

DOES SINGLE PARENTHOOD PUT CHILDREN'S SCHOOL PERFORMANCE AT RISK?

Diederik Boertien, *Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics*

With a good future for their children in mind, parents follow several strategies to invest in their children's skills, education, norms and values. Some strategies, such as choosing a school or reading to children, require time commitments. For other strategies parents need money. Examples of such expensive strategies are extra-curricular classes or living in a 'good' neighborhood. Investing in children is thus a time-consuming and expensive process. Whereas parents who live together can often assist each other in this task, making all these investments could be harder for single parents. Should we therefore be worried about their children's opportunities in life? How about children living with single parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds? And if so, what can be done about it? We aim to answer these questions for Spain here, where single motherhood has become increasingly more common. We first use Census data to document the rise in single motherhood and show that in 1991 6% of children lived with a single mother, but that by 2011 this percentage had risen to 15%. We subsequently look at data from the PISA project of the OECD to look at the mathematical abilities of children living with single parents. Even though children living with single parents have slightly lower mathematics scores than those who live with two parents, these differences appear substantively barely relevant upon closer inspection. We argue that if we want to equalize opportunities in Spain we should not focus on family structure, but rather on other sources of inequality of opportunity such as income, neighborhoods and schools.

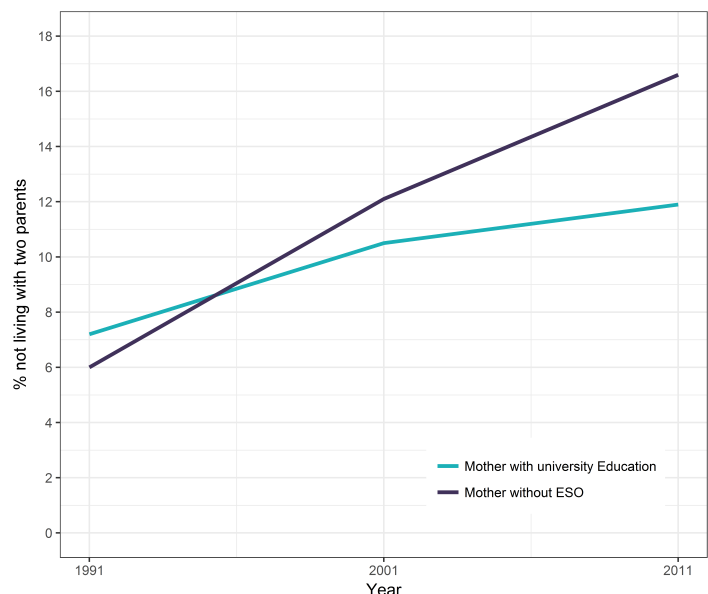
THE CHANGING SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF SINGLE MOTHERS

The most common way for parents to end up raising children alone used to be through the passing away of a father or mother. Today, fortunately only a small minority of children has such an experience. The most common route to single parenthood in Spain is now the separation of two parents who used to be married or cohabiting. A small group of children never live with their father, which can be both a planned or unplanned situation. Both parental break-ups and single motherhood at birth have been on the increase in Spain (Castro Martín & Seiz Puyuelo, 2014). Based on census figures, only 6% of children below the age of 16 lived with a mother but without a father in the household in 1991. This number had risen to 15% by 2011.

The profile of single mothers has also been changing. As shown in Figure 1, single motherhood used to be slightly more common among higher educated mothers. But in recent years, single motherhood has been especially on the increase among the lower educated (See also Garriga & Cortina, 2017).

Such changes in the relationship between education and single motherhood have been observed across Europe.

FIGURE 1. *The percentage of children not living with a father in the household according to maternal education*



Source: Spanish Censuses 1991, 2001 and 2011. Children aged 16 or less.

