe.

Paid work is not sufficient by itself

It is difficult to understand changing family forms and structure without examining changes in the relationship between changing family life and paid work.

Underpinning a number of these proposals is the recognition that simply promoting employment for single parents is not on its own an adequate policy response. Single parents are predominantly female. Not only do mothers struggle to balance work and care responsibilities, but the wages they can command in the labour market are on average lower than those of men (European Commission, 2006: 11). Therefore, single mothers are most likely to face difficulties in finding jobs that are satisfactory enough for them to give up welfare benefits, in countries where such benefits are available (Fondazione Brodolini, 2007: 31).

Welfare to work policies that are not supported by policies to guarantee job security, 'family friendly' working arrangements and guaranteed minimum incomes on which to raise children and opportunities for skill enhancement and career development run the risk of coercing women in to poorly paid work that is damaging to both their own and their children's welfare.

While targeting support towards children and families is a necessary feature of a poverty reduction scheme, it is not sufficient. What is required is an overall policy approach which addresses underlying inequalities (Frazer and Marlier, 2007:63).

Gender equality is at the heart of child centred policies. Women are discriminated against to a greater or lesser extent in almost all aspects of their lives across the EU member countries with lower average earnings and career opportunities restricted by inappropriate working arrangements. The findings from this review suggest that those countries that have policies to support greater gender equality also provide better outcomes for children, including children from single parent families. Findings from the review suggest that the defamilialised approach on balance provides best outcomes for children in general including children who have been affected by family breakdown. However, even in some of the defamilialised countries outcomes for children from single parent families, although often better than elsewhere, are not as good as for children overall suggesting that there is room for further measures to improve outcomes for children who live in single parent families in these countries. Although, to be effective policy cannot be 'parachuted in' but must take account of both opportunities and constraints within national policy environments there are nevertheless opportunities within the EU for policy learning for countries to improve the outcomes for children affected by family breakdown.

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