

### The rise of Single Parenthood in Contemporary Britain

Sociology has given us insights into our understanding of the rise in single parenthood in Contemporary Britain. Single-parent families have become increasingly common in Britain. According to government statistics, in 1961, 2 per cent of the population lived in households consisting of a lone parent with dependent children, but by 1998 this had more than tripled to 7 per cent.

According to Hantrais and Letablier (1996), Britain has the second highest rate of lone parenthood in Europe, and is exceeded only by Denmark, and rates in countries such as France, Greece and Portugal are much lower than those of Britain are.

Children may start their life living in a single-parent family. However, the single parent may well find a new partner and marry them or cohabit with them. The child will then end up living with two parents.

It should also be noted that many children who live in a single-parent household do see and spend time with their other parent. Further more even in two-parent families, one parent (usually the mother) might be responsible for the vast majority of the childcare.

There are many reasons why lone parenthood can come about. People who are married can become lone parents by divorce, separation or death of a spouse. Lone parents who have never been married may have been living with the parent of the child when the child was born, but they subsequently stopped living together. They may not have been living with the parent of the child when they were born.

Official statistics give some indication of the frequency of the different paths to lone-parenthood, but do not provide a complete picture. Official figures for Britain shows that the largest proportion of female lone parents in 1995-7 were single, with about a third being divorced and just under a quarter separated. The figures for those who were single do not differentiate between those who were cohabiting when the child was conceived and those who were not. These proportions have changed over time.

Clearly the rise in lone motherhood is closely related to increases in the divorce rate and to the increase in births outside marriage. The increase in single lone mothers may partly result from a reduction in the number of 'shotgun weddings'. Marriages that resulted from pregnancy were often unstable and could end up in producing lone motherhood through an eventual divorce or separation. Now, the partners may choose to cohabit rather than marry and, if their relationship breaks up, they end up appearing in the statistics as a single, never married, parent.

The absence of cohabitation does not necessarily imply that the parents do not have a close relationship some writers see the rise of single parenthood as a symptom of increased tolerance of diverse family forms.

There are a number of reasons for supposing that the welfare state is not responsible for the increases. Some commentators don't believe that lone parenthood gives advantages to those seeking local authority housing. In 1993 John Perry, policy director of the Institute of Housing, said

"I've not been able to find a single housing authority which discriminates in favour of single parents over couples with children. The homeless get priority, but there is no suggestion that a homeless single parent gets priority over a homeless couple". Single parents who are reliant upon benefits tend to live in poor housing conditions and to have low standards of living. There is little material incentive to become a single parent. There is evidence that a large majority of single parents do not wish to be reliant on state benefits. They would prefer to work for a living but find it impractical to do so.

Single parenthood has increasingly become a contentious issue, with some arguing that it has become a serious problem for society.

"A vast majority of the population would still agree, I think, that the normal family is an influence for good in society and that one-parent families are bad news. Since not many single parents can both earn a living and give children the love and care they need, society has to support them; the children suffer through lacking of one parent"

While most commentators agree that single parenthood can create problems for individual parents, many sociologists do not see it as a social problem, and some see that it is a sign of social progress.

"Some view the mother only family as an indicator of social disorganisation, signalling the 'demise of the family'. Others regard it as an alternative family form consistent with the emerging economic independence of women".

More controversial that the low average living standard of lone parents is the question of the psychological and social effects on children raised in such families. Findings of a number of American studies, which seem to indicate that children are harmed by single parenthood. These studies have claimed that such children have lower earnings and experience more poverty as adults; children of mother-only families are more likely to become lone parents themselves; and they are more likely to become delinquent and engaged in drug abuse. The findings of such studies must be treated with caution.

In a review of research in lone parenthood, Louise Burghess notes that some research in the relationship between educational attainment and divorce suggests that children in families where the parents divorce start to do more poorly in education before the divorce takes place.

David Morgan does believe that the evidence suggests that the children of single parents fare less well than those from two-parent households. He qualifies this by saying that we still do not know enough about what causes these

differences; as with the effects of financial hardship, the children would be affected by the stigma attached to coming from a single-parent family.

It is very difficult to disentangle the direct and indirect effects on children of being brought up in a single-parent household and therefore dangerous to make generalisations about such effects.