Why these changes took place is unclear. A classic theory argued that separation is an option only available to the most advantaged in society when it is still socially unaccepted (Goode, 1963). In 'traditional' societies separating might be illegal, expensive, or stigmatized. In such contexts, separation can be a relatively avant-garde and expensive move to make by parents, and is therefore often only possible for the elite. As separation becomes more socially accepted, it might become easier, cheaper, and widely accessible. In that case, fewer resources are needed to divorce and also people from lower socioeconomic classes start to divorce.

In a context where most people who want to leave their partner are able to divorce, actual happiness within a marriage will become the most important factor determining who divorces and who does not. It is therefore often argued that poor individuals might divorce more because they are less satisfied with their relationships. Stress induced by economic factors or struggles regarding gender norms can be possible sources of such lower satisfaction. It could, however, also be that more pragmatic motives play a role such as home ownership which might make separating a bigger hassle compared to the situation where a couple is a renting a house together.

Regardless of the reasons why, the concentration of single parenthood among socioeconomically disadvantaged groups might form obstacles for the development of their children's skills and behaviors. How serious is this issue?

THE CHALLENGES OF SINGLE PARENTHOOD

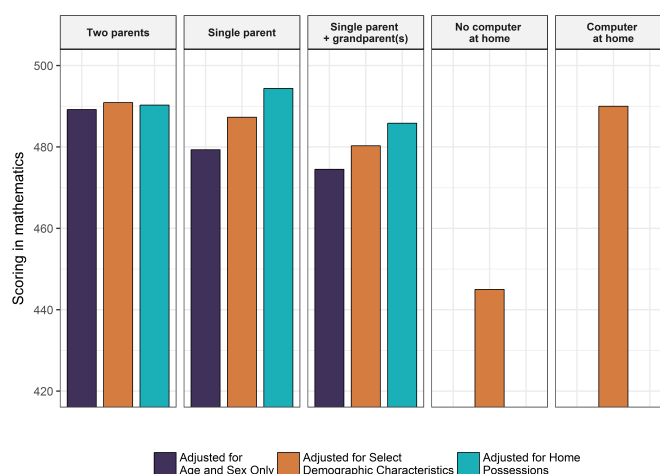
The lives of children co-residing with a single parent differ from the lives of those sharing the household with two parents. Children living with a single parent are likely to have less intensive contact with the non-resident parent, and the resident parent often has to take on the task of day-to-day parenting by her or himself. In many cases, this means that single parents, usually the mothers, have to start working less to be able to care for their children, which might lead to poverty or other economic stress. If single parenthood is the result of a break-up between parents, children will also need to emotionally adjust to such a new situation. But, parental separation can also relieve children from exposure to conflict in the household. Altogether, these factors can form obstacles for children to do well in school, to develop skills, to complete university and get a good job later on in life.

Many of the challenges posed by single parenthood can be minimized through, for instance, joint custody, alimony payments, monetary support for single parents and public childcare which can make it easier for single parents to work. Step-parents could also to some extent help single parents with their parenting tasks, but their presence in the household might also require new emotional adjustments to be made by children.

Overall, much research across the globe has documented that differences in the outcomes of children exist depending on the family structure they experienced during childhood (Härkönen et al., 2017). This is also the case in Spain. Figure 2 shows how well different groups of children did on a standardized mathematics test done by a large representative set of children (over 20,000 children) from all over Spain within the framework of the international PISA project run by the OECD (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>).

It can be seen that children living with both a father and mother had a score of 489 compared to a score of 479 for children who lived with a single parent (the purple bars of Figure 2). Children living with a single parent as well as one or more grandparents had even lower scores of, on average, 475. From these numbers, it would appear that family structure plays a role in children's

FIGURE 2. Average mathematics test scores for children aged 15 in Spain in 2012



Source: PISA 2012; Average of five plausible mathematics scores.

Note: Single parent: child living with one parent but without grandparents (8.5% of sample). One parent and grandparent: children living with a single parent and at least one grandparent (1.8% of sample). Demographic characteristics are region of residence, being a foreign born child, having a foreign born mother, child's sex, mother's education and own age. Home possessions is a summary measure of whether the child has access at home to, e.g. an own room, a computer, a desk, etc. Differences between purple bars statistically significant at the 95% CI level, as well as orange bars for computer at home, not for other differences.



outcomes in life. There are, however, important qualifications to be made to that point.

