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Lone-parent families: a growing phenomenon

In 1996, there were just under 7 million lone parents with dependent children in the European Union (excluding Denmark and Sweden), representing 14% of all families with dependent children. The United Kingdom has by far the highest proportion (23%); Greece (7%) and Spain (8%) the lowest. On average, 84% of lone parents are female.

The rise in lone parenthood has been one of the most striking demographic and social trends in recent years. Between 1983 and 1996, the number of lone parents increased on average by 58% in the 8 Member States for which data are available.

In relation to other heads of families with dependent children, lone parents are less likely to be economically active, have a much higher risk of unemployment and have lower levels of educational attainment. The disparities are considerably greater for lone mothers than for lone fathers.

For the Union as a whole in 1994, the average adjusted income of lone parents represented 77% of that of other families with dependent children. The most striking differences are evident in Ireland and the United Kingdom where the corresponding figures were 59% and 64% respectively.

There are two main routes of entry into lone parenthood: the breakdown of a relationship and the birth of a child outside marriage. Both of these phenomena have increased considerably since the early 70s and may offer some explanation for the variations between countries. For example, the country with the largest proportion of lone parents - the United Kingdom - has the highest divorce rate in the Union and a relatively large number of children are born outside marriage. There are also two main routes out of lone parenthood: re-partnership and children growing up and becoming 'independent'.

This report focuses on single lone parents, i.e., lone parents who live alone with their dependent children (see technical box). It therefore excludes those lone parents i) who may still be living with their own parents, or ii) who, since the birth of their child(ren) have got married or are cohabit-

ing, or iii) whose children are in employment (as their main activity) and are therefore deemed to be no longer 'dependent'.

Lone parents account for 14% of all families with dependent children

The proportion of lone parents has grown steadily in all Member States over the last fifteen years. In 1996, there were around 6.8 million lone parents with dependent children in the European Union. Lone parent families account for just under 5% of all families or, more significantly, 14% of all families with dependent children. This proportion has risen considerably since 1983 when it stood at 9%. All Member States have experienced an increase, particularly Belgium, Ireland and the United Kingdom (Table 1).

Table 1: Lone parent families - the basics

	EU-15	B	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	UK
Number of lone parents, 1996 (1000)	6 768	214	1 368	101	467	1 231	65	877	7	219	137	165	101	1 815
as a % of all families with dependent children	14	15	13	7	8	15	13	11	11	11	14	12	17	23
% increase 1983-1996	58 (*)	75	:	33	:	48	100	32	58	5	:	:	:	94

(*) Average based on data for B, EL, F, IRL, I, L, NL, UK

Source: Eurostat - Labour Force Survey

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Five times more lone mothers than fathers

On average, women account for 84% of all lone parents with dependent children. This proportion is similar in nearly all countries.

In all Member States, lone fathers tend to be older than lone mothers. The median age for men (44) compared with that of women (38) is consistent with the later ages at which men get married or become fathers. More than 16% of lone fathers are aged 55 and over as against 6% of lone mothers.

The United Kingdom has a relatively large number of young lone parents: one in two are under 35 while Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal have higher than average proportions of older lone parents aged 55 and over. These figures are in line with the ages of children living with just one parent (see below).

Just over 10% of lone parents have 3 or more dependent children

For the Union as a whole, 58% of lone parents have just one dependent child, a further 30% have two and the remaining 11% have more than two children. In Ireland, 25% of lone parents have more than two dependent children.

In 1996, 75% of lone parents had at least one dependent child under the age of 16, i.e., not having completed full-time compulsory school. In the southern EU Member States where young people tend to stay longer in the parental home, the figures are lower: ranging from 49% in Spain to 60% in Italy. 30% of lone parents have to cope with at least 2 dependent children under the age of 16, and 8% with three or more.

On average, 20% of lone parents have at least one dependent child below pre-school age (less than 5 years). Finland (26%) and the United Kingdom (29%) have significantly higher proportions. In contrast, less than 10% of lone parents in Greece, Spain and Portugal have a dependent child under 5 years. For the Union as a whole, 4% of lone parents have at least two children in this age group.