Firstly, there are countless characteristics out there that matter for how well children do in school. A key objective of research should be to identify which factors are the most important ones affecting child development. We should therefore compare the differences observed for family structure to differences observed for other characteristics. Figure 2 shows how math scores differ depending on whether children have a computer at home or not. Not having a computer at home is likely to be an indicator of economic hardship in children's households. Children with no access at home to a computer have an average mathematics score of 445 whereas children who do have a computer scored 490 on average, a difference of 45 points. This difference is quite a bit larger than the difference of 14 points observed for family structure. Family structure therefore does not appear to be as important for children's skills as certain other family characteristics.

Secondly, there is the question of 'causality'. When two characteristics are related to each other, this does not automatically imply that one causes the other. For example, if poor people are more likely to separate, the lower math scores of children living with a single parent might be due to this experience of poverty and not because they miss a parent in the household. Social scientists employ a wide variety of strategies to discover whether associations between characteristics are due to such third factors or whether associations indeed reflect 'causal effects'. The simplest of these strategies relies on accounting for characteristics that were already present before children started living in a single parent family. This has been done using some basic demographic characteristics for the orange bars in Figure 2.

These orange bars show that the differences in school performance according to family structure are reduced once we account for region, being foreign born, maternal age and maternal education. The average score of children living with two parents is now only 4 points higher than the average score for children living with a single parent. For children living with a single parent and a grandparent this difference is 10 points¹. It is likely that these differences would be even smaller if we were able to account for more characteristics of families such as the socioeconomic characteristics of non-resident fathers.

Nonetheless, there appear to remain some differences in the

mathematics performances of children living with both parents compared to children who do not. Why might this be the case? The lower family income and high risk of poverty of single parents have often been proposed as possible explanations. Children living with a single parent and a grandparent might especially experience poverty. Single parents who move in with grandparents might do so because they do not have the money to live by themselves.

In Spain, material differences indeed appear to be important. Once accounting for whether children have access at home to a variety of things such as an own room, a desk or a computer, differences in test scores practically disappear, as shown by the light-turquoise bars in Figure 2. If we want to reduce differences according to family structure further, a good bet would therefore be to invest in economically supporting single parents. An example of such a policy would be to increase the accessibility of high quality child care which could permit single parents to increase their employment.

SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT SINGLE PARENTHOOD?

Being a parent can be an intense experience. All parents will have had to deal with high levels of stress at some point during their children's lives. It is therefore not surprising that there are worries about whether single parents might need assistance to work their way through parenthood. Increases in single parenthood among lower educated mothers could in particular spark concerns about how well their children will be able to achieve their goals in life. However, once looking at how well children of single parents actually do, it appears that children living with a single parent do not perform that differently from their peers.

There are differences in the cognitive skills children have depending on family structure, but these differences are much smaller compared to characteristics such as having a computer at home. Children living with single parents thus appear to do just fine. If we are concerned about creating equal opportunities for children in Spain, policy efforts should focus on minimizing differences in child outcomes according to other background characteristics such as parental income or parental education.

To underline this point, Figure 3 presents a final set of numbers. The bars in Figure 3 show how the mathematics scores of children depend on the education of the mother. Differences are remarkable, and amount up to 66 points, once again a difference

¹ Once looking at language and science tests instead of math, these differences are even smaller to non-existent.