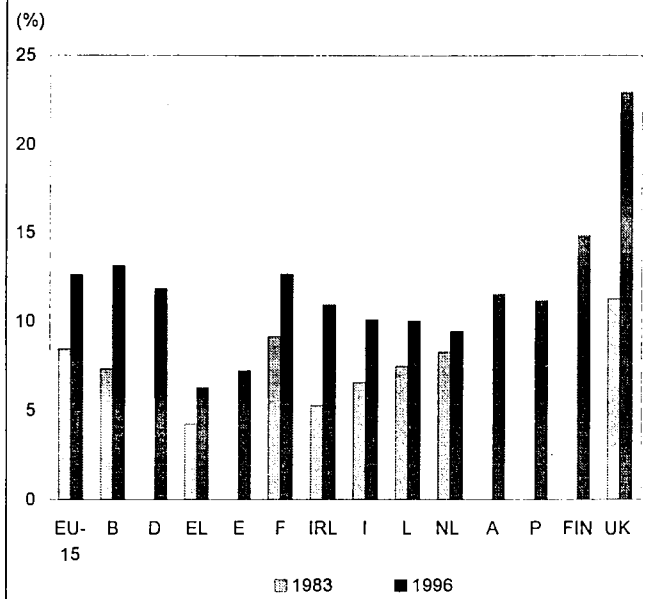
One in eight dependent children are living with just one parent

In 1996, there were just under 10.7 million dependent children living with one parent in the Union (excluding Denmark and Sweden). This represents 13% of all dependent children. There are significant variations between countries ranging from 6% in Greece and 7% in Spain to 23% in the United Kingdom. In all countries for which data are available, this proportion has risen steadily since 1983. In Ireland and the United Kingdom it has more than doubled (Figure 1). Of the 10.7 million, 1.8m are under 5 years of age, 5.9m are aged 5-15 and a further 3m are aged 16-24. Each of these age-groups represents 10%, 13% and 14% of their respective populations.

Less likely to be economically active, more likely to be unemployed

For the population as a whole, females are less likely than men to be economically active, more likely to be unemployed and more liable to be in part-time employment. The picture is similar when comparing lone parents (mainly women) with other heads (mainly men) of families with dependent children.

Figure 1:
Trend in the proportion of dependent children living in lone-parent families, 1983-1996



Source: Eurostat - Labour Force Survey

On average, 68% of lone mothers aged 15-64 were economically active in 1996, compared with 84% of lone fathers and 93% of other heads of families with dependent children. The gap between lone mothers and other heads of families is evident in all Member States, particularly in the United Kingdom (51% against 93% respectively). However it is relatively narrow in Austria, France and Finland.

Overall, lone mothers (68%) are more likely to be part of the labour market than other mothers with dependent children (61%). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Greece, Spain, Italy and Luxembourg. The opposite is true in the United Kingdom with lone mothers (51%) less likely to be economically active than other mothers (70%).

Throughout the Union, there does not appear to be a relationship between the labour market participation of the heads of most families and the number of dependent children in their family. The picture changes however for lone mothers. For the EU as a whole, activity rates of lone mothers decrease as the number of children increases, falling from 72% for those with one child to 50% for those with more than two children. Activity rates for other mothers also decrease, however, those of lone fathers are largely unaffected by the number of children.

The negative correlation between activity rates of lone mothers and the number of children is particularly noticeable in Germany and the United Kingdom but negligible in Belgium, Greece, Spain and Portugal (Table 2). Differences between countries may reflect the level of child-care provision, the degree of support available from within the extended family, the availability of part-time work, the extent of taxation, welfare support, etc.

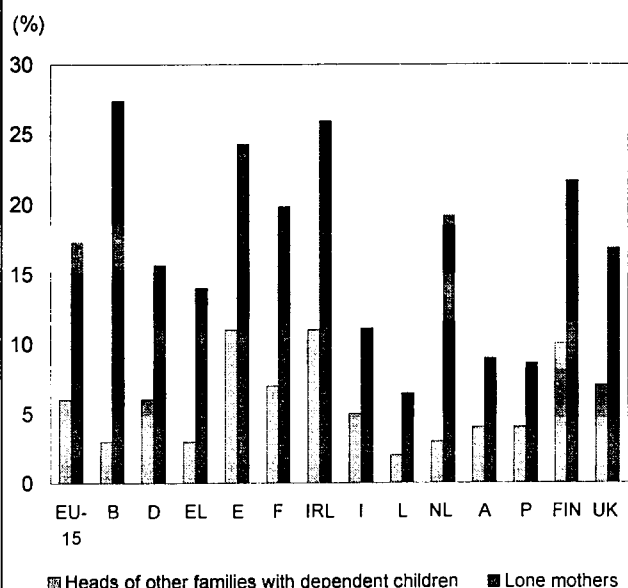
Table 2:
Activity rates of lone mothers aged 15-64 by number of dependent children, 1996

	(%)		
	1 child	2 children	3 or more children
EU-15	72	66	50
B	73	77	67
D	80	72	51
EL	67	70	61
E	61	72	65
F	87	86	71
IRL	53	51	39
I	66	64	52
L	76	67	57
NL	60	56	46
A	82	84	68
P	78	75	75
FIN	80	80	62
UK	59	49	35

Source: Eurostat - Labour Force Survey

The unemployment rate for lone mothers stood at 17% in 1996 for the EU. In all countries, with the exception of the southern Member States where the differences were minimal, this was considerably higher than the corresponding rate for other mothers with dependent children (11%). The rate for lone mothers was also much higher than that of lone fathers (10%) and that of other heads of families with dependent children (6%). (Figure 2).

Figure 2:
Unemployment rates for lone mothers and other heads of families with dependent children, 1996



Source: Eurostat - Labour Force Survey

One-third of lone mothers work part-time

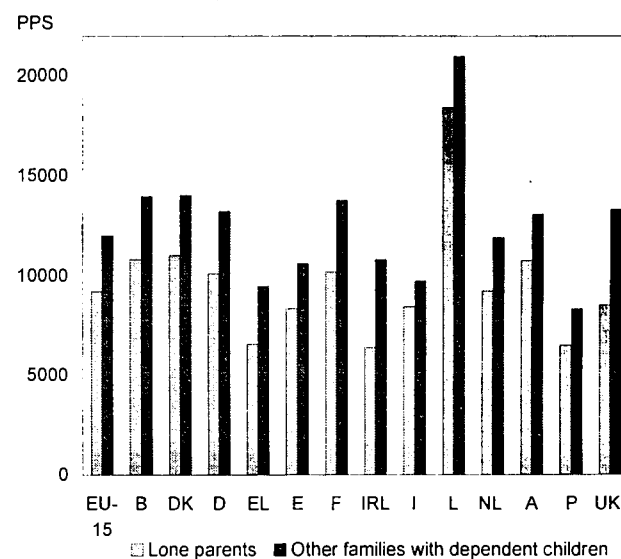
Part-time work is recognised as one solution to reconcile professional and family life. Lone mothers are much more likely than other heads of families with dependent children to work part-time. On average, 33% of lone mothers in employment in 1996 were working part-time compared with only 6% of lone fathers and 3% of other heads of families with dependent children. However, they are less likely to do such work than other mothers with dependent children (40%). Throughout the Union, the proportion of lone mothers working part-time rises as the number of dependent children increases: 29% for lone parents with one child, 37% with 2 children and 46% for those with more than 2 children.

On average for the European Union, more than one in five (22%) lone mothers were working part-time in 1996 because they could not find a full-time job. By comparison more than one-third (36%) of other heads of families with dependent children were in involuntary part-time employment.

The effect of education and training

Lone parents are no different to other workers in that their employment prospects and earnings potential are largely determined by their educational and training qualifications. On average in 1996, 49% of lone mothers aged 25-64 had completed upper secondary education or held a university degree compared with 52% of lone fathers and 55% of other heads of families with dependent children. The disparity in educational attainment levels can be observed in the majority of Member States. The largest discrepancies exist in the United Kingdom where only 36% of lone mothers have completed upper secondary or higher education compared with 55% of other heads of families. In Italy and Portugal, lone mothers seem to be slightly better qualified than other heads of families with dependent children.

Figure 3:
Adjusted net monetary income of lone parents and other families with dependent children, 1994



Note: Data for Luxembourg should be treated with caution due to small sample size

Source: European Community Household Panel, Wave 2, 1995

Lower income for lone parents

For the Union as a whole (excluding Sweden and Finland), the average adjusted net monetary income of lone parents in 1994 was 9212 PPS compared with 11978 PPS for other families with dependent children.

Put another way, the adjusted income (see technical box) of lone parents represented 77% of that of other families with dependent children. The most striking differences can be observed in Ireland and the United Kingdom where the corresponding figures were 59% and 64% respectively (Figure 3).

Technical notes

Families are defined as married or cohabiting couples with dependent children. **Lone parents** are those who live alone with their dependent children. Lone parents are compared with **other heads** (the reference person of the Labour Force Survey) of families with dependent children and **other mothers with dependent children**. Only the population aged 15-64 is considered.

Dependent children are considered to be aged under 25, living in a household in which at least one of their parents is a member and whose main activity is unemployed or economically inactive (mainly in education or training).

The **labour force** or the **economically active** population is defined as the sum of persons in employment and unemployed persons.

The **total net monetary income** of a household covers all income from work (wages, self-employment income), plus all social transfers such as pensions and income from capital and property, minus social contributions and taxes deducted at source. **Adjusted income** facilitates comparisons between households' incomes. The "adjustment" of the total household income takes account of the varying size of households.

The purchasing power parity is a conversion rate that uses the prices of a selection of comparable products and thus takes account of the real purchasing power of a currency. The amounts obtained using this rate are called **purchasing power standards (PPS)**.

Sources

Data are drawn largely from the European Labour Force Survey (1983, 1987, 1992 and 1996). No comparable data on households are available from the LFS for Denmark and Sweden. Therefore, data for the EU exclude these two countries. Income data are taken from the European Community Household Panel (2nd wave, 1995) and cover all Member States except Finland and Sweden.

Further reading

"Private lives and public responses: lone parenthood and future policy" Dr Reuben Ford, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1997

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