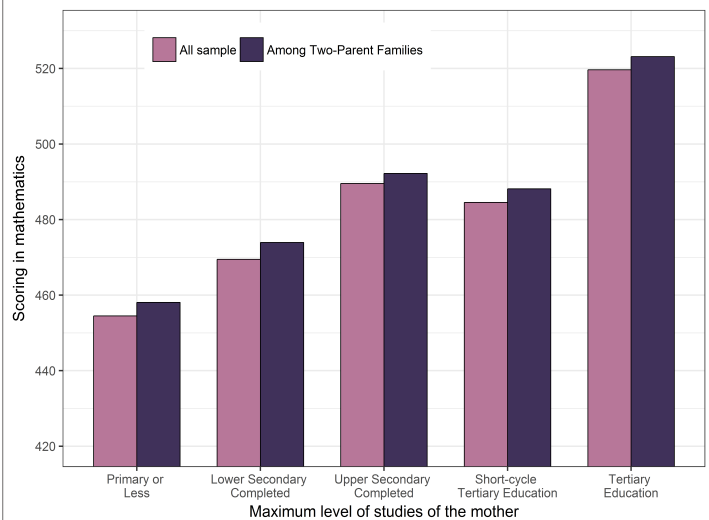
several times bigger than those observed between children living in different family structures. Would these gaps according to maternal education be smaller in a world where all children would live with two parents? Our best guess of how such a hypothetical world would look like is probably based on comparing mathematics scores among children who now actually live with two parents.

The purple bars in Figure 3 give an indication of this hypothetical situation by presenting differences in PISA math scores according to mother's education for the subgroup of children living with two parents. It can be observed that math abilities might be slightly higher for all groups in such an imaginary universe where everybody lives with two parents. However, the differences between children according to maternal education would change little. Children living with a father and lower educated mother have, on average, a 65-point lower math score compared to children living with a father and higher educated mother. This difference is basically the same as observed for the whole population. In a world where all children live with both parents, it is unlikely that abilities differ less depending on socioeconomic background than they do now.

Single motherhood, and probably family structure more generally, is not what we should focus on if we are concerned about

the opportunities of disadvantaged children in Spain. Instead, we should concentrate on other factors that can explain differences in children's outcomes. Examples of such other factors are variation in family income, parenting, schools, and neighborhoods.

FIGURE 3. Mathematics scores according to maternal education for all families and for children living with a father and mother.



Source: PISA 2012; Average of five possible mathematics scores. Lower secondary = ESO; Upper secondary = Bachillerato; Short-cycle tertiary = Ciclo formativo de grado superior; Tertiary = University.

Bibliography

Castro-Martín, T. ; Seiz-Puyuelo, M. (2014). *La transformación de las familias en España desde una perspectiva socio-demográfica*. VII Informe sobre exclusión y desarrollo social en España 2014. Madrid: Fundación FOESSA.

Garriga, A. ; Cortina, C. (2017). The change in single mothers' educational gradient over time in Spain. *Demographic Research*, 36, 1859-1888.

Goode, W.J. (1963). *World Revolution and Family Patterns*. New York (NY): The Free Press.

Härkönen, J. ; Bernardi, F. ; Boertien, D. (2017). Family dynamics and child outcomes: An overview of research and open questions. *European Journal of Population*, 33(2), 163-184

Citation

Diederik Boertien (2018) "Does single parenthood put children's school performance at risk?", *Perspectives Demogràfiques*, 10: 1-4.

Editors

Andreu Domingo and Albert Esteve

Please address correspondence to:

Diederik Boertien
dboertien@ced.uab.es

Credits

Graphics: Anna Turu
Layout: Xavier Ruiz Vilchez

Acknowledgements

Several of the arguments made in this text are based on joint work with Fabrizio Bernardi of the European University Institute. I would like to thank Andreu Domingo and Albert Esteve for comments on the content. Diederik Boertien's research has been made possible by the Beatriu de Pinós program of the AGAUR (2016-BP-00121), and the European Research Council project 'EQUALIZE' led by Iñaki Permanyer (ERC-2014-StG-637768).

URL

<http://ced.uab.es/difusio/butlleti-perspectives-demografiques>

Contact

Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics.
Carrer de Ca n'Altayó, Edifici E2
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
08193 Bellaterra / Barcelona
Spain
Telephone: +34 93 5813060
Email: demog@ced.uab.cat
Web page: www.ced.uab.